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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/8282>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.8282
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2010
Number of pages: 11-22
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Kerry Jane Wallart, "Lines and Circles: Geometrical Horizons in David Dabydeen's *Turner*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 33.1 | 2010, Online since 11 December 2021, connection on 20 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/8282> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8282>

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Lines and Circles: Geometrical Horizons in David Dabydeen's *Turner*

In his long narrative poem *Turner*, Guyanese author David Dabydeen attempts stylistically to undercut the problematic emotion carried by a painting by Turner. Perspective dissolves in favour of geometry, science is pitted against art, abstraction against figuration, the dominant horizon eventually replaced by circles of suffering and oppression. Yet the text does derive from the image in complex ways, and the aesthetics of the sublime is interpreted in modernist terms. The poem thus adopts the shifting viewpoints of modernism in order to displace Turner's horizon without losing sight of his painting. This paper shows how a poem which has consistently been read as a protestation might rather be a reflection upon the act of creation and the continuity which it implies.

J. M. W. Turner's *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*¹ is swathed in the same warring yellow and blue which his contemporary, John Constable, had admiringly called "saffron and indigo," with respect to the equally famous *The Bay of Baiae with Apollo and the Sibyl* (Beckett, 124). Turner's *Slave Ship*

depicts an actual scene from the archives of the British slave trade: the case of the *Zong* of 1781, a slave ship whose cargo was so badly affected by an epidemic that Captain Collingwood used the opportunity of an on-coming storm to throw 122 sick men and women into the sea. The reasoning for this was a financial calculation: he could claim insurance for Africans lost at sea, but not for those dying of disease. (Döring 1997, 3)

A major scandal even at the time, the event has inspired numerous artistic representations from a vast array of vantage points. Among them, Guyanese writer David Dabydeen's *Turner* examines the painting's very construction of perspective. Aflame, the romantic horizon occupies centre-stage in Turner's painting while, hardly noticeable in the foreground, the shackled foot of a drowning slave thrown overboard merely hints at the drama which is really unfolding. In his preface to his long narrative poem, David Dabydeen discusses John Ruskin's critical response to the famous painting.² After long, lyrical comments on the

1 Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) was an English Romantic landscape painter particularly renowned for his brilliantly coloured seascapes.

2 Ruskin was fond enough of the painting to have actually bought it, thus becoming its first owner; the description of the painting is to be read in Ruskin 159-60. The painting (see front cover) now hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts, in Boston. The paginations for all subsequent quotations from *Turner* and Dabydeen's preface will be given directly between parentheses in the body of the text.

sea, the treatment of the sky, the use of colours, Ruskin ends up offhandedly tackling the actual subject, “the shackling and drowning of Africans” in a footnote which, in Dabydeen’s words, “reads like an afterthought, something tossed overboard.” (ix) Here is a quote from Ruskin’s commentary: “Every square inch is a perfect composition (Ruskin 160). As is usually the case, the commentary betrays its author more than the artist who is being analysed. Indeed, Turner’s painting is so ambiguous as to have elicited both the opinion that he was proving a consummate upholder of slavery, and that he was actually denouncing the trade (see for example Smiles 63-64). On his part, Ruskin takes the figure of the slave for granted, neglecting to interpret its presence. He was sensitive, after all, to the composition of a painting which does focus on sea and sky while obscuring the bodies of the slaves. Similarly, in more than one nineteenth-century novel, colonial exactions hardly deserve a mention, and often are relegated to the background. Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), for example, does not dwell on the fact that the property and money of Sir Thomas Bertram are obviously sustained by his sugar plantations and presumably the slaves who worked them in Antigua. For Ruskin and others, colonial domination was not the topic simply because they saw no reason to discuss its validity (although Ruskin did rather explicitly enjoin his compatriots to “Reign or Die” in his Inaugural Lecture at the University of Oxford, in 1870).

