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# **Embodied Voices : Literacy and Empathy in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River***

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The word «empathy» is one that Caryl Phillips frequently uses in talking about his fiction. In an interview with a journalist from the *Cincinnati Enquirer* about his novel *Crossing the River*, Phillips answered a question concerning the emotions on which he drew in writing the novel by saying,

The primary emotion is an attempt to draw upon deep empathy. You're writing about people and trying to discover what motivates them. Therefore you have to imagine yourself into their shoes and into their lives. It's a sort of deep process of trying to slowly imagine yourself as somebody else.

More recently he used the same term in evoking his relationship with the Brontë family in the writing of his most recent novel, *The Lost Child* (Caryl Phillips interview, CBC News, 12 June 2015). Phillips is using the term in a very general way to describe the way he relates to his characters and the feeling that he hopes to elicit in the reader. However the way he defines the term in the above quotation corresponds closely to the definition given by philosophers, psychologists and literary critics. Suzanne Keen, author of *Empathy and the Novel* and of an article entitled « A Theory of Narrative Empathy » defines empathy as « a spontaneous, vicarious sharing of affect » which « can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading » (2006 : 208). Phillips's reference to « imagin[ing] yourself in their shoes » is, of course, the most common way of referring to what Keen describes as a « sharing of affect ». Keen, like other scholars who have taken an interest in empathy, includes in her analysis a careful review of the historical development of the term, its anchoring in specific cultural contexts, and its relationship with related terms like « sympathy » and « identification » with which it is often confused. Recent developments in the neurosciences have added a more concrete, experimental dimension to an idea that had for a long time been treated essentially in philosophical and psychological terms. The use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has made it possible to visualize the areas of

the brain involved in different types of experience, both direct and indirect.<sup>1</sup> The revolutionary dimension of this type of research lies in its emphasis on the relation between mind and body, what Pierre Louis Patoine calls the « virage biologique » of the cognitive sciences and philosophy (135). Patoine describes the development of what is called «embodied cognition» and traces it back to its roots in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the theories of the sign developed by the American linguist Charles Peirce (89, 129).<sup>2</sup> This type of research has reactivated interest in aesthetic responses to literature by suggesting a close link between mind and body, leading to what Patoine calls « an implication of the body as the centre of feeling (“le corps sensible”) in the elaboration of meaning » (94, my translation). Patoine uses extreme examples like James Frey’s autobiographical text *A Million Little Pieces* based on the author’s experiences in a drug rehabilitation centre to test the limits of what he calls « empathetic reading », a type of reading that produces physical resonance in the reader. He defines empathetic reading as « a state of consciousness making possible the transformation of a semiotic form into a somatic experience » (210, my translation). By suggesting a close relation between the emotional and physical dimensions of the feelings involved in aesthetic experience, Patoine, like other critics who have taken an interest in empathy, makes it possible to re-examine the philosophical, aesthetic and ideological underpinnings of reading. He obliges the reader to re-examine not only the philosophical background to the question in the writings of Hume, Adam Smith, Rousseau, Merleau-Ponty and others, but also to reconsider critical approaches to reading like those involving reader-response.<sup>3</sup> To put it in a nutshell, he asks us to reconsider the whole history of philosophy, aesthetics, linguistics and literary criticism while adding a generous dose of the neurosciences and psychology.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Keen mentions in particular an article published in *Science* by Tania Singer et al. giving the results of research carried out to determine the areas of the brain involved in empathetic response. By observing the difference between the reactions elicited by the experience of physical pain and those generated by the observations of another person in pain, they were able to demonstrate why « a person perceives that she feels another’s pain, while not literally experiencing the same sensations » (2006 : 211, 2007 : 13-14).

<sup>2</sup> Patoine points out that for Peirce, « the sign, even one which is determined by a code or by habit (thus being of the order of tertiary) is rooted in sensation (primacy) and is never, finally, but a particular movement within the general and unlimited semiosis in which we live » (my translation, 129).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the historical background of empathy, see also Keen, 2007, Chapter 2, 40-48.

