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Graham Swift

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Abstract

I first met Caryl, or Caz as I've come to know him, a few years ago at a literary jamboree in Toronto. I think we fulfilled all our official duties, but we spent a lot of time in a place in downtown Toronto called the Bamboo Club - one of those places which has acquired since a sort of metaphysical status, because whenever Caz and I have met again in some far-flung corner of the globe, it seems our first instinct has been to find out where the 'Bamboo Club' is. Caz, I confess, is a little bit better at finding it than I am.

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Caz was born in 1958 in St. Kitts, one of the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean. He came to England when still a babe in arms and was brought up and educated here. In more recent years, he has travelled extensively and has made his temporary home in many parts of the world, including his native St. Kitts. In keeping with his nomadic inclination, it could be said that one of the main themes of his work is that of the journey or, put rather differently, of human displacement and dislocation in a variety of forms. The journey behind his first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), was the one Caz himself took part in, albeit unwittingly – the emigration of the post-war years from the Caribbean to this country. The journey that lies behind both Caz's last novel, *Higher Ground* (1989), and his new novel, *Cambridge*, is a more historic, more primal and more terrible journey, the journey of the slave trade westwards from Africa.

Caz has maintained, however, a keen interest in Europe or, to be more precise, in Europe's pretensions and delusions about the place of European civilization in the world. His book of essays, *The European Tribe* (1987), was devoted to the subject. In *Higher Ground*, a novel in three parts, we travel from Africa in the slave trade days to North America at the time of the Black Power movement, only to end up in a Europe still nursing its wounds from the last war. In *Cambridge*, Caz has reversed the direction of this journey to bring a European consciousness face to face with Europe's global perpetrations. He does this through the person of Emily, a woman of the early nineteenth century who escapes an arranged marriage by travelling to her father's estate in the West Indies (her father being an absentee landlord), where she is exposed to and, indeed, exposed by the effects of slavery and colonisation.

Like its predecessor, *Cambridge* is a novel in three distinct parts, the first and longest of which is Emily's own account of her journey and her observations when she arrives. From what seems at first to be an inquisitive,

self-consoling travelogue there emerges a drama revolving around a handful of characters: Emily herself; Brown, an Englishman whom we understand has somehow ousted the previous manager of the estate; the Cambridge of the title, a negro slave who has suffered the singular and equivocal fate of having lived in England and having been converted to Christianity; and another slave, Christiania, who, despite her name, indulges in decidedly un-Christian rites and appears to be on the verge of madness.

The second part of the book is Cambridge's own account of how he came to be Anglicized and Christianized. The third, written in the form of a report (which we guess to be far from reliable), describes how Cambridge comes to be executed for the murder of Brown. And the brief epilogue of the novel tells us the effect of all this on Emily. These last few pages are particularly astonishing. Coming at the end of a novel of enormous accumulative power, they pack a tremendous punch and, written in a prose of tense intimacy, they show how facile it is to assess either Caz's work as a whole, or his heroine, by any crude cultural or racial analysis. Caz is interested in human beings. Emily's plight at the end of the novel plainly has its cultural and racial dimension, but it's essentially one of personal trauma – psychological, sexual, moral and (a word Caz will no doubt love) existential.

How did Cambridge arise? What was the germ, the idea behind it?

You know that period when you've finished a book and you don't know what to do? We generally have lunch during these periods in that place around the corner from the British Library, as one of us is pretending to be 'working' in there. Well true to form, I was doing little more than scrambling around in the British Library, having just finished *Higher Ground*, and having a month and a half on my hands before I was due to go down to St. Kitts. It was during this period that I happened upon some journals in the North Library. One in particular caught my eye. It was entitled *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, and written by a Scotswoman, named Janet Schaw, who at the beginning of the 19th century travelled from Edinburgh to the Caribbean. What attracted me to this story was the fact that she visited St. Kitts. Right beside what was once my brother's place, up in the mountains in St. Kitts, is a broken-down Great House. Janet Schaw described going to a dinner there when it was the centrepiece of one of the grandest plantations in the Eastern Caribbean. I began to realize then that there was a whole literature of personal narratives written primarily by women who had travelled to the Caribbean in that weird phase of English history between the abolition of slavery in 1807 and the emancipation of the slaves in 1834. Individuals who inherited these Caribbean estates from their families were curious to find out what this property was, what it would entail to maintain it, whether they would get any

money. The subject matter began to speak, but that's never enough, for there's another and formidable hurdle to leap; that of encouraging a character to speak to you. At the back of '88 when we used to meet, I was concerned with the subject matter and the research, but as yet no character had begun to speak.

