

On Not Being Tony Harrison: Tradition and the Individual Talent of David Dabydeen

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ONE OF THE MORE unusual critical responses to T. S. Eliot is surely David Dabydeen's claim that "Eliot is the parent of Caribbean poetry." Indeed, Dabydeen himself feels the need to qualify his remark before he makes it, when he says that Eliot assumes this parental role "in a peculiar sense" (Grant 211). On a thematic level, much of the work of the British-based Indo-Caribbean poet Dabydeen is to do with absent parents (the poet's actual parents, his parent country of Guyana and the Caribbean parent language, Creole; now living in England, Dabydeen shares with Eliot the status of *metoikos*, or resident alien); on a formal level, his poetry is less a quest for origins than it is a turbulent — by turns loving and loathing, respectful and rebellious — relationship with Eliot and other literary progenitors from Homer to Tony Harrison.¹

Dabydeen's agon with Eliot is evident from his first collection, *Slave Song* (1984). The poet's use of Creole in this collection is, on one level, a testament of authenticity and, paradoxically given Dabydeen's title, a proclamation of emancipation from the influence of Eliot and Western literary tradition: this black vernacular is a language which, despite its "capacity for a savage lyricism" permits no level of abstraction, so "you cannot have the Four Quartets in Creole" (Binder 171, 170). Notwithstanding this, the innovation of contemporary Black British and Caribbean poetry suggests a certain continuity with Eliot; prior to these poetries, Dabydeen has argued, "the last great innovator in British poetry this century has been T. S. Eliot" (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 85). Dabydeen goes on to specify "the brokenness of the [Creole] language," in which "resides not just a certain barbaric energy, but also the capacity to be experimental" (Binder 170), suggesting perhaps —

and underpinning the constructedness of Dabydeen's experimentation with the vernacular and with Creole — that Dabydeen's may be a synthetic Creole, in the sense in which the Scots of Hugh MacDiarmid's early lyrics is a synthetic Scots.

Sarah Lawson Welsh's point that *Slave Song* "is characterized by a vigorous orality but also [an] . . . ultimately stronger . . . textuality" (42) is borne out by Dabydeen's subsequent collection, *Coolie Odyssey* (1988). As Benita Parry remarks, "Where *Slave Song* offers a fiction of transparency, of instant access to the authentically demotic voices of Guyana, *Coolie Odyssey* satirizes the conceit of poets aspiring to retrieve a folk heritage" (55).

Tony Harrison has also satirized such an aspiration in the conceits of *The School of Eloquence*, and as Dabydeen's citation of Harrison in the title of his essay "On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today" suggests, there is some contiguity between their projects. Reading the Gawain poet as a student at Cambridge, Dabydeen could see "the ancient divorce between north and south in Britain" as "evocative of the divide between the so-called Caribbean periphery and the metropolitan centre of London" (Ricks and Michaels 4). Dabydeen's essay goes on to complain that "Milton's ornate, highly structured, Latinate expressions . . . are still the exemplars of English civilization against which the barbaric, broken utterances of black people are judged" (8). Elsewhere Dabydeen reminds us that "The term 'barbarian' is derived from a Greek word meaning 'to speak like a foreigner'" (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 164); and of course the grammar schoolboy-self Harrison remembers in "Them & [uz]" is dubbed "barbarian" by his RP-speaking teacher for his Leeds-accented rendition of Keats (20). Later in his poem Harrison remarks that "You can tell the Receivers where to go / . . . once you know/ Wordsworth's *matter / water* are full rhymes" (21) - and Dabydeen has pointed out that in Creole pronunciation, "water" becomes "wata" (Ricks and Michaels 3). Over and above incidental consonances like these, Dabydeen paraphrases Wordsworth's dictum that "poetry was the language of ordinary men," adding "His own poetry wasn't, and my Creole isn't, because you always shape the language you use" (Binder 170) — a remark with which the wordsmith of *The School of Eloquence* would surely agree.