<sup>4</sup> The same is true of Keen’s work, an important inspiration for Patoine. The collection of articles edited by Alexandre Gefen and Bernard Vouilloux, *Empathie et esthétique*, also contains articles providing critical analysis of the complex background of empathy, in particular the article by Françoise Lavocat «Identification et empathie: le personnage entre fait et fiction» (141-173).

My objective in evoking the question of empathy in relation to *Crossing the River* is not to convoke the neurosciences in order to provide a mechanistic measurement of the reader's potential emotional investment in Phillips's story. My concern is rather to examine the sometimes unexpressed assumptions made by critics and readers in talking about literature dealing with the collective traumas of the past. Fatim Boutros, in his essay on *Crossing the River*, illustrates the connection often made between trauma and empathy:

The characters' most private and intimate sorrows make the debasing conditions of slavery appear much less remote and allow for an empathic identification with the victims of European cultural hegemony. (187)

Boutros bases his analysis on his definition of the Middle Passage as « an instance of traumatic deterritorialization » (176) and he uses the word « trauma » repeatedly, for instance in relation to Martha and to Travis, whose situation he sees as « deeply traumatic » (185). The problematic relation between trauma and empathy has already been evoked in relation to Phillips's fiction, most notably by Stef Craps in an article entitled « Linking Legacies of Loss—Traumatic Histories and Cross-Cultural Empathy in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*. » Craps points out the obvious connection between the two ideas but also draws our attention to the danger implicit in inviting readers to assume that they can put themselves in the place of someone who is suffering<sup>5</sup> (157). A particularly severe criticism of attempts to elicit empathy with regard to slavery has been delivered by Marcus Wood, who sees such depictions of suffering as pornographic (36) and who takes Phillips to task for not reinventing our vision of slavery rather than reflecting it through the discourse of a white slave trader, as he does in the section entitled « Crossing the River ». <sup>6</sup> The vehemence of these debates concerning trauma reveals the extent to which the notion of empathy is both ambiguous and controversial. Thus it seems to me that an examination of *Crossing the River* in the light of studies devoted to the question of empathy in literature can help us to understand more clearly what we are talking about when we evoke empathy in relation to a novel of this type and whether in effect it can be seen as eliciting empathy on the part of the reader.

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<sup>5</sup> In this connection she mentions Dominick LaCapra's coining of the term « empathic unsettlement » which places limits on the extent to which it is possible to take the victim's place (157). LaCapra also evokes Kaja Silverman's use of the term « heteropathic identification » to describe an emotional response « that comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one's own » (LaCapra 40).

<sup>6</sup> Keen reminds us that Brecht also considered « the universalizing tendencies of viewers experiencing empathy as an affront to the historical specificity of experience » (2007 : 57).

The most thought-provoking aspect of Patoine's discussion of empathetic reading, and the most controversial, is his focus on the involvement of the body. In talking about his book, Patoine says:

Its aim is to construct a model capable of explaining the neurophysiological workings and the aesthetic stakes of those moments when we read with our bodies, when texts whip us, bite us, caress us, giving us bodies shaken by physical sensation. It explores those phenomena of empathic resonance on the borderline between the body and the text, the place where literature—as sound and meaning—is given physical extension in tactile, muscular and visceral sensations; where it functions as a technology of simulation capable of generating fictive sensations. (12-13, my translation)

Patoine provides a working definition of empathetic reading that avoids confusion with much vaguer feelings like sympathy and that places emphasis on the involvement of the body.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, he bases his definition of empathetic reading on the idea of immersion in the text, immersion being a concept associated with specific types of texts.<sup>8</sup> In the course of his discussion, he evokes a number of other factors, cognitive, contextual and ethical, that modulate this involvement.<sup>9</sup> However, the emphasis on empathy as what Keen calls «embodied experience» (2006 : 210) offers the advantage of allowing us to look at *Crossing the River* as a novel about bodies and embodied experience, but also to situate Phillips's narrative treatment of his subject with respect to Patoine's model and to measure both the applicability of empathy as a working principle and the limits to its usefulness. If empathy is a useful frame for evaluating Phillips's fiction, it should allow us to perceive aspects of his fiction which cannot be seen as clearly in other approaches.

