The Paradigm of Trauma

The representation of collective trauma strongly influences processes of cultural positioning in postcolonial societies. Contemporary identities cannot be adequately discussed without an awareness of the historical background of a given community. The impact of slavery was both devastating and formative at the same time. Despite the massive impact of this cultural trauma and the resilience of racist thinking, it was at the same time the origin of the Afro-Caribbean community. Recent discussions in the field of trauma studies have triggered new interest in social psychology and its correlations with ethical questions.

Phillips links the burdensome legacy of slavery to recent history and even contemporary phenomena. The implicit historical analogy between African suffering and the Holocaust has been regarded as Phillips's greatest achievement by some critics and as the most deeply flawed aspects of his work by others.1 The suffering and loss that unite protagonists whose social environment differs in terms of time and space are the thread that can be traced in all his novels. The broad spectrum of themes in Phillips's writing testifies to the semantic openness which characterizes his fiction. In Phillips's novels, the ethical dilemmas that traumatizing experience causes for victim and perpetrator alike remain unresolved. Thus, the reader is left with a sense of empathic

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1 An interesting account of attempts to draw connections between African-American and Jewish diaspora experiences is, for instance, that by Wendy Zierler, “My Holocaust Is Not Your Holocaust.” Especially for the indirectness of the parallels emphasized by the non-linearity of the narrative strategies in Higher Ground and The Nature of Blood, she regards Phillips's as one of the more positive approaches to this highly sensitive issue.
unsettlement, the feeling of not having been provided with any explicit suggestions for how to react to this experience of affective uncertainty.

Phillips does not openly comment on the ethical status of traumatic events. One reason why his work may be equally appealing to critics who write from a poststructuralist perspective and to activists in identity politics is his focus on his protagonists’ personal experience. The question of ontological truth is countered by a radical perspectivity. The subjectivity of personal experience is featured alongside the immediacy of the violence imposed on individuals. The protagonists are unable to find a way to live a meaningful and dignified life. The ambivalent nature of diasporic history becomes particularly visible in the fact that Phillips juxtaposes the perspective of the victims with that of the perpetrators. He consistently avoids reductionism and allows for empathic identification with both sides. Contemporary trauma studies emphasize the fact that perpetrator trauma can lead to serious mental strain, irrespective of the complex questions of historical guilt:

But not everyone traumatized by events is a victim. There is the possibility of perpetrator trauma which must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices. Such trauma does not, however, entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator and the victim.

Another recurring debate concerns the trivializing potential of literary representations of traumatic events. Ever since Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum that to “write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric,” a broad discussion about the potentially aestheticizing character of artistic representations of extreme suffering has emerged. One of the ways in which Phillips conveys the impact of trauma is the representation of silence and desperation. In an apparently paradoxical way, the literary audience becomes mobilized by the representation of the irredeemable paralysis of the protagonists. In contrast to activist writings

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2 The notion was introduced by Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma.

3 LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma, 79.