"I Miles Philips": An Elizabethan Seaman Conscripted by History

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LET ME BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION. I ACCEPTED TILOTTAMA RAJAN AND LINDA WOODBRIDGE'S INVITATION TO TAKE PART in this panel less from an eagerness to talk about history and its imagining, though I will certainly get to them, than from an eagerness to talk about a particular text. That text, as described in its lengthy original title, is "A Discourse Written by One Miles Philips Englishman, One of the Company Put on Shoare Northward of Panuco, in the West Indies by M. John Hawkins 1568. Conteining Many Special Things of That Countrey and of the Spanish Government, but Specially of Their Cruelties Used to Our Englishmen, and amongst the Rest to Him Selfe for the Space of 15. or 16. Yeres Together, until by Good and Happy Meanes He Was Delivered from Their Bloody Hands, and Returned to His Owne Countrey. An. 1582" (Philips 398).

Like so many other texts of this period, this one was first published by Richard Hakluyt in the 1589 edition of his *Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* and reprinted eleven years later in that book's much expanded second edition. Since then it has been frequently summoned up as a witness in accounts of early modern English exploration and overseas expansion; of the English slave trade, which John Hawkins inaugurated with this voyage and its two predecessors; of English relations with Spain, which were much exacerbated by this voyage; of the Mexican Inquisition, of which Miles Philips was an early victim; and of sixteenth-century Mexico itself, which Philips was among the first Englishmen to visit and describe (see, for example, Greenleaf; Hair; Williamson; and Unwin). In this way, Philips's text has been repeatedly conscripted by history, as Philips was himself conscripted for service in Hawkins's fleet. But all these historical conscriptions, beginning with Hakluyt's, share an inclination I would like to resist, an inclination to look through Philips's text for information about places and events that lie beyond it. What I want to do instead is conscript the text itself—the text as a verbal artifact—for history. As interesting as any information Philips supplies is the way he supplies it: the narrative strategies he uses and, most particularly, his first-person

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pronouns. Not only do those pronouns deserve the attention of history, they are manifestations of a history that was imagined in poetry long before Philips wrote. They thus provide a particularly resonant example of how history and imagination interact to provide a usable past.

What is so remarkable about Philips's first-person pronouns—or, at least, his first-person singular pronouns—is that for the first three-quarters of his text there are so few of them and that for the remaining quarter there are so many. In his first thirty-one pages, Philips uses *I* and its various declensions—*me*, *my*, *mine*, and *myself*—only seventeen times, and of those seventeen, eight refer not to the actor in the story he is telling but rather to the narrator who is telling that story, the narrator who cannot remember a detail, or thinks it would be good to insert a description, or plans to follow up on a particular point.[1] But in his last twelve pages, those pronouns occur no less than 288 times, only one of which refers to the narrator rather than the actor. To put this discrepancy more bluntly, a text that for three-quarters of its length made do with just one first-person singular pronoun every two pages, suddenly finds that it needs nearly twenty-four of them on every page. Why this sudden shift? And why should it matter? Why, in particular, should it matter to history?

Before trying to answer these questions, let's consider this pattern in greater detail. From the fleet's departure from Plymouth in October of 1567 through its storm-troubled voyage to the Guinea coast of West Africa, its forcible collection there of human merchandise for the New World slave trade, its transatlantic middle passage, its bellicose commerce with Spanish settlements from Margarita to Cartagena, its tempest-driven retreat to the Mexican port of San Juan de Ulúa, its disastrous battle in that port with the Spanish viceroy's fleet, and the resulting abandonment of half Hawkins's English crew on the Mexican shore "Northward of Panuco," Miles Philips never once emerges as an individualized I from the collective we of the company. Indeed, over that whole period, which covers a little more than a year and some ten pages of Philips's narration, the only figure who achieves any sustained individual attention is "our general," John Hawkins, whose actions and even thoughts are singled out thirty-six times with that plural possessive phrase and are accorded dozens of accompanying third-person singular pronouns. Now this is perhaps not all that surprising. As the commander of the fleet, Hawkins was, after all, the chief actor on the voyage. It is even less surprising when we notice that so far Philips's account is a fairly close paraphrase of one that Hawkins published in 1568, immediately on his return from the New World, and that Hakluyt faithfully reprinted in both editions of the *Principal Navigations*. Personally and textually, Philips is up to this point little more than a passive appendage of his general.