If we consider Phillips's novel in the light of what has just been said, our immediate reaction is to say that *Crossing the River* is in no way the type of novel that invites immersion in the sense in which Patoine uses this term. It corresponds rather to the form of fiction which he defines as obliging the reader to have recourse to « the task of interpretation » (even the work of interpretation), which « attenuat[es] his immersion in the fictional world » (210, my

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<sup>7</sup> Keen points out the importance of distinguishing empathy from sympathy: « Empathy is distinguished in both psychology and philosophy (though not in popular usage) from *sympathy*, in which feelings *for* another occur » (2006: 208). Thus she makes a distinction between the sentence « I feel what you feel », which characterizes empathy, and the statement « I feel a supportive emotion about your feelings », which corresponds to sympathy (209).

<sup>8</sup> In defining immersion, Patoine refers to definitions proposed by specialists of electronic media that establish a link between « immersion as a state (enchantment) and the capacity of fiction to become a second world, an alternative reality, conducive to the simulation of experience » (202, my translation).

<sup>9</sup> Patoine even admits that given the number of factors to be taken into account, such as the reader's attitudes, background and degree of attention, makes his model of fully empathetic reading, «more of an exception than the norm» (216, my translation).

translation). Phillips is interested in the textual encoding of reality, in the way in which our perception of the world is filtered through the cultural codes which make written and verbal expression possible. They would appear, at first glance, to aim at distancing the reader from any immediate immersion in the historical and geographical worlds described. As Joan Powell points out in her discussion of the author's non-fictional works, « Phillips has a propensity for metafictional narrative modes, pastiche, polyphony, intertextuality, and related forms that enable the inquisitorial revision and articulation of the literary and historical representations of black and Jewish diasporic subjects » (88).<sup>10</sup> If studied in this light, Phillips's fictional works would seem to appeal to the intellect and to understanding rather than to elicit empathy as an emotional and even physical reaction. In order to approach this seeming paradox between what appears to be an intellectual and distanced approach and Phillips's own remarks about the importance of empathy, I am going to look at the way in which the author places his fictional discourse on the borderline between bodies and texts, or rather the intersection between bodies and texts. I argue that Phillips uses his fiction to deconstruct the codes by which the body is embedded in language, thus destabilizing the reader's relation to the representation of feeling. By providing the historical and cultural background in which his characters function, Phillips prepares the reader to empathize with people inhabiting other worlds and periods. He contextualizes empathy as an emotion related to cultural and historical variables.<sup>11</sup> In this perspective, Phillips's representation of the contexts in which empathy was felt and expressed, or rather suppressed is an important aspect of the historical dimension of *Crossing the River*. One might object that it is not because the reader observes people feeling or expressing empathy, or failing to do so, that he will share the empathy felt by characters or feel empathy for those to whom it is refused. However, I would further like to argue that it is Joyce's narrative, presented in her own words, that plays a crucial role in the reader's relation to all of the narratives. Joyce's narrative makes it possible to talk about empathy as potentially elicited by a narrative voice struggling to connect physical and emotional experience to language.

I would first like to look at the question of literacy and its relation to the representation of bodies and of feelings, including empathy, in the context of the slave culture of the eighteenth

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<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of the metafictional dimension of Phillips's novels, Petra Tournay also shows how the « subjective authenticity » suggested by his use of « the travel journal or diary and the epistolary narrative » is « immediately held up for scrutiny and contested when contrasted with multiple points of view » (93).

<sup>11</sup> Françoise Lavocat points out that the proponents of cultural studies and postcolonial studies often object to discussions of empathy in literary criticism, which they see as based on assumptions about the transcultural and transhistorical nature of empathy (163).

and nineteenth centuries. This will involve an examination of both « the Pagan Coast » and the fictional character of James Hamilton and his log and correspondence. The use of a partially epistolary form in the first section of the novel and a pastiche of the correspondence and ship's log of John Newton in the third section are devices typical of what Linda Hutcheon has called historiographic metafiction, a form of fiction that draws attention to the way in which history is encoded in written form.<sup>12</sup> The imitation of written forms alerts the reader to the conventional nature of writing and its relation to the social codes underlying a particular society or culture. The letters exchanged between Nash and Edward, with their conventional greetings and closings, are signs displayed clearly on the surface of the narrative, but pointing to less visible codes embedded in the slave culture represented in the narrative. That Nash should address Edward as «My Dear Father» and sign as «your humble servant and affectionate son» (28) is deeply ironical, but shows the extent to which paternity and enslavement were intertwined.<sup>13</sup> It reveals in particular the inextricable paradox linking the body and the word, a paradox that has manifold ramifications in the text.<sup>14</sup> It is precisely this conundrum that leads to Nash's demise in Africa, for as his letters reveal, the language he has learned from Edward cannot be stretched to fit the African context.