Dabydeen's essay defines the "barbaric, broken utterances" of "black people" (and of poets like Harrison, as Dabydeen's self-alignment with the latter suggests) against the "Latinatinate expressions" of Milton; and yet the two elements in the title of Dabydeen's essay, "On Not Being Milton" and "Nigger Talk in England Today," contradict, modify, qualify each other, as do the two elements in the title of his 1988 collection *Coolie Odyssey*. In both titles, allusion implicitly aligns the poet with literary tradition, while the competing use of terms such as "Coolie" and "Nigger" serves to racialize, to complicate, perhaps to appropriate and certainly to revise, a tradition which, despite his anterior claim of not being Milton, includes a poet such as Harrison.² Yet Dabydeen has in retrospect called naive his initial perception of an analogy between Harrison's North / South divide and antagonisms between a Caribbean periphery and English centre (Ricks and Michaels 4). The title poem of Dabydeen's collection *Coolie Odyssey* elaborates on Dabydeen's sense of displacement not only with reference to "the metropolitan centre," but also in relation to Harrison, Seamus Heaney, Douglas Dunn and the readerly "vogue" of "peasantry" attendant upon their writing :

Now that peasantry is in vogue,
 Poetry bubbles up from peat bogs,
 People strain for the old folk's fatal gobs
 Coughed up in grates North or North East
 'Tween bouts o' living dialect,
 It should be time to hymn your own wreck,
 Your house the source of ancient song:
 (Dabydeen, *Coolie Odyssey* 9).³

The use of the conditional in "It *should* be time to hymn your own wreck, / Your house the source of ancient song" (my emphasis) in the first verse of "Coolie Odyssey" suggests that Dabydeen is as wary of positioning his own poetry in relation to that of Heaney and Harrison — the poem goes on to acknowledge that "the connections [are] difficult" — as he is aware of potential readerly and critical appropriations of his poetry given that "peasantry is in vogue." Like a Guyanese Richard III, Dabydeen, who frequently brings into his work in standard English the Shakespearian timbre he detects in Creole (Binder 170), declaims, "In a winter of

England's scorn / We huddle together memories, hoard them from / The opulence of our masters" — "masters" operating as a mordant pun in which the masters of the slave system are identified with Dabydeen's literary "masters."

"Coolie Odyssey" explores dislocation from home and from origins which, in the process of rendering them as poetry, are transformed — at the end of the poem, Dabydeen's Guyanese homeland becomes "this library of graves," where "The ancestors curl and dry to scrolls of parchment" (12). In Harrison's "Book Ends" from *The School of Eloquence*, a generational and cultural divide is figured in terms of writing and representation, and Dabydeen, similarly, describes parents who are "authored" by their own offspring — Dabydeen's ancestors "lie like texts / Waiting to be written by the children" (12). Both poets, Harrison and Dabydeen, assume an ambivalent stance toward what Harrison calls "Littererchewer" (21) and literary tradition; and in the case of both, the writing of poems which "go back to my roots" (Harrison 11), also signals the distance travelled (in Dabydeen's case, that distance is geographical as well as cultural), from origins. Yet while he can acknowledge analogy between his own dilemmas and those of Harrison and Heaney, Dabydeen also resists assimilation into the society of these "Rhubarbarians": talking in an interview of the "folk' grandmother" to whom his poem "Coolie Odyssey" is dedicated, Dabydeen has said

I cannot write about her in the way the Irish, like Heaney, would write about their folk. And I cannot write about her the way Tony Harrison in Britain would write about folk in the north of England. My folk is not like their folk, and there is nothing romantic or snug about my folk; they don't wear caps and don't smoke clay pipes. (Binder 172)

Dabydeen courts here the charge of special pleading, and of perpetuating stereotypes (caps and clay pipes) which have little to do with the facts of Irish or Northern experience.

Notwithstanding this, however, the issue of relationship between generations, between a poet and his or her family, forebears, father or mother country, is negotiated by the two poets, Dabydeen and Harrison, in a manner strikingly similar and yet differently inflected. Harrison opens *The School of Eloquence* with the

verse epigraph “Heredity,” answering the question “*Wherever did you get your talent from?*” by referencing his “two uncles, Joe and Harry — / one was a stammerer, the other dumb” (7).⁴ Dabydeen, likewise, brings to mind Shklovsky’s argument that the “legacy” of art, or literary tradition, “is transmitted not from father to son, but from uncle to nephew” (qtd. in Erlich 260), even if he does not present his poetic gift, as Harrison does, in terms of an unprecedented triumph over adversity — Dabydeen comments that “one of my uncles had already gone to Oxford — straight from the bush” (Birbalsingh 180).

“Coolie Odyssey,” which begins with wry speculation about the recent “vogue” for the “folk,” ends by considering issues of reception and audience, as the poet describes the unsatisfactory alternatives with which he feels he is faced — of writing either “songs / Fleshed in the emptiness of folk, / Poems that scrape bowl and bone” or reading his “fair conceits”

To congregations of the educated
Sipping wine, attentive between courses —
See the applause fluttering from their white hands
Like so many messy table napkins (13).