In the preface, David Dabydeen goes on to write that his own text “focuses on the submerged head of the African in the foreground of Turner’s painting.” (x) He returns to what cannot be seen on the horizon, to what hides in the foreground, submerged. He chooses to re-organize the composition. Turner’s organisation of space is thrown to the four winds in the long narrative poem, which recounts the ordeal of a young African boy at the hands of his slave master. In Dabydeen’s *Turner*, the sublime circumference of the sea – the “perfect composition” that had so impressed Ruskin – recedes in favour of an indistinct mesh of lineatures, of lines and circles, of “strokes, and dots” (27) which defy perspective. The horizon is made an impossible vision through the dissemination of subjectivities, starting with that of the artist. Turner becomes in turn, as it were, a pervert and a greedy slave master, a writer, the dying Christ or else a still-born African who has just lost its mother to the Middle Passage, in a text which merges innumerable identities from both Africa and Britain. In such a confusion of voices, the poem delineates nothing but a dark hole around that foot, a “thing drawn yet / Struggling to break free.” (30) My intention in this paper is to link Dabydeen’s poetic choice to Homi Bhabha’s reflections on time in his essay “DissemiNation.” Its first section, “The time of the nation,” highlights how national identity goes along with a certain visualization of time. Space is not treated *per se* by Bhabha, but alluded to in several passages, such as the following: “The recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression.” (295) In *Turner*, the deconstruction of perspec-

tive challenges such elaborations, and can therefore be read as an attempt to evade political concerns altogether.³

While criticism has mostly questioned J. M. W. Turner's political and aesthetic intentions,⁴ and Dabydeen's postcolonial reactions,⁵ this paper proposes to read the poem's response to the painting in formal terms. Turner has imposed a perspective that humiliates the drowning slave further, and Dabydeen sets about to organize space in the (apparently) most abstract way possible. Neither a flamboyant writing back nor a self-conscious and equally angry failure to redeem an original voice (both readings having been made of *Turner*), the poem is centered around the image of a circle. As a metaphor for creation, the circle is deployed to undercut the straight line of grand narratives and master paintings. Because the body of the poem constantly plays with its iconographic source, this paper proposes to read *Turner* as a reflection on the notion of geometry, another visual discipline which Dabydeen opposes to the romantic "sublime" and the unity of perspective. Space is reorganised along the shapes of circles, spirals, orbs, vortexes, spheres and arabesques. This circularity is, I shall argue, a writing back to colonial visions without sentimentalism, and which is intended to remain distinct from any ideology. Abstract configurations of shape and meaning in *Turner* contribute to abolishing the horizon in favour of a plane, a line and a circle which function as invitations and constraints, an end and a beginning, a desire and a reality, what is and can be, what is seen and not seen. However, the very title of the poem intimates proximity with the romantic painter, as the name *Turner* can be taken either for an ironical homage or an accusation. The last section of this essay will address the ways in which Dabydeen arguably follows in Turner's footsteps rather than turns away from them.

Turner presents us with two protagonists, the slave who has been drowning for centuries and whose consciousness we overhear, and a stillborn baby drifting towards him or her, as its gender characterization becomes more and more indistinct the further we read on. Both a monologue from beyond the grave and a tale of births and adoptions, the poem recounts the relationship between one slave and his/her master, Turner, as well as the one between the two dead slaves drifting

3 Fulford writes about Döring's analysis, "Döring's essay recognizes, as we have, that aesthetics are bound to politics, in this case to the ideologies of colonialism, which allow the death of slaves to be depicted in a sublime style as they are transformed into the occluded and incomprehensible "other," inspiring terror in the eyes of the beholder. In this sense, any notion of a decolonized aesthetic is doomed since our very notion of what constitutes the sublime has been forged within a context whereby imperialism imaginatively obscures and distances otherness or alterity." (2)

4 As a matter of fact, and even though his nationalism is no longer to be proven, Turner was a very close friend of Walter Fawkes, a reformist who staunchly supported abolition. However, his consistent silence concerning his political views makes such a debate a moot point altogether.