Within this narrative framework focused on literacy and the written word, the expression of feeling is also shown to depend on the cultural and historical context. It is in his exploration of religion as a language for the expression of emotion that Phillips is particularly successful in exposing the historical and cultural dimensions of empathy. In this respect, the penchant in American religious practice for reading the Bible as a guide to personal experience plays a crucial role. In one of his appeals to Edward, Nash says

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the uses of history in postmodern fiction, see Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, chapters 6, 7, and 8.

<sup>13</sup> The paradoxical relationship between paternity and enslavement was a common subject in American slave narratives. A classic example is the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. In talking about himself, Douglass says, « My father was a white man. [...] The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me » (48). In the same chapter he discusses the consequences of this ambiguity for slaves and slaveholders, as it makes « a gratification of their [the slaveholders'] wicked desires profitable as well as pleasureable » (49). For a discussion of the implications of literacy and the codes of written expression in *Crossing the River*, see Birat 1999 and 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Bénédicte Ledent has pointed out the paradoxical relation between literacy and slavery in the novels of Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar, « potentially a source of freedom and awareness but also of alienation and even death [...] » (1996: 276-7). Frederick Douglass discusses this problem in Chapter VII of his narrative, pointing out that « learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy » (84).

Words cannot express my gratitude for the care you displayed towards me during my younger days, for as the Scripture says, train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it. (21)

Nash has not simply learned to read the Bible, he has learned to read his own life and his relation to others in the language of scripture. Edward is shown to practice the same identification while waiting for passage to Liberia:

His inner being was filled with a strange tranquillity, and a deep peace fell upon him at least the equal to any he had ever known in his life, although the origins and purpose of the strangely contemplative mood eluded him. In his mind he would rehearse scenes from the life of Christ, yet found that even in Christ's moments of greatest adversity, such as when betrayed by Judas, or when being led to the Cross, his Lord's face never lost its purity and compassion. (44)

Such passages draw the reader's attention to the contradictions underlying the practice of slavery, one of which was its incompatibility with the Christianity practiced by the slaveholders. However, at the same time, Phillips places great emphasis on the emotional relation between Edward and Nash. It is this relation that gives the greatest urgency to their situation, inviting an empathetic reaction on the part of the reader. Particularly important in this respect is Edward's desire « to go where Nash lived » (59), as if he feels the need to immerse himself in the context in which his lover disappeared. However, the reader's impulse to empathize with either Edward or Nash is held in check by all of the mechanisms that serve to distance and contextualize their relationship. Phillips creates a tension between the distancing effects of his post-modern approach and the emotional dimension of the relationship between Edward and Nash.<sup>15</sup> All of the critics who discuss the question of empathy take into account the cognitive factors that influence the reader's reaction, including, of course, his evaluation of the characters in moral and ethical terms (Patoine 217, Lavocat 158-9, Keen, 2006 : 212-213). In *Crossing the River* there is no direct appeal to the empathy of the reader, but rather a complex narrative structure in which both distance and proximity are placed in a meaningful tension that finds further echoes in the other sections of the novel.

The same tension can be found in the section entitled « Crossing the River » which is a pastiche of John Newton's ship's log. Creating a pastiche of the journal and placing it in the context of the novel modifies the status of the historical text, allowing it to be read

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<sup>15</sup> In talking about *Crossing the River*, Bénédicte Ledent states that « the reader empathises with the narrative voices and, as in *Cambridge*, crucial pieces of information are withheld to be revealed, puzzle-like, later in the story » (2002: 113). However, she goes on to say that « nowhere does the reader feel taken in by the narrators, for a pervading indeterminacy never allows the reader to adopt clear-cut positions [...] » (113).