These alternatives are rephrased in Dabydeen’s “On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today”: “you cease *folking* up the literature, and you become ‘universal’ — or else you perish in the backwater of small presses” (Ricks and Michaels 12). Keith Tuma suggests that “One way out of this double-bind is to move between and among modalities . . . refusing to be pinned down in one or the other” (255), and although Dabydeen continues to insist that the “immigrant [poet] in Britain lacks genuine audience” (Binder 172), the standoff between “folk” and “the educated” in the last lines of “Coolie Odyssey” presents a perhaps strategically dichotomized version of the more complex interplay between elements (between Creole and standard English, between the vernacular and literary tradition) which characterizes the finest work of this poet as he does what Tuma bids him to do, to “move between and among modalities.” As Dabydeen has said of the composition of his *Slave Song*, “the tension between the home environment [of Guyana] and the Cambridge environment just created poetry” (Birbalsingh 181-82).

And yet blackness, in the closing lines of “Coolie Odyssey,” is seen in terms of “emptiness” and lack, whiteness in terms of surfeit: neither term in this binary is sufficient, satisfying. The poet’s role in relation to the “folk” is self-ironized as redundant, even predatory — “Fleshed in the emptiness” is Dabydeen’s oxymoronic formulation for that relationship — and in relation to a white audience he is accessory in another sense, he is recreational, postprandial, as the poem concludes with an image of the white reception of the black text as a form of consumption, Dabydeen’s version of that inversion found in slave narratives and some subsequent black texts of white cannibalism.

The opening lines of Dabydeen’s poem had also discussed possible contexts for the black poem, considering at the same time black reception (Dabydeen’s) of white texts, and the relationship his own writing might bear to such texts. Like Harrison’s “On Not Being Milton,” the opening poem of *The School of Eloquence*, “Coolie Odyssey,” the first poem in Dabydeen’s book of that title, begins with references to other texts. Both poems, then, foreground their status as poems, and as manifestoes, the difference being that where Harrison and Heaney serve as Dabydeen’s white intertexts (and countertexts), Harrison’s poem deploys black intertexts — “On Not Being Milton” is dedicated to two Mozambiquan poets-cum-political activists, Sergio Vieira and Armando Guebuza, and in the first verse, Harrison compares his own poem with Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*.

The epigraph to *The School of Eloquence*, taken from E. P. Thompson, enables Harrison to introduce his own poetry as a contemporary “cover” for political activism, and allows him to play and pun, in the collection’s first poem proper, on the idea of “corresponding societies.”⁵ “On Not Being Milton” suggests a correspondence between working-class and black — for Harrison, “growing black” is a way of recovering his “roots”:

Read and committed to the flames, I call
these sixteen lines that go back to my roots
my *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*
my growing black enough to fit my boots (11).

In addition to this black-and-white correspondence, Harrison’s poem also suggests a correspondence between the present time of

writing (the 1970s) and an earlier phase of English working-class radicalism, epitomized by the activities of the London Corresponding Society and by the Cato Street Conspiracy. Harrison's black intertexts, the Mozambiquan poet-activists who are his dedicatees, and Césaire, merge political activism and militancy with writing, as of course did the members of the London Corresponding Society, all of these models being linked implicitly to Harrison's own project as poet. The poem ends:

Articulation is the tongue-tied's fighting.
 In the silence round all poetry we quote
 Tidd the Cato Street conspirator who wrote:

Sir, I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting (11).

Richard Tidd has the last word in the poem, and his is a precursor text for that of Harrison the self-aware "ham," who will continue, now in the broader dispensation of the first person plural, the unintended if fitting affiliation between writing and "putting to rights" which is the unconscious subtext of Tidd's "*Righting*."

Harrison's poem, beginning as it does with Frelimo and with Césaire and ending with Richard Tidd, involves a gradual leaching out, a bleaching, of its black referents. In the opening verse, Harrison's analogy between blackness and the working-class, Northern voice results in a merger of the two: in the phrase "growing black enough to fit my boots" Black British immigration, a major concern of Harrison's later sequence *V*, is registered only implicitly and is assimilated into a local English saying. Harrison's phrase is a domestication of the Black British, who are seen to be as natural, as much a resource, and at the time of writing as inflammatory politically, as the coal with which the black immigrant community is also compared. In contrast, Harrison's black intertexts remain conspicuously exotic — the title of Césaire's poem is not translated from the French and the poem's dedication is left unexplained to those less well versed than Harrison in the politics of African postcolonial struggle (ironically in the face of Harrison's defiantly regionalist poetic, the poem's single footnote explains a local usage, "Enoch"). Tidd, however, is contextualized for us, within the text of the poem itself, in his role as one of the Cato Street conspirators.