5 See for example Döring, Fulford and McIntyre.

in an unnamed and ever more ghostly sea. "Neither can escape Turner's representation of them as exotic and sublime victims. Neither can describe themselves anew but are indelibly stained by Turner's language and imagery." (x) The preface questions, once again, the possibility for postcolonial authors to start writing in front of a blocked horizon. Any type of representation, be it African or Guyanese, has already had its fate sealed by previous colonial or even colonialist narratives and – as in the instance of the painting – images. The idea is given shape through the reiteration of the word "seal," in both senses of the word: "sealed lips"; "Like an old seal's mouth"; "Until a slave arose from the dead, / Cracking the seal of his mouth, waking / The buried with forbidden words." (16, 18, 29 respectively) The mouth of the enslaved is irredeemably stopped, and language forbidden. This is evidently where postcolonialism joins postmodernism – in the awareness that it is too late to write anything new.⁶ Some type of foreclosure is clearly on the cards, "stopping [the poet's] mouth" (39). A figure of oppression (but not only), Turner becomes the slave master and even at times all slave masters, and all the blond and blue-eyed Englishmen before and after him. "Turner are [sic] the ones with golden hair [...] All the fair men are Turner." (8) Dabydeen's protagonist is also a lecher and a pederast, taking his slave boys to bed, silencing them in shocking and graphic ways. More than anything, he represents order and temporality, rationality and science: "since Turner's days I have learnt to count, / Weigh, measure, abstract, rationalise." (2) The line of discourse is necessarily that of rationality, it becomes a furrow, a groove endlessly trapping the voices of the decolonized world. The poetics deployed in *Turner* does not, however, reject the above-mentioned rationality. In an interview, Dabydeen adds that Europeans have been imposing their vision of things and their genres, and that

there is something very voyeuristic about Turner's response to all that blood and mayhem, in the same way that slavery provided the horror that fed into the Gothic novel at the turn of the 18th century: all that horror and Neo-Gothicism partly fed on the descriptions of slavery, the shark, the broken nigger, the blood. (qtd in Döring 1997, 14)

In the course of the nineteenth century, the horror of slavery was turned into thrills by a jaded British audience.⁷ Turner's perspective and saturated mimesis have locked the fate of Middle Passage victims into lurid emotions.⁸ "[I]n search of another image of himself," (40) the slave offers a description of the disaster which is full of restraint, spurning the sensational realm of passions and instinc-

6 The relation between postmodernism and postcolonialism is complex, not the least since neither term is easily or straightforwardly defined. For further reading on the idea that both share a strong awareness of their belatedness, see Adam and Tiffin.

7 Colonial horror tales form a distinct genre by themselves, and a singular vein of gothic novels. For further reading on the "imperial gothic," see Brantlinger 227-53.

8 One might mention here that Turner's chair at the Royal Academy was that of "Perspective."

tual drives. Indeed, Turner's painting garnered immense attention also because it did speak to the senses.⁹ Its horizon is meant to mirror tempests in the souls. Conversely, Dabydeen confronts perspective, and refuses to adopt a single point of view. He thus often uses the interstice between two types of representation to diffract the singularity of horizon, the unity of vantage point. A passage betrays such play, and appeals to reason rather than to emotion: "People spew off the edges, clutching roots / Like they do now at each other, as one ship sinks." (6) Reproduced on the page facing these lines is a detail from another painting by Turner, *A Fire at Sea* (c. 1835, Tate Gallery). The adverb "now" refers to the very page on which the word is printed, and intimates that the poetic voice is actually producing a running commentary of Turner's artwork, adopting the objectivity of criticism. In the latter quotation, echoes from *The Waste Land* are also to be heard ("What are the roots that clutch," ["The Burial of the Dead" 61]), and they lead readers further down to read *Turner* in modernist terms as well as in the light of Lyotard's reflections on the question of the sublime. Elsewhere, rationality and science appear under the guise of geometry, an important concern in the poem. In *Turner*, circles and lines are not meant to send us back to figurative art; they elaborate a more abstract horizon.¹⁰