metonymically as a representation of the codes of slave trading.<sup>16</sup> The very nature of the document, with its seemingly neutral economic function as a record meant, in the terms used by Wood, to be « a financial document explaining where all the money was going » (57) reveals by contrast the horror of the way the slaves are evoked. In entries such as « after which time I will be fully slaved » (115) they are present only through a verb used to describe the ship, which itself is perceived as an extension of the captain through the use of the personal pronoun « I ». In the Journal, the ship as well as the crew and slaves become, as it were, members of the captain's body, subject to his absolute authority. In this sense the ship symbolizes the joining of physical and psychological power in the person of the captain and his ship. Furthermore, the sampling of entries presented stands for the whole Journal, meant to be a complete account of the voyage but which in no way takes into account the humanity of the slaves, who are literally written out of existence. As in « The Pagan Coast », slavery is perceived through the relation between texts and bodies.

There is another aspect of the journal that merits attention, for it elicits a somewhat different reaction in the reader. The very fact of removing the journal from its original context has the effect of foregrounding the language used by Hamilton and highlighting certain characteristics of his style. He uses a specific vocabulary to describe the weather and the sea, often employing adjectives that would normally be used to characterize people: « indifferent smooth water » (102), « short, ugly sea » or « a stern sea breeze » (117) to give just a few examples. He also comments upon natural phenomena in a highly impressionistic, almost poetic style: « All night northern lights flying about the wild sky » (102). David Miall, in his studies of affect and the reading of fiction, has pointed out the impact of foregrounding, produced by metaphor and figurative language, on readers' emotional responses. In the case of *Crossing the River*, the effect of this style is multiple. It reinforces the historical authenticity of the text. It also underlines by contrast the brutality of Hamilton's remarks about the way he treats disobedient sailors and slaves. Ultimately, the hybrid nature of the ship's log, with its blending of « commercial detachment » and poetic description, complicates 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.

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<sup>16</sup> Marcus Wood, who has been very critical of Phillips's use of Newton's Journal, points out that Phillips is often seen as « a diasporic variant of the post-colonial *bricoleur*. The hybrid texts which result from Phillips's magpie processes of assemblage can be constructed as an assault upon Western notions of the authoritative text » (53). Wood, for his part, seems to feel that Phillips fails in his aim to contest and question Newton's attitudes.

This response is further affected by Hamilton's correspondence with his wife. The sentimental style of Hamilton's letters reflects the conventions surrounding the written expression of feeling in the eighteenth century. The reader is obviously shocked at his verbal posturing, even if Hamilton was not aware of the extent of his hypocrisy. However, in his second letter there is an interesting parallel with the situation of Edward in «The Pagan Coast». Hamilton has asked Mr. Ellis, referred to in the ship's log as one of the traders (or factors as they were called) from whom he has bought slaves, to take him to the place where his father died. His need to see « the very place where my late father, only two years past, lost his life » (118), like Edward's desire to see where Nash lived, reveals an emotional loss, but also an unresolved conflict related to the enigma of his father's disappearance in Africa. Mr. Ellis suggests that Hamilton's father « cultivated a passionate hatred, instead of a commercial detachment, towards the poor creatures in his care [...] » (119). Like Edward, Hamilton is unable to understand the ultimate fate of someone whose feelings he thought he shared. Like Edward, his need to *feel* is frustrated by his inability to *know*. I would suggest that this tension between knowing and feeling plays an important role in the novel. It opens a space for emotional reactions, for affect, while at the same time making it difficult for the reader to empathize with the characters involved precisely because of what he knows. The two sections which I have discussed so far serve to destabilize the reader's relation to feeling and affect by deconstructing the conventions, both historical and cultural, which determine the way feelings are expressed in a given culture.

As I final step I wish to turn to the fourth section, « Somewhere in England » narrated by Joyce. I would like to demonstrate that it is in this section that Phillips creates a space for empathy by using a narrative voice that speaks from an ambiguous place, the borderline between public sentiment and private feeling, where empathy becomes possible. It seems to me that the key function of Joyce's narrative is to anchor the reader's perception of the issues raised in the first three sections in a voice that brings them close to personal experience, thus potentially eliciting empathy in the reader.