And yet, working against the poem's black-to-white trajectory, Tidd's brief text — "*Sir, I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting*" — harbours among its unintended subtexts a black reference: Harrison's own sustained license to pun means we may legitimately read Tidd's "Ham" not only as Harrison intends us to read it — to be ham-fisted, and / or to ham, to act or overact — but also as a nomination of blackness, Ham the son of Noah as a supposed progenitor of the world's black races. And there is a black subtext, too — a black British subtext — to the Cato Street Conspiracy itself, in the form of one William Davidson (1786-1820): known as the "Black Davidson," he was the Anglo-Caribbean mulatto son of a Scots planter, hanged in 1820 for his part in the Cato Street plot, along with Richard Tidd, Arthur Thistlewood, James Ings and John Brunt. That one of Tidd's fellow conspirators was black we learn, in passing, from E. P. Thompson, and in considerably greater detail from Peter Fryer and from Dabydeen and Paul Edwards, in their *Black Writers in Britain 1760-1890*.⁶

Another of the black British writers represented in Dabydeen and Edwards's book, the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano, had lodged with Thomas Hardy, the founder of the London Corresponding Society in 1792, when Equiano, himself a member of the LCS, was working on a revised edition of his autobiography (first edition 1789). Thomas Hardy declared, in a letter, "I am fully persuaded that there is no man, who is, from principle, an advocate for the liberty of the black man, but who will zealously support the rights of the white man, and vice versa" (qtd. in Walvin 170). Harrison's poem also proposes such a model of white-and-black and black-and-white solidarity, but in spite of all the crossovers and correspondences Harrison suggests — between words, writers, historical periods of political agitation, liberation movements — his poem still manages to occlude black British history and writing. As Dabydeen says, "black British literature is not a modern phenomenon" (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 83), and figures like Davidson and Equiano represent a black sub-text to British cultural history, one which Dabydeen himself has, as part of his interrogation of origins, done much to bring to the surface of historical and literary inquiry.

Harrison's use of black intertexts in his "On Not Being Milton" is answered by Dabydeen's more equivocal use of reciprocated white intertexts (including Harrison's poem) in "Coolie Odyssey." Dabydeen's poem, which is in one sense a reply to Harrison's, seems to suggest that Black British and northern working-class British are not, in anything but Harrison's wordplay, corresponding societies. And yet, as Dabydeen has said, "My use of [Creole, in *Slave Song*] was influenced not by living in a village in Guyana, but by being in a library in Cambridge where I was reading medieval alliterative verse" (Binder 170). Dabydeen is playing, in his use, in *Slave Song*, of explanatory notes and of translations of the Creole poems into standard English, on the notes and glosses to a modern edition of a text such as *Gawain*; at the same time, his framing materials could be seen as an uncomfortable reminder of the white affidavits which framed earlier black texts, such as slave narratives; or, as Sarah Lawson Welsh suggests, it may be that such white affidavits "are replaced in *Slave Song* by a self-generated critical introduction which parodically 'authorises' the text for white or non-Creole-speaking consumption" (Welsh 41). Or, the notes to *Slave Song* may suggest that *The Waste Land* is a kind of "master text" to which Dabydeen's text is chained. And yet Dabydeen's open acknowledgement of Eliot's influence is anything but anxious: "it was a literary joke — hence I referred twice in *Slave Song* to T. S. Eliot, because Eliot had also joked and provided a kind of spoof gloss to *The Waste Land*" (Birbalsingh 182). Dabydeen calls his poem "an act of counterparody, in the way that Eliot had annotated his *Waste Land*" (Ricks and Michaels 5), and explains that his annotations were prompted by his anticipation of "such automatic responses" to the book as that of Peter Porter, who appears to miss the point when he complains in his review of Dabydeen's book that Creole is hard to understand (Ricks and Michaels 5). "The Canecutters' Song" from *Slave Song* reappropriates the closing words of *The Waste Land*, Eliot's "Shanti! Shanti! Shanti" (25); and in a wider sense, Eliot and the multiple personae of *The Waste Land* stand behind Dabydeen's comment that "None of the poems uses the word 'I'; one inhabits a series of masks" (Binder 169). As Welsh points out in her discussion of the use of Creole in

Dabydeen's poetry, "The literary reconstruction of this medium of vocalisation is necessarily a contrivance, an artifice, a self-conscious process . . . There are no originary voices in *Slave Song*, only reconstructed, represented, mediating ones" (Welsh 34, 37).