Opting for abstraction goes hand in hand with a dissemination of vantage points. The voice is evasive. The voice of the drowned slave alternates with that of Turner, himself a Protean figure. The expression of emotions and opinions is carefully avoided, and, even when feeling is evoked, its recipient is obliterated: "Swoosh, the sound still haunts." (2) Passive forms are piled upon one another ("nigger made impotent, / Hurt by different hands in different ages," 30, e.g.). More often even, the self is relegated to the position of object – grammatical and otherwise: "my breath held / In shock until the waters quell me," "the sun, which blinds me as I look up [...] The sun has reaped my eyes," "The water will not see me." (21, 22, 23) The theme of the deadly and the ghostly also recurs, further abolishing the possibility of a stable perspective and of the horizon that would go therewith. In *Turner*, the narrative voice is clearly rising from the dead: "[N]either ghost / Nor portent of a past or future life / Such as I am now." (20) With lines such as "she might be dead," (20) the poem goes on suspending existence *sine die*. The absence of any sensibility is made clearer even by the still-born child, yet another "Turner," a being which can claim no human experience, an

9 Frédéric Ogée thus argues that, influenced by the poetry of Thomson and Akenside, Turner was convinced that an empirical approach to the world was most apt, and that he conceived images no less as a sensual than as an intellectual experience of the truth of things, as a form of poetic moment (see Ogée 167).

10 It seems that such a preoccupation has led to further literary developments in *A Harlot's Progress* (1999), a novel which clearly derives from *Turner*. For more on this parallel, see Yelin. Her article reads Dabydeen's *Harlot's Progress* and *Turner* in the light of Adorno's writings on the possibility of post-traumatic art, placing these texts once more in an "ethical and political" (344) perspective.

anti-lyrical possibility. After the modernists, Dabydeen creates a world in which the lines of the poem lead to mere dashes, “strokes, and dots,” (27), replacing the last remnants of a human presence still to be remembered, but certainly partly vanished (such is the narrative voice in *The Harlot’s Progress*, a sequel of sorts to *Turner*, which presents Mungo lying on his deathbed). Eradicating emotional perspectives which were too tainted with Victorian sensationalism, and which also failed to render the horror of it all, has led the poet to do away with human presence in his text. Interestingly, Dabydeen had published *Disappearance* (1993) only one year before *Turner*, and the themes of both texts are to some extent intertwined. The novel tells the story of a Guyanese engineer come to Hastings in order to literally prevent England from disappearing. The erosion provoked by the sea is strong enough to have washed out several villages perched on the soft chalk cliff, and threatens to go on doing so. The narrative gives voice to the perspective of the colonized, and subverts traditional relationships between the motherland and its colonies. It falls to a Guyanese to redeem Kent, but the engineer’s alienation is such that the irony is lost on him. The recorded disappearances are also human, starting with that of the husband of the narrator’s landlady, Mrs. Rutherford, a ghostly character reappearing throughout the novel. Such narrative strategies are deployed, I argue, because the notion of perspective – either textual or graphic – has been delegitimized by the colonial period.

The erasure of the self may also be related to Dabydeen’s interpretation and distortion of the sublime. *Turner* calls into question the aesthetics of the sublime, as the double and uncertain etymology of the word (*sub*, under + *limis*, oblique or *limen*, the threshold) contains the very idea of a line, or limit. In the poem, the sublime is associated with the alienation of repetition, orienting the perspective toward the slave boys:

And we repeated in a trance the words
That shuddered from him: *blessed, angelic*
Sublime; words that seemed to flow endlessly
From him, filling our mouths and bellies
Endlessly. (38)

Run-on-lines, the repetition of “endlessly” framing the penultimate line, and the final figure of aposiopesis (a rhetorical interruption designed to betray an emotion) – all these devices suggest that the horizon of language is infinitely blocked by what has already been said and written. But the same passage abounds with images of the circle. The linearity of the syntagm is held in check by repetitions that curb the line, the evocation of the round shapes of mouths and bellies, the ebb and flow of the poem’s rhythm. Dots, lines and circles intersperse the poem. Geometry is lurking.

