



Above: Caryl Phillips talks to York students. Right: the Holbeck area of Leeds where two of the 7/7 bombers spent their teenage years

possibility then a different approach is required, and Phillips thinks it must involve writers, particularly writers of narrative fiction, and their ability to help bridge gaps of understanding between cultures.

However, when we seek justification for why we ought to behave in a certain way, or why a government ought to enact a certain policy, we turn as a matter of habit toward philosophical arguments, or cite facts about the world that support our case. We are less inclined to look for answers in lit-

‘So it is, he says, that yesterday’s “Paki-bashing discourse” has now become today’s “anti-Muslim rhetoric, delivered with a wink and a nudge”

erature – reading is seen as a leisure activity, and a passive one at that.

But if we see reading a book as entering into a kind of friendship, the act of reading gains significance. Just as keeping the company of people who enrich our understanding of the world is important to us, so too it is with the books we choose to read.

In his lecture, Phillips seeks to assert the importance of fictional writing along similar lines. “The process of daring to imagine yourself into the life of someone who is not you,” he says, “is an act of moral courage.” However, this is accompanied by an anxiety that these capacities are in danger elsewhere in society.

He criticises the adversarial nature of much of our politics and reality TV culture today, drawing an appreciable murmur of approval from the audience. “We don’t have empathy, we have judgment.”

The point that he made throughout his lecture is that our established ways of debating and practising the politics of culture are desperately inadequate for the scale of the task at hand, and that if we are to solve the problems we face, a different kind of engagement is required.

The adaptation from a postcolonial to a multicultural world, which Phillips dubs “the colouring of Europe”, is, he says, “not something that might happen: it has already happened.” In his essay ‘The Pioneers’, he lampoons the old-fashioned definition of England as a nation of stamp-collectors and pigeon-fanciers: “Most Britons,” he wrote, “are no longer interested in the aimless navel-gazing of a George Orwell.” However true this might be, though, there remains a great deal of work to be done in order to understand what causes the cracks and fissures that characterise modern racial and cultural politics.

Phillips’ writing is an attempt to express human life as part of a community. He writes to extend our understanding of what it means to be an outsider; to be surrounded by a culture to which you can never fully belong.

If there is a case for literature’s indispensability, and its ability to transcend the shortcomings of our adversarial and often narrow-mindedly intellectual culture, there can surely be few people better placed to make it than Caryl Phillips.



WHO IS CARYL PHILLIPS?

Caryl Phillips was educated at Leeds Central High School and Queens College, Oxford, and is professor of English at Yale University. He has written nine works of fiction, most recently *Foreigners*, published in the UK by Harvill Secker.

His novel *Crossing the River* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1993, and *Dancing in the Dark* won the 2006 PEN/Beyond the Margins award. Phillips’ collection of essays, *A New World Order* (Secker & Warburg, 2001) contains several of the pieces referred to in

this article.

The Morrell Address on Toleration is an annual lecture organised by the Department of Politics at York. It is part of the wider Morrell Studies in Toleration programme, funded by the C & J. B. Morrell trust, which includes the teaching of an MA course in Political Philosophy and the Idea of Toleration. The programme’s purpose is to “increase the philosophical and historical understanding and appreciation of toleration as an idea and as a practice.”