A principal scene of Dabydeen's next book, *Coolie Odyssey*, is Guyana, "the blasted land," a land laid waste by the degradations of slavery and the devastations of cane. The title poem tells us that "The odyssey was plank between river and land," the "odyssey" being both Dabydeen's text itself and the history of the transport of indentured Indian labour (and subsequent Caribbean emigration to Britain). "The odyssey was plank," too, in the sense of Homer providing Dabydeen with one of his poem's principal intertexts, another being *The Waste Land*, itself a peripatetic quest poem.

Dabydeen's 1994 poem-sequence "Turner," which takes its place in the tradition of the long poem about a painting, is also self-consciously part of the lineage of the maritime epic with which Dabydeen has already had congress in *Coolie Odyssey*, where the two terms of the title suggest that this is a literary quest which self-consciously takes its place among, even as it revises, the tradition of watery epics from Homer through to Eliot and on to Walcott's *Omeros*, a text which accommodates both Homer and the Caribbean oral tradition, both the *Odyssey* and the African experience of diaspora.⁷ And "Turner" is a still more sustained rewriting of *The Waste Land*. Death by water haunts both poems; the drowned slave who is the focal figure of Dabydeen's poem is, in one of his many facets, a version of Eliot's Phlebas; and fittingly Dabydeen owes a stylistic debt to section IV of *The Waste Land*, "Death by Water," in the lyricism of the equally brief section X of "Turner"; to Ariel's song, one of the principal intertexts of *The Waste Land*, in section IX, "Words are all I have left of my eyes"; and again in section V, where "the sea prepares / Their [the drowned slave women's] festive masks, salt crystals like a myriad / Of sequins hemmed into their flesh through golden / Threads of hair" (9). Dabydeen's remark that "Turner" was "a great howl of pessimism about the inability to recover anything meaningful from the past" (Dawes 200) could have been taken verbatim from any number of critical responses to Eliot's poem. Both texts, Eliot's and Dabydeen's,

have a mythic substructure: Manu, the Noah of Indian myth, co-ordinates Dabydeen's text, and is his Fisher King: in section XVII, Manu "prophesies / The stranger who will bring rain to fertilise / The crops" (26). Where Eliot's Fisher King ends amid fragments and ruins, Manu dies, his tale unfinished, with a "broken / Word" (32). And Manu orchestrates the temporal simultaneity which Dabydeen's poem shares with Eliot's work when, in a remarkable moment which crystallizes Dabydeen's complex relationship with tradition, Western and black, literary and oral, this African magician paraphrases the poet of *Four Quartets*: "he told that time future was neither time past / Nor time present, but a rupture so complete / That pain and happiness will become one" (33).

"Turner" has other intertexts, too: for instance, there is the echo of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" in section XXV, "the white enfolding / Wings of Turner brooding over my body" (39), which McIntyre says, suggests "a complicit creativity . . . perhaps claiming solidarity with other colonised peoples" — notwithstanding the fact, seemingly unrecognized by McIntyre or Edward Said, that Yeats is only metonymic of "the Irish" in a very restricted sense, and that he is a decolonising poet is at the very least debatable. Indeed, "Leda and the Swan" have been read as a reaction against the conservative ideology of the newly independent Irish Free State (see Cullingford 140-64). More viable intertexts, which again invoke Eliot, are Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a novel which not only shares with Dabydeen's poem the themes of child haunting, slavery and rememory, but according to Dabydeen also compares with Eliot in its fusion of "the intellect and the senses" (Dawes 201);⁸ and Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," itself, like Rich's earlier "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," a revision of *The Waste Land*.⁹ Dabydeen says in his preface to "Turner" that "the sea has transformed" the slave, has "bleached him of colour and complicated his sense of gender." This brings to mind Rich's lines about the androgynous "mermaid" / "merman" (164), while the final lines of Rich's poem, where the "book of myths / in which / our names do not appear" figures the erasure of women from cultural history, compare with Dabydeen's remarks in the preface to "Turner" about an erased African presence in British culture, and also, more specifically,

with section XVIII of "Turner," where the slave-speaker (and by implication Dabydeen-as-poet) is named "Nigger" "from some hoard of superior knowledge" yet this is a hoard which, we are told, "I will still ransack" (28).