Dabydeen understands the sublime as a geometrical poetics. Such a position may not be as distant from *Turner*’s as one might think and the last section of my paper will show how the poem derives from the painting in more ways than it

first seems. One of the possible definitions of the sublime is an attempt to minimize the topic so as to create the distance which, according to Burke, is necessary to arouse our sense of the sublime. Typhoons and drowning in tempestuous seas were a privileged topic, along with all sorts of natural disasters – shipwrecks, snow storms and drifts, floods and fires, with humans crushed under, cast overboard or thrown aside. Yet the sublime only worked if the spectator knew herself or himself to be safe. According to Edmund Burke, the sublime rests upon the feeling of “negative pleasure,” stemming from the distance between the viewer and the view, a necessarily awful and painful one. The sublime makes us guess what can hardly be beheld. The object of the sublime is described as “dark, uncertain and confused.” (Burke 1, 7) Distance is always needed, which suggests that, as an aesthetic category, the sublime has to do with horizons, but also with the disengagement of the self. “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful.” (Burke 24, 2) The very association of pain and what Burke calls “delight” was subsequently resurrected and transformed by Kant in his rational rather than sensualistic sublime, an emotion which, however, may not be inspired by a work of art but need be associated with the spectacle of nature. Lyotard scrutinized the Kantian sublime in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, which defines the concept of the sublime as the source of the entire modernist movement. Indeed, modernism questioned the very existence of subjectivity and led thought to its limit. “It is the limit itself that understanding cannot conceive of as its object. The limit is not an object for understanding. It is its method” (Lyotard 59). Writing about modernist poetry, Lyotard points out that the

sublime feeling is analyzed as double defiance. Imagination at the limits of what it can present does violence to itself in order to present that which it can no longer present. Reason, for its part, seeks, unreasonably, to violate the interdict it imposes on itself and which is strictly critical, the interdict that prohibits it from finding objects corresponding to its concepts in sensible intuition. In these two aspects, thinking defies its own finitude, as if fascinated by its own excessiveness. (Lyotard 55)

A “method” avoiding “sensible intuition,” such is the – modernist-inspired – sublime which is thus to be found in Dabydeen's *Turner*. The poem uses geometry as a guideline, but it also responds to the painting as an artwork rather than merely criticizing the painter's cultural perspective – at odds with the poet's contemporary perspective. As a matter of fact, Turner's art was already veering towards abstraction, thus introducing a distinct and shocking rupture in the tradition of nature painting the English school had founded. Creating a vortex where the subject vanishes, Turner's art questions the very possibility of representation, and painting often becomes its own topic, a trait which largely caused his work to be ignored in the Victorian age. Dabydeen's poem throws into relief the

difficulty of making pronouncements about Turner's art, perhaps as much as it deplores the erasure of that drowning slave.

As in modernist poetry, mimetic representation in *Turner* is threatened because value is lost, and because of the axiological uncertainty, signalled by the Eliot intertext, "Would it have been worth while, after all."¹¹ In this respect, the poem forcefully reminds us that value was a moral scandal during the slave trade, indicting the capitalist excesses of the eighteenth century in Great Britain. If the poem's horizon is blocked, it is also because no worth can ever guarantee language again – language being traditionally guaranteed by common beliefs, as is easily seen in the case of oaths for example. The motifs of boat and coin are often merged, possibly recalling *Moby Dick*, but surely suggesting that all that mankind gone awry had to do with no more than greed.

[...] rub salt
 Into the stripes of her wounds in slow ecstatic
 Ritual trance, each grain caressed and secreted
 Into her ripped skin like a trader placing each
 Counted coin back into his purse. (37)

The lines weave body and money together. The imagination of the poet teeters between the linear (stripes, ripped) and the circular (grain, placing back, purse) which subsequently turns into a baroque-like fold: "Her flesh is open / Like the folds of a purse, she receives / His munificence of salt" (37) The rationale for refusing to write might be for other reasons than the lock-up of perspective on the part of the British. Such memories might be worthless, devalued by an economy gone fast and loose. Elsewhere, arithmetic appears as uncongenial (Turner counts and "sketches endless numbers" 17), with geometry its counterpart and possible solution.