And how did the character of Cambridge evolve?

Actually, he came second. Emily, the woman's voice, came first, partly because for the last ten years I'd been looking for a way of writing the story of a Yorkshire woman. I'd grown up in Yorkshire and I had also read and reread *Wuthering Heights*, so I'd this name in my head, Emily. Emily, who wasn't anybody at the moment.

The novel's called Cambridge, but Emily certainly has more prominence in terms of pages. I wondered whether you'd ever thought of Cambridge as the main character, or indeed if you'd still think of him as the main character?

No. Emily was always going to be the main character, but Cambridge was conceived of as a character who would be ever-present. He doesn't appear often in her narrative, in terms of time, but he's always in the background of what she's doing, and what she's saying, and what she's thinking. And then, of course, in the second section of the novel, he has his own narrative.

There's a lovely irony to Cambridge's narrative. We've had many pages of Emily and then we get Cambridge's account: Emily figures in Cambridge's mind merely as that Englishwoman on the periphery - scarcely at all, in fact.

There is a corrective in having Cambridge's perspective. Cambridge's voice is politically very important because it is only through painful application that he has acquired the skills of literacy. There are so few African accounts of what it was like to go through slavery, because African people were generally denied access to the skills of reading and writing. Reading and writing equals power. Once you have a language, you are dangerous. Cambridge actually makes the effort to acquire a language. He makes the effort to acquire the skills of literacy and uses them to sit in judgement on himself and the societies he passes through.

Did your feelings about Cambridge change as you wrote the novel? He is a very ambiguous character.

You know you cannot be too judgmental about your characters. Novels are an incredibly democratic medium. Everyone has a right to be understood. I have a lot of problems swallowing most of what Emily says and

feels. Similarly, I have difficulties with many of Cambridge's ideas and opinions, because in modern parlance he would be regarded as an Uncle Tom. But I don't feel I have the right to judge them.

Emily seems to be a mixture of tentative liberal instincts and blind prejudice. And it could be easy for us, with our 20th century complacent hindsight, to judge her quite harshly, but you are very sympathetic – and we can't do anything but sympathize with her, pity her. I wonder if your feelings about her changed as you wrote her long narrative?

(pause) Maybe.

Did you have the end even as you wrote the narrative?

No. No. I think she grows. She has to make a journey which begins from the periphery of English society. I could not have told this story from the point of view of a man. She was regarded, as most women of that time were regarded, as a 'child of lesser growth' when placed alongside her male contemporaries. She was on the margin of English society, and I suspect that one of the reasons I was able to key into her, and to listen to what she had to say, was the fact that, like her, I also grew up in England feeling very marginalized. She also made a journey to the Caribbean for the purpose of keeping body and soul together, which is a journey I made ten years ago. So in that sense, looking at it coldly now, through the prism of time, I can understand why I would have listened to somebody like her and why she would have entrusted me with her story. And through the process of writing ... you are right, I did begin to feel a little warmer towards her. She rose up above her racist attitudes.

She became alive in her own right.

Because she was courageous. It may be a small and somewhat unpleasant thing in the context of 1991 to find a woman expressing some warmth and affection for her black maid, but in the early nineteenth-century it was remarkable that a woman, and particularly this woman, was able to confess to such emotions. A nineteenth century man couldn't have done this, for men have a larger capacity for bullshit and for self-deception, even when they are talking only to themselves. I am not sure that I would have trusted the narrative of a nineteenth century man engaged in the slave trade. The only time I read men's narratives which seem to me to be lyrical is when the men, nineteenth century or otherwise, are in prison.

Emily, in a way, is about to be sold into a kind of slavery – her arranged marriage – which gives her a perspective on what she sees. Is that how you saw it?

Yes. I don't want to push it too hard, for the two things are obviously only analogous on a minor key. However, an arranged marriage to a widower who possessed three kids and a guaranteed income was a form of bondage. Emily finds the strength, the wit, and the way out of this. I admire her for this. What makes her grow are a series of events which are particularly painful and distressing for her. As I have already stated, part of the magic of writing is that you cannot be too judgmental about a character. You have to find some kind of trust, some form of engagement. You attempt to breathe life into these people and if you're lucky they breathe life into you. You love them with passion; then, at the end of two or three or four years, you abandon them and try and write another book.