Separation from Hawkins and the fleet does, however, finally force out Philips's first reference to himself as an individually identifiable presence in his own story. "Those that went in the first boat were," he tells us, "safely set on shore, but of them which went in the second boate, of which number I my selfe was one, the seas wrought so high, that we could not attaine to the shore" (409). But even then his use of such pronouns is extraordinarily sparing. In a twenty-page passage that covers the events of the next twelve years and includes a difficult trek through coastal marshes and topical forest, Indian attacks, arrest by the Spanish, a forced march to Mexico City, imprisonment, interrogation, work in the silver mines, a new arrest (this time by the freshly established Mexican Inquisition), renewed and far more intense interrogation, judgment, bondage, release, and, finally, careful accommodation to a life under constant suspicion, Philips refers to himself as performing an individual action or having an idea of his own only twice, both times in the same sentence. "I learned," he tells us, the Indian language "very perfectly," and "I found" the Indians "to be a courteous and loving kind of

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people" (430). Other than that, first-person singular pronouns emerge in this twenty-page segment only when Philips feels he must let us know to which part of a progressively subdivided group he belongs. Half the Englishmen set ashore traveled westward under the command of Anthony Godard, "of which number I Miles Philips was one"; various Englishmen are called out by the Inquisition for sentencing, "and then was I Miles Philips called"; and "I Miles Philips and William Lowe were appointed to the blacke Friers, where I was appointed to be an overseer of Indian workmen" (412, 428, 430). The awkwardness of these designations, the uncomfortable coupling of pronoun and name, testifies to the difficulty Philips has in even conceiving of himself apart from a group. Through hardship, danger, and sometimes excruciating suffering—hardship, danger, and suffering that must often have been experienced in a very personal way—he always identifies himself with some larger we.

In this settled disinclination to single himself out with an individualizing pronoun, Philips is at one with much Elizabethan writing, including most of the voyages Hakluyt prints. Except for a thick flurry of *I*'s in a brief but painfully defensive passage about the decisions he made in the hours leading up to the battle at San Juan de Ulúa, in which the greater part of his fleet was lost, Hawkins uses few first-person singular pronouns. And Job Hortop, the common seaman whose narrative appears in Hakluyt's second edition alongside Philips's, uses even fewer. Hortop begins with a first-person singular introduction of himself and ends with a first-person singular list of his near-death experiences in the course of the expedition, but in between he rarely refers to himself alone—despite the fact that he presents his "treatise" as an individual instance, known by personal experience, of the universal truth enunciated by his biblical namesake, Job of Hus: "man being borne of a woman, living a short time, is replenished with many miseries" (445). Whether a responsible general officer like Hawkins or merely a suffering private seaman like Hortop, Elizabethans habitually shied away from any direct highlighting of their distinguishably individual selves.

If the degree of Philips's reticence is remarkable even in this notably reticent company, it may be because his age and particular circumstances at the time of the events he recounts made extreme reticence natural and necessary. Not that he tells us anything about himself that would support such an inference. He doesn't. Unlike Hortop, who lets us know where he was born, where he was brought up, to whom he was apprenticed and in what trade, how he came to be part of Hawkins's expedition, and in what capacity he served and on which ship, Philips divulges nothing that would particularize him—nothing, that is, more than a name. But, as it happens, we can fill in some of these blanks from another source. Though it has by now rotted away to illegibility, the transcript of Philips's trial before the Mexican Inquisition could, for the most part, still be deciphered early in the last century when it, along with hundreds of similar documents, was copied out at the expense of G. R. G. Conway, an Englishman then living in Mexico City. Thanks to Conway and his assistants, we now know that Philips was just a boy, twelve or thirteen years old, when Hawkins visited his parents' London home and arranged for him to serve as a page on Hawkins's flagship. Youth was the basis of Philips's defense six years later when he faced the Mexican Inquisition, and it was no doubt the reason for the exceptionally light sentence he received. He was simply too young to have had a fully heretical belief of his own. "He followed," as he told the inquisitor, "the faith the others did"; "he had not attained years of discretion and until he came to this land [of New Spain] only thought of play"; "he was accustomed to do what others did and believe what they believed."[2] He had, in short, no independent self worth mentioning, certainly none worth prosecuting.