Like Derek Walcott, David Dabydeen foregrounds the sea to suggest the temptation of dismooring and drifting, a solution to "loosen the greed anchored / In men's hearts." (10) Here, value and suffering are strongly linked, and an escape might be suggested by the verb "loosen," which is often understood in the poem as the opposite of to enslave. The same term is used by Dabydeen to encapsulate the birth of his vocation:

"I dropped out in the second year and went back to Guyana for six months to loosen my tongue. When I came back to Cambridge, I felt more confident." He felt confident enough, indeed, to submit those Creole poems to an English prize and win it, thus launching his career as a poet. (*Guardian* interview)

One remembers the "thing drawn yet / Struggling to break free." (30) Looseness also stands for the poetic voice, one which needs to forsake lament. This dis-

11 A few lines following this quotation from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," (14), Lazarus, risen from the dead, appears, another intimation that Eliot lurks behind the entire text of *Turner*.

placement, which is also a dislocation and a welcome leap, allows the landscape to stop rendering an emotion, as was the case in Turner's painting. Variations on the word "loose" recur in the poem: "Blown and flapping loose," "Blown loose, I baptise Tanje after the strumpet / Of our village," "Now I am loosed / Into the sea, I no longer call, / I have even forgotten the words." (1, 14, 18) So much "looseness" directs us towards a horizon which does not exist, but will always be projected by the poetic imagination.

It has bleached me too of colour,
 Painted me gaudy, dabs of ebony,
 An arabesque of blues and vermilions,
 Sea-quats cling to my body like gorgeous
 Ornaments. (14)

The arabesque is a curvilinear form reconciling the circle and the line. It is also an interesting feature from a postcolonial vantage point, as it sees the East meet the West: it is the name given by the Arabs and seen through the prism of the Italian language with the adjective *arabesco*. The term also testifies to the polysemy of the signified, as it can designate a type of writing, a dance position, and a musical subgenre altogether. The circle is everywhere in the poem, and it often loops into an arabesque, often representing resilience: "Almost a circle without snapping, yet strong." (2) The arabesque is also phonetic, braiding together similar sonorities such as "rope," "reap," "ripe," "rape". Elsewhere, it assumes the shape of the imperfect circles of intertextuality with, for example, echoes of Trinculo's words in *The Tempest* ("most scurvy monster," II, 2, 1241): "It plopped into the water from a passing ship / Like a lime-seed spat from the scurried mouth / Of a sailor." (6) Like Prospero, Turner is carrying his books around, an object of fascination for the young slaves. The image of a circle is also embedded in the first syllable of the name Turner, returning again and again in Dabydeen's text. Finally, I contend that, more than anything else, the various figures of the circle function in the manner of a poetic gesture, one which cannot quite tell of the Middle Passage, but keeps circling around its dark hole. The aporia of perspective is replaced by a circular horizon – the very Greek etymology of the word: a belt, a circle – which mimics the return of the word, again and again, on the scene of traumatic memories.

The entire text is set under the sign of incessant repetitions. As a result, the figure of the circle imposes itself, and supersedes the line of perspective, reminding one that when modernist art destroyed perspective and its illusion, one of its first moves was to repeat a nose, an eye. Like the cubists before him, Dabydeen plays with circles as well as with cubes. His circles are also, prominently, stylistic, notably with the Homeric practice common to oral literatures, of using and reusing the same half-verse – "It plopped into the water and soon swelled" (2) / "It plopped into the water from a passing ship" (6); "Shall I call to it in the forgotten" (30) / "Shall I call to it even as the dead" (31); "The first of my sisters, stout,

extravagant" (35) / "The first of my sisters I have named Rita" (37); "'Nigger,' it cries, naming me from some hoard" (28) / "'Nigger,' it cries, loosening from the hook" (39).