Joyce's narrative, unlike those concerning Edward and James Hamilton, is not represented as being entangled in written texts. Bénédicte Ledent refers to Joyce's « journal entries » (2002: 109). While the different entries bear dates, I am not sure that I would treat them as a journal or diary, for there is a strong orality in the way she expresses herself and one has the impression that she is addressing someone directly, although this person might be

herself.<sup>17</sup> This argues for reading this section as stream of consciousness, although Joyce's consciousness resembles a conversation in which she is searching for a way to put her experience into words. I would not attribute the jumbling of the chronology to Joyce herself, but to a narrator situated at a higher level, just as the selection of the letters and diaries found in sections one and three must be assigned to a heterodiegetic narrator whose role consists in establishing the parallels and echoes found in the narrative as a whole.

There are a number of factors that place Joyce in a relation to the reader which is different from that of the other characters/narrators. To begin with, her connection to the question of slavery and the black diaspora is revealed only gradually and in any case will prove to be tangential, through her liaison with a black American soldier in WWII. Secondly, she is the only character who speaks directly to the reader (even if she is considered as speaking to herself) in a way that gives immediate access to her thoughts and feelings. Thirdly, her situation is much closer to the present, making her reactions easier for the reader to understand and relate to. However, it is the nature, or tone, of her voice that determines Joyce's relation to the themes evoked in the novel. Unlike Edward, Nash and James Hamilton, Joyce has no instinctive or acquired mastery of the codes of written and spoken expression that characterize the society in which she lives. She struggles to find a language capable of capturing her physical, psychological and social position in the world. It is in the process of searching for this language that she attracts the attention of the reader, showing him what empathy means to her, what it can mean in society, but also making it possible for the reader to empathize with her.

Keeping in mind what Patoine says about empathy as a « somatic experience », one can analyze Joyce's manner of speaking as the encoding of her body and of her physical experience in language. While this encoding is included in the conventional expressions and metaphors that characterize any given language, the way a particular speaker uses or modifies these conventions reveals his particular physical connection to the world. Joyce's description of her first encounter with Len clearly illustrates this process:

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<sup>17</sup> The historian Alain Corbin, in an interview published in *Le Monde* on the occasion of the release of the second volume of *The History of Emotion (Histoire des émotions)* edited by him makes a remark that sheds interesting light on this section of the novel. He mentions the importance of what he calls personal writing (« l'écriture de soi »), in other words, diaries and correspondence, in tracing the history of emotions. But he adds that « We are obliged to consider that a sentiment is only felt once it has been written down. But has it been felt prior to this? That's a real question. » (*Le Monde des livres*, September 30, 2016, my translation). There is no indication that Joyce's diary has been written down, and yet her effort to put things into words suggests a process of selection and composition.

I was wondering if you'd care to come out for a drink with me? If I'd care to? He wasn't much to look at. But he didn't look like he would hurt. Me, at least. And so I said yes, and found myself in the snug of the Brown Fox with him and his words. (130)

Joyce's tendency to interrogate the relation between literal and figurative uses of languages is particularly symptomatic of her problematic physical relation to the world. In talking about her mother she says

In 1926 she fled to the bosom of Christ. She'd lost her husband, then she lost her job in the General Strike. Luckily, God took her up. What I mean is, God took her up to do good works for Him. On this earth. She hasn't done much since, except God's work. (130)

Aware of the possible misunderstanding of the expression « took up », she specifies its meaning in a religious context. Clearly for Joyce the metaphorical language of religion is no compensation for the real losses one experiences in life. Religion runs as a thread through the entire novel, emphasizing the way in which religious practice relies on forms of affect and identification which influence people's relations with others. In the case of Joyce, it partly explains her unsatisfactory relationship with her mother. Joyce reproduces with visible contempt her mother's words of warning about men:

She'd told me many times that she didn't trust men. They'll just abandon you in the most callous fashion. And hadn't she been right? They're here, and then they're gone. Jesus. Now there was somebody you could trust. When the Lord said come unto me, He didn't mean until the pubs were open, or until He found some other woman. The Lord accepted you with open arms and embraced you. (132)

Joyce's particular way of examining conventional uses of language allows the reader to follow the workings of her mind and understand the source of her feelings. However, it also exposes the ways in which society controls language, thus having an impact on people's capacity to feel. This is particularly true in the context of a war, in which language is often censored and controlled:

It says, in the *Star*, that you're not to supply the Germans with food, petrol or maps. And if you see anything at all suspicious you're to go straight to the police. They sometimes talk to you like you're mental. (160)

Joyce is simultaneously constructing a language compatible with her feelings and deconstructing the conventional uses of language that suppress empathy and feeling. It is by this double effect of her language that she produces a discourse which prepares the reader to feel empathy for her.