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Given all this—Philips's initial reliance on Hawkins and on Hawkins's text, his stylistic conformity to the common Elizabethan avoidance of the first-person singular, his youth, and his need to deny responsibility for his religious practices before reaching the New World—there should be no surprise that we find so few *I*'s in the first three-quarters of his text. Everything worked against them. No, the real surprise is that they occur with such extraordinary frequency from then on, with far greater frequency than Hawkins or Hortop achieves even in the most self-referential moments. How then, to return to the first of the questions I asked earlier, does it happen that this self-abnegating young man suddenly discovers and proclaims such an insistent self? What transforms his habitual *we* into an inescapable *I*?

With so much built-up resistance to be overcome, the passage in which this shift finally occurs demands scrutiny. It comes after Philips and the seven others who shared his relatively mild sentence—all of them, as we know from the Inquisition records, boys when the fleet first sailed—are released from the monasteries where they were condemned to serve for the preceding five years. Still part of a group, Philips continues with his characteristic *we*. "Then were we suffered to goe up and downe the countrey, and to place our selves as we could, and yet not so free, but that we very well knew that there was good espiall alwayes attending us and all our actions, so that we durst not once speake or looke awry." From there, he goes on to recount the fate of each of his fellows:

> David Alexander & Robert Cooke returned to serve the Inquisitor, who shortly after maried them both to two of his Negro women: Richard Williams maried a rich widow of Biskay with 4000 Pezos: Paul Horsewell is maried to a Mestisa, as they name those whose fathers were Spaniards, and their mothers Indians, and this woman which Paul Horsewell hath maried, is sayd to be the daughter of one that came in with Hernando Cortes the Conquerour, who had with her in marriage foure thousand Pezos, and a faire house: John Storie is maried to a Negro woman: William Lowe had leave and licence to goe into Spaine where he is now married.

Then without interruption, as the final item in this catalog, comes the sudden eruption of Philips's *I*, here italicized in all its declensions to show off its unprecedented frequency:

> For *mine owne* part, *I* could never throughly settle *my selfe* to marry in that countrey, although many faire offers were made unto *me* of such as were of great abilitie and wealth, but *I* could have no liking to live in that place, where *I* must every where see and know such horrible idolatrie committed, and durst not once for *my* life speake against it: and therefore *I* had alwayes a longing and desire to this *my* native countrey. (431–32)

After having spent fully half his life in Mexico, most of it passing as an actively practicing Catholic, after having learned Spanish so well that he could easily be mistaken, as he several times is, for a native-born Spaniard, and after having achieved a sufficiently secure position in this new country to attract promising offers of marriage, Philips discovers in himself an irreducible core of Protestant Englishness. This new identity appears so abruptly and with so little advance notice that we cannot help wondering where it comes from. Was it there all along, just waiting to emerge? Or was it the product of the Spanish "cruelties" Philips often points out? Nothing in his account makes it possible to answer with any assurance. Indeed, his newfound *I* would seem almost to have been produced by a process of elimination. As the English company to which he originally belonged is gradually pared away by physical separation or assimilation, Philips is left with no one to support his habitual *we*. His *we* becomes an *I* as much by default—by a simple reduction in number that, when it finally gets down to one, requires a shift in pronouns—as by inner resistance. But whatever the process that brings this singularly Protestant and English self to the fore, there can

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be no questioning the intensity of the feeling with which Philips experiences it. From here on, and at considerable risk to his life, all his energies are bent on escaping back to England.

I say that there can be no questioning the emotional integrity of this *I*. But it has been sharply questioned. In a recent essay on Philips's rhetorical strategies, Barbara Fuchs has done just that, and she has bolstered her questioning with the intriguing suggestion that we read Philips's narrative within a generic frame provided by the Spanish picaresque.[3] Fuchs argues not that Philips intended to present himself as an English *pícaro* or even that he was acquainted with the genre as such "but rather that the parameters established by the Spanish form elucidate this peculiar English narration of adventures in New and Old Spain." The picaresque "frames," as she puts it, Philips's story "both by revealing its distinct shape and by casting suspicion upon his claims"—particularly his claim to have discovered in himself an inviolable core of Protestant Englishness (63). That claim is, Fuchs argues, belied by the subterfuges, the Catholic and Spanish maskings, that permit Philips to survive in New Spain and make good his escape back to England. Far from being a transparently unproblematic truth, Philips's claim to a firmly grounded and unwavering religious and national identity is, Fuchs suggests, just another picaresque act, an act he stages for his new inquisitor, an audience of English readers. When it is convenient to be Catholic and Spanish, he is Catholic and Spanish, and when it is more convenient to be Protestant and English, that is what he is. Neither mask goes much deeper than the occasion requires.