You said a moment ago that men could only become lyrical when they are in prison. The second part of Higher Ground actually consists of letters from prison in a very distinct male voice. In that novel generally, you seemed to depart from your previous work in using strong first person voices. In Cambridge again, there is an emphasis on first person narrative. Was that a conscious decision or did that just happen?

It was conscious. There are any number of stories that you can tell. You are populated with the potential for telling stories from now until doomsday, for these things are circling around in your head. But it seems to me that the real test of a writer's ability is the degree to which that writer applies him or herself to the conundrum of form, to the task of imposing a form upon these undisciplined stories. I had written two novels in the form of the third person and somehow I couldn't address myself again to such a manner of telling a story. It was as though I had to find some way of expanding my repertoire. So the first part of *Higher Ground* is written in first person present tense, the second part as a series of letters and the third part is in the third person but with these rather strange flashbacks. Each segment of the novel demanded a different point of attack. It was a way of breaking out of what was becoming, to me, the straightjacket of the third person. We used to talk about this when you were writing *Out of This World*. I remember you saying that there was an intimacy about the first person which you found attractive. Well, me too. And like you, I am interested in history, in memory, in time, and in the failure of these three things. It seems to me, at this stage anyhow, that the first person gives me an intimate flexibility which I can't find in the third person.

Nine-tenths of Cambridge is written in a pastiche of 19th century language. Certainly, the final few pages of it are your language, the language of the 20th century. This sense of a language that can talk about certain things suddenly bursting through Emily's own language in which she can't, is very volcanic. It is a brilliant conclusion to a novel. I wonder if we could broaden things out and talk more generally about your writing. You say in The European Tribe that

you wanted to be a writer while sitting by the Pacific in California with the waves lapping around your ankles ...

Alright, alright! The summer of my second year in college, I travelled around America on a bus until my money ran out in California. And I went into this bookshop and bought this book, *Native Son*, by Richard Wright. There weren't many black people writing in England. So it never occurred to me that writing as a profession was a possibility. But when I was in the States, I discovered such people as Jimmy Baldwin and Richard Wright and Toni Morrison.

Do you think it was necessary to go to America to become a writer?

I was slouching towards a writing career. Being in the States shifted me into high gear and out of the very slovenly third that I was stuck in.

How old were you when you first went back to St Kitts?

Twenty-two. I had written a play, *Strange Fruit*, in 1980, which was done at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield. And with the royalties from that, I went back to St. Kitts with my mother, who had left in 1958 when she was twenty. It was strange, because I had grown up without an overbearing sense of curiosity about the Caribbean. My mother hadn't been back either. She held it in her memory. But when we arrived in St. Kitts, many of the things that she remembered were no longer there: her school had burnt down, people that she knew had died, and someone she dearly wanted me to meet had long since emigrated to America. For her it was like discovering a ghost town. But for me, it fired my curiosity about myself, about England, about the Caribbean. Naturally, the 'rediscovery' confused and confounded me, but that was no bad thing for, after all, writers are basically just people who are trying to organize their confusion.

Your first two novels were very much about the Caribbean, coming from and going back to. How much was that actually paralleling your life and exorcising your own feelings about the Caribbean?

My first novel, *The Final Passage*, was published in 1985. I had started it some five years earlier, on the inter-island ferry between St. Kitts and Nevis. I looked back at St. Kitts and began to write some sentences down. I wanted to try and tell the story of the journey from the Caribbean to England, which seemed to me to be, in terms of fiction in this country, an untold story. People had written novels and stories about this journey, but not people of my generation. The second novel, *A State of Independence* (1986), although not autobiographical, followed the emotional contours of my life, in that it dealt with the problems of returning to the Caribbean

and thinking, they are not sure if I am one of them, and yet feeling that I am not sure if I am one of them either. However, I have certainly not exorcised my feelings about the Caribbean. I have no desire to do so. The reason I write about the Caribbean is that the Caribbean contains both Europe and Africa, as I do. The Caribbean belongs to both Europe and Africa. The Caribbean is an artificial society created by the massacre of its inhabitants, the Carib and Arawak Indians. It is where Africa met Europe on somebody else's soil. This history of the Caribbean is a bloody history. It is a history which is older than the history of the United States of America. Columbus didn't arrive in the United States. He arrived in the Caribbean. The Caribbean is Marquez' territory. He always describes himself as a Caribbean writer. It's Octavio Paz' territory. It's Fuentes' territory. The Caribbean for many French and Spanish-speaking writers has provided more than enough material for a whole career. For me, that juxtaposition of Africa and Europe in the Americas is very important.