In the entries describing the bombing of the city and her mother's death, Joyce's voice plays a crucial role in establishing the reader's relation to the events represented. The effect

produced by Joyce's narrative, focussed on her perception, comes close to the « immersion » described by Patoine.

Everywhere I looked I could see mountains of rubble, crushed cars, and battered trams.  
Up above me, the loose, swinging arms of cranes picked their way over the carcass of  
the town. (179)

The anthropomorphic vision of the cranes is coherent with the emphasis that Joyce has placed since the beginning of her narrative on bodies and their inscription in the context of the war. She goes on to describe seeing

[...]a formal queue of parents taking turns to lift their children into the cockpit of a  
crashed Jerry bomber. I wondered about the pilot, and then realized that I should be  
wondering about my mother. (179)

To be noticed here, apart from the fact that Joyce is capable of « putting herself in someone else's shoes » by imagining the fate of the German pilot, is the fact that she first speaks of a «Jerry bomber», adopting the language used by others, and then speaks of « the pilot » without designating him as « Jerry ». The situation reveals a realigning of her empathy, causing her to wonder about the dead pilot rather than about her mother. This entire section, in which Joyce illustrates the functioning of empathy, would seem contrived if it were not for the fact that the reader has been prepared for her empathetic capacities by the way she has used language from the very beginning. The reader is invited to participate in Joyce's discovery of a situation for which nothing has really prepared her, but in which her capacity to think and feel beyond her own experience is demonstrated. These scenes also prepare the reader for later events which will be thematically linked to the questions of race and the diaspora, but in which the reader is not given such an intimate view of the narrator's reactions.

As a conclusion I would like to return to the question of empathy raised from a theoretical point of view at the beginning of this paper. In her article on empathy, Suzanne Keen reminds us « the set of links among novel reading, experiences of narrative empathy, and altruism has not yet been proven to exist » (208). In her article, Keen examines the question of narrative technique and the role that it plays in the creation of empathy. She points out in particular the number of variables that need to be taken into account (216) and asserts that « first person fiction, in which the narrator self-narrates about his or her own experiences and perceptions, is thought to invite an especially close relationship between reader and narrative voice » (220). However, she adds her own reservations concerning any automatic link between

first-person narrative and empathy.<sup>18</sup> I would argue is that it is not the simple fact of using a first-person narration that explains the functioning of Phillips's text, but the specific way in which Joyce inscribes her own experience in language in a way that prepares the reader to perceive the world and other people through her eyes. She produces a personal narrative that gives emotional weight to the questions of identity, trauma and displacement presented in a more intellectual framework in the three other sections. Joyce's discourse enables us to see how Phillips makes possible an empathetic response that in some ways bridges the gaps opened by the temporal and geographic distances that characterize the other sections. Empathy and understanding work together to give greater impact to the representation of the collective trauma experienced by displaced populations. Stated somewhat differently, Phillips's fictional representation of the ramifications of slavery in *Crossing the River* creates a space for what the philosopher François Jullien calls « a capacity for "disadhesion" (la capacité de 'desadhérence') »). Rather than generating a confusion between identity and identification, it opens up a difference (écart), a space (« Des ressources à partager » review of *Il n'y a pas d'identité culturelle* by François Jullien, *le Monde*, October 2, 2016) in which the other can be recognized. It is in this space that empathy becomes possible.

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<sup>18</sup> Keen refers to David Lodge's writings on empathy, in which he argues that first-person narration « commands the willing suspension of the reader's disbelief, by modelling itself on the discourses of personal witness: the confession, the diary, autobiography, the memoir, the deposition» (Lodge, qtd. in Keen 2006: 220). Keen states, «My research suggests that readers' perception of a text's fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through scepticism and suspicion» (220).

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