This suspicious, deconstructive reading has much to be said for it. Philips does have the *pícaro*'s gift for improvisational shape shifting—and never more so than in the stretch of his adventures that follows the emergence of his singular *I*. With the Indians, he is a fellow victim of Spanish cruelty. With the Spaniards, he is successively a compliant apprentice and interpreter, an apparently patient prisoner, a native of "Granado" eager to buy passage home, a soldier, a weaver of taffetas, and again a soldier. And even with an English sea captain, he learns from sad experience that he must pretend to be a student of languages rather than admit he is one of Hawkins's abandoned sailors. But on the other side of the question, the evidence is stronger. Most telling is the simple existence of his narrative. Unlike his six fellows, who all married and settled in Mexico or Spain, Philips came home. He resisted marriage and defied the inquisitor's order that he not leave Mexico City. He thus opened himself to the danger of being taken, tried, and burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic, a danger he twice barely escaped. No *pícaro*, for whom survival is goal enough, Philips has a purpose defined by an unbendable sense of who he is and who he wishes to remain. When he stood before the Inquisition to renounce his upbringing and embrace the inquisitor's Catholic faith, that purpose had yet to emerge. In that moment, nothing distinguished him from those other English prisoners who, however reluctantly, accommodated themselves to the demands of a superior power. But from the time he begins calling himself *I* and begins talking of the difference between his inner feelings and the face he shows the world, his behavior provides irrefutable evidence of his "longing and desire to this [his] native countrey."

That evidence demands a generic frame quite different from the picaresque. For many years, I have been teaching Philips's narrative in conjunction with heroic poetry, in particular with the Circean episodes in the *Odyssey*, *Orlando Furioso*, *Jerusalem Delivered*, and *The Faerie Queene* and with the closely related Dido episode in Vergil's *Aeneid*. These are episodes in which the epic hero risks losing—or in some instances does lose for a while—the sense of who he is and what he is meant to accomplish. The original Circe—Homer's Circe—transforms men into beasts and makes, in the words of George Chapman's translation, "their country

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vanish from their thought" (391). Had Odysseus succumbed to her temptation, as his men do, he would never have returned to Ithaca. In a similar way, Dido would have kept Aeneas from carrying the Trojan gods to Latium; Alcina would have prevented Ruggiero's founding of the House of the Este; Armida would have defeated Rinaldo's liberation of Jerusalem; and Spenser's Acrasia would, with her engulfing sensuality, have denied all heroic accomplishment. For Miles Philips, marriage in New Spain is just such a temptation. If he were to give way, as all his companions do, his provisional and defensive assumption of a Catholic and Spanish mask would be made permanent. He would, in the Circean rhetoric that was becoming common in the religious and national conflicts of the sixteenth century, not only have played a beast's part; he would have been transformed into a beast forever. Instead, he resists and, like the wily Odysseus, the most picaresque of epic heroes, feigns compliance to win his eventual liberty.