Lastly, a pre-lapsarian form of circle is also evoked through the language Dabydeen confesses in his preface to having invented: "Most of the names of birds, animals and fruit are made up." (ix) *Turner* teems with neologisms (brumplak, pakreet, hemlik, chaktee, panoose, straplee, abara, barak, siddam, ocho, sarabell, shada, jenti, harch, sea-quats, chintoo, dozi, babla, daedal), all of which suggest that expressing the Middle Passage is first and foremost a linguistic venture. The voyage is announced on the first page of the poem in a highly metatextual passage:

What was deemed mere food for sharks will become
My fable. I named it Turner
As I have given fresh names to birds and fish
And humankind, all things living but unknown,
Dingly recalled, or dead. (1)

In this respect, *Turner* stands out in Dabydeen's poetic production. All his other works to date have been written in a mixture of Creole and English, a combination with remarkable historical antecedents, as he explains in the introduction to *Slave Song*:

Another feature of the language is its brokenness, no doubt reflecting the brokenness and suffering of its original users – African slaves and East Indian indentured labourers. Its potential as a naturally tragic language is there, there in its brokenness and rawness which is like the rawness of a wound. If one has learnt and used Queen's English for some years, the return to Creole is painful, almost nauseous. (13-14)

The surface of the poem is comparable to a geometrical plane where both Standard English and an imaginary tongue intersect. With *Turner*, Dabydeen has created an intellectual abstraction in which things cannot go wrong, eschewing the constraints of both reality and realism. It is important to note that there has always been something unrealistic about Turner's art, since he obtained the almost unbearable light which made his style famous and unmistakeable, partly thanks to the undercoat of white paint he slathered onto the canvas beforehand, lending the paintings their distinct luminosity. Turner's school thus gained the derogatory nickname of "white school". This was how the blindingly white sun in the middle of *Slave Ship* was fashioned in the first place. In a way, Dabydeen pays tribute with *Turner* to some aspects of the painting that have been neglected by such interpretations as that of Ruskin. He envisages *Slave Ship* from a different point of view that displaces the horizon, and engages with figuration the way cubist and modernist works of art do when they require the beholder to change perspectives incessantly.

Dabydeen's *Turner* attempts line after line to express the unacceptable in a circular way, in order to keep trying to voice what cannot be said. Geometry

is used to counter emotion and sensationalism. In his own way, the poet questions the very possibility of a limit, of a perspective, of a position from which to behold a single horizon. The latter is redefined as a circle associated with death, but also with motherhood and creation. Only a few sea monsters are left for us to contemplate with awe, and they are certainly reminiscent of another painting by Turner, *Sunrise with Sea Monsters* (c. 1845). In section XIV, the poet evokes glimpses of "The dregs of creatures without names / Which roamed these waters before human birth." (21) Like the surface of the sea, the horizon is where the invisible starts and the imagination takes over.

In the epilogue of *Feeding the Ghosts*, another text which originates in the *Zong* disaster, Guyanese novelist, Fred D'Aguiar, concludes in strikingly similar terms:

Accustomed to rehearsal, to repeats and returns, [the sea] did not care about the abomination happening in its name. We could not stop even if we tried. That ship was in that sea and we were in it and that would be for an eternity in a voyage without beginning or end. [...] Where death has begun but remains unfinished because it recurs. (229-230)

In common with *Turner*, *Feeding the Ghosts* stages a circle that has come to replace the line. It is there to mark the end of humanity, of progress and of hope, irreparably. The very idea of a preface, in Dabydeen's case, and of a prologue in D'Aguiar's, points to the inanity of clear ends. As Bhabha remarks in the introduction of *The Location of Culture*, "beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years," (1) but our times are witnessing the loosening up of such categories. In their stead, we find strange pronouncements, shifting perspectives, new horizons and a language which, like *Turner's*, circles in the round.

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