But now it's not just Europe, America has moved in. How do you feel about that? You are living in America now, teaching there.

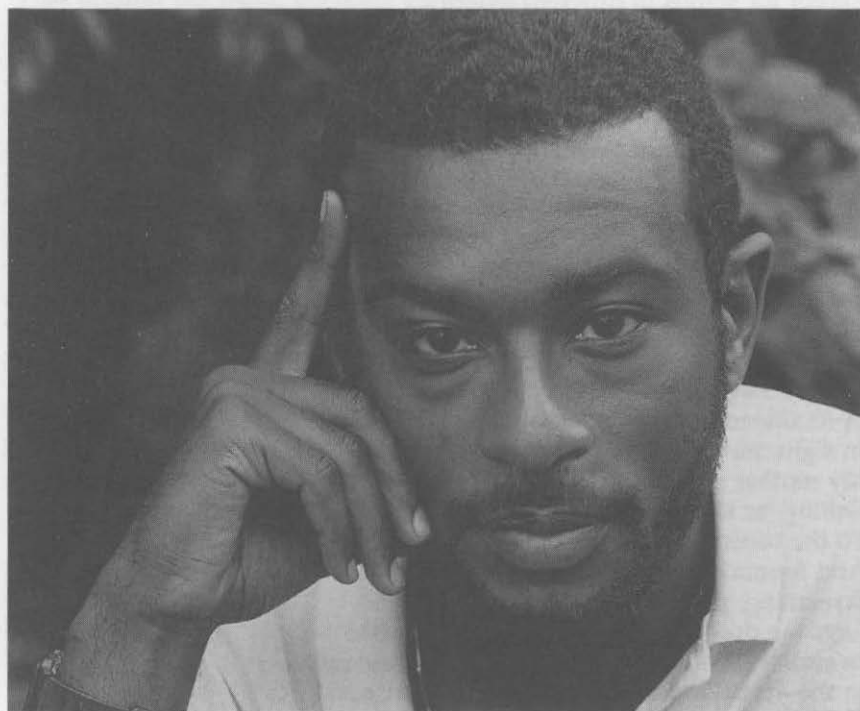
The reason I am living in America is because, like yourself, like many people, business occasionally takes me to the United States. When I'm not there all I have to do is turn on the TV, or open up the papers, and I am bombarded with images of America. In other words, over the years I have come to think of myself as somebody who knows America because I have some kind of a relationship with it. However, I'm not sure that anybody can seriously claim to 'know' a country as large and as diverse as the United States. It seemed important, given the opportunity of spending a year or maybe two years in the United States, to make a concerted effort to get to know a part of the country more intimately. That's really why I'm living there. Furthermore, the Caribbean is now, to some extent, culturally an extension of the Florida Keys, and I really want to understand a bit more about American people rather than simply imagining them all to be characters out of 'Dallas', or a nation whose soul is reflected in the studio audience and guests of 'The Oprah Winfrey Show'.

I've one last question and it's quite a big one. We always have a lot of fun together, whenever we meet we have some laughs. Yet your work doesn't really glow with optimism. You are very hard on your characters; most of your central characters are lost people, they suffer. Pessimism seems to win through. Is that ultimately your view of the world?

I am always surprised that people think I am a pessimist. *Cambridge* is to some extent optimistic. Emily grows. Okay, she suffers greatly, but she still grows. It's the price of the ticket, isn't it? The displacement ticket. Displacement engenders a great deal of suffering, a great deal of confu-

sion, a great deal of soul-searching. It would be hard for me to write a comedy about displacement. But there is courage. Emily has a great amount of courage. As does Cambridge. And in *Higher Ground* there is faith. I don't necessarily mean faith with a religious gloss on it. I mean the ability to actually acknowledge the existence of something that you believe in, something that helps you to make sense of your life. You are right when you say that the characters are often lost, and that they suffer. But I would like to claim that the spirit and tenacity with which my characters fight to try and make a sense of their often helplessly fated lives is in itself optimistic. Nobody rolls over and dies. If they are to 'go under', it is only after a struggle in which they have hopefully won our respect.

(This interview is adapted from a public interview between Graham Swift and Caryl Phillips at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in March 1991.)



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