All of which brings me back to the imagining of history. I do not suppose that Philips's imagining of his own history is any more dependent on his reading of epic poetry than Fuchs thought it was dependent on his reading of picaresque fiction. This is not a matter of life deliberately imitating art. But I would suggest that Homer, Vergil, and the sixteenth-century poets who followed them imagined a vital part of the history Philips lived and reported. The narrative pattern Homer initiated and the others variously elaborated and revised recurs in Philips's refusal of marriage and discovery of an *I* that longs for home. The adherence to that pattern is what gives Philips's text its rare paradigmatic force, what can make it central to our own reimagining of early modern European history. In each of the epic poems, resistance to Circean temptation and the decision to pursue a goal identified with an originary self serve as a powerful representation of whatever ideology the poem favors—Homer's *oikos*, Vergil's empire, Ariosto's Este dynasty, Tasso's militant Counter-Reformation Christianity, and Spenser's Protestant nationhood. But in each there is also a deep imaginative engagement, sometimes an intensely sympathetic engagement, with all that must be renounced and left behind. So in Miles Philips. Like the others, his text offered readers the pleasures of travel to distant and little-known places, the dangers of captivity and threatened metamorphosis, the reassurance of inward resistance, and the thrill of an exciting escape. But, even more than that, it joined the others in presenting an exemplary and heroic self, a self that can waver and even fall but that is ultimately grounded in values the readers are called on to emulate. The unmistakable signs of that self, Philips's first-person singular pronouns, appearing so suddenly and then maintained with such persistence, can thus be thought of as having done important cultural work for the Elizabethan readers who first encountered them.

For us, more than four hundred years later, those pronouns and the narrative from which they emerge are traces of a history that we may now wish to resist and deconstruct, as Barbara Fuchs was inclined to do, but that can still exert a powerful appeal. Much of what shaped Philips's text was then quite new. When Hawkins's fleet first sailed, the Protestant Reformation was just fifty years old, and its most recent identification with the English state dated back less than nine years, to Elizabeth's accession in November 1558. Animosity between England and Spain was no older, while the commerce in African slaves that brought Hawkins and his men to a New World discovered three-quarters of a century earlier and to a New Spain conquered and settled in the preceding half century was newer still. No wonder then that the emergence of Philips's *I* has such compelling force. It represents assertions and denials, affiliations and estrangements, that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier and that were to dominate English and American self-understanding for centuries to come.

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But all that momentous newness, all that historical immediacy and particularity, is caught up in a narrative pattern Homer imagined for his wandering hero more than two thousand years before Philips wrote. And that, too, helps explain the continuing force of Philips's *I*. History and the literary imagination have here combined to produce a text that gives access to the lived experience of a particular moment, a moment of unusual import and volatility, but the text speaks that moment in a way that resonates well beyond its temporal confines. Perception of the confluence belongs, of course, more to us than to Philips. Unlike Job Hortop, who compared his miseries with those of the biblical Job, or John Hawkins, who ended his brief account by expressing his need for another John Foxe, another tireless martyrologist, to write his story, Philips consciously evokes no literary pattern or precedent. But the pattern and precedents are there all the same, and they work to give his narrative a literary and historical significance neither Hortop's nor Hawkins's can rival.

So where is history imagined? The obvious and inevitable answer is in the present, in Fuchs's framing of Miles Philips as an English *pícaro* or in my reframing of him as a latter-day epic hero. History is always imagined or reimagined in a present and in response to the needs and interests of that present—in this case, in response to our postmodern concern with the interdependent dynamics of early modern nationhood and early modern selfhood. But those present imaginings are necessarily informed both by the documentary record—including the record of Philips's *I*—and by the generic patterns through which we apprehend and process that record, patterns like the picaresque and the Odyssean epic. Without the record, imagination would have nothing to fix on. And without the generic patterns, themselves the products of earlier imaginings, the record would make little sense. Nor is the record itself free of all imagining. At every point where we encounter it, whether in Philips's "Discourse" or in the related accounts of Hawkins and Hortop or in the archives of the Mexican Inquisition, the record is suffused with the imaginings of those who produced it. The imagining of history is thus the conflation and interaction of many imaginings in many presents, including some that long predate the events being imagined. So when sometime in the 1580s Miles Philips switched from *we* to *I* and when we in our twenty-first-century present respond to that switch with the recognition that the history of selves and nations is there speaking to us across the full span of nationalist modernity, our imagination, Philips's imagination, and the imaginations of people like Homer and the authors of the Spanish picaresque all have a part. Together, even in occasional disagreement, we imagine a history that nevertheless really happened.

Notes

[1] I count pages in the 1903–05 MacLehose edition of Hakluyt. The numbers would change were I to use one of the sixteenth-century editions, but the proportions would remain the same.

[2] "Trial" 176–78. For the Spanish original, see "Proceso" (1949) 655–58.

[3] In an essay that was brought to my attention only after this paper was completed, José María Rodríguez García takes a position similar to Fuchs's, though without reference to the Spanish picaresque.

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