"Turner" is an extended meditation on J. M. W. Turner's 1840 painting, "Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and the Dying," known as "The Slave Ship." In his preface, Dabydeen explains that his poem "focuses on the submerged head of the African in the foreground of Turner's painting" and he defines his own response to the picture against that of Ruskin, its owner and dominant explicator, who consigns the content of the artwork, "the shackling and drowning of Africans" to a "brief footnote" which "reads like an afterthought, something tossed overboard" ("Turner" IX). The submerged African becomes metonymic, for Dabydeen, of the Western erasure, or relegation to a footnote, of black life and black history, and by extension, black culture. According to McIntyre, for "postcolonial" writers such as Dabydeen, "footnotes become the lost history and culture, the 'holes' in standard representations, that once retrieved and reinserted, allow one to write and read otherwise, against the dominant order" (McIntyre 147). "Turner" is, in one sense, a poem of retrieval, as Atlantic slavery is retrieved by Dabydeen from the sub-text to which Ruskin's essay on the painting relegates it. Dabydeen retrieves the African who for the most part "remains unseen in Turner's text. All that is visible above sea level in the painting is, fittingly, a foot" (McIntyre 148).

Ruskin's interpretation of Turner's "The Slave Ship" is predicated upon "something tossed overboard," on an absence: another of Turner's paintings, "The Golden Bough," again owned by Ruskin, also featured a figure which, to Ruskin's consternation, quite literally "dropped off" the canvas. The figure was that of the Sibyl of Cumae: "at the very last moment Turner added the Sibyl herself in the foreground holding up the bough."¹⁰ The Sibyl foregrounds *The Waste Land*, too, just as her image, and Turner's painting, foregrounds Eliot's ur- and primary inter-text, Frazer's *Golden Bough*, the opening sentence of which asks, "Who does not know Turner's picture of the Golden Bough?" (Frazer 9).¹¹

If Ruskin's response to Turner's painting, his relegation to a footnote of the painting's subject — the slave trade — privileges

style over content, then, McIntyre infers, the reinsertion of that footnote which is Dabydeen's response to the painting revises and reverses Ruskin's priorities, stressing content over and above the demands of style and form. But representation of the history of the Atlantic slave trade, of which the individual drowned slave is metonymic, proves problematic in several ways, and not least because as a poet Dabydeen, without compromising the ideological integrity of his project, refuses the reductiveness of a certain variety of literary critical postcolonialism which construes assault upon "the dominant order" purely in terms of overt political message. In his preface to "Turner," Dabydeen says, of the poem's slave, "His real desire is to begin anew in the sea, but he is too trapped by grievous memory to escape history" (ix-x), and this may be the case for Dabydeen and his text, as well: "Neither can describe themselves anew but are indelibly stained by [the] language and imagery" of others. Dabydeen comes close, here, to echoing the well-worn postcolonial paradox, that "[A]ll experience is articulated in the forms and institutions of the Old World" (qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 148); and yet the application of such a paradox does little to address the complexities of Dabydeen's poem, which negotiates a much more nuanced relationship with its Western intertexts than this postcolonial paradigm alone can register.¹²

A more resourceful critical praxis is suggested in Paul Gilroy's response to Turner's painting: the context of Gilroy's essay "Art and Darkness. Black Art and the Problem of Belonging to England," which predates by four years the publication of Dabydeen's "Turner," is a 1989-90 exhibition of visual art which bears the "compound identity" of being "both black and British" (46). Gilroy discusses Turner's painting "The Slave Ship" as an "illustration both of the extent to which race has been tacitly erased from discussion of English culture and how a 'racial' theme, relocated at the heart of national self-understanding, can contribute to a new, more pluralistic conceptualisation" of Britain. According to Gilroy, "One source of Turner's inspiration may have been Thomas Clarkson's account of 'barbaric events' [the drowning of some 130 African slaves] aboard the slave ship *Zong*" — Clarkson's source, in turn, being Olaudah Equiano (Walvin 63, 152-3); in any event, Gilroy

says, "The picture and its strange history pose a challenge to the black English today. It demands that we strive to integrate the difficult dimensions of our hybrid cultural heritage more effectively" (49: 51).

In Dabydeen's "Turner," the awakened slave "invents a body, a biography, and peoples an imagined landscape. Most of the names of the birds, animals and fruit are made up" ("Turner" IX). The slave is Adamic, calling a world into being by naming it; and yet as we know from Wallace Stevens, "There was a myth before the myth began" even for "Adam / In Eden" (Stevens 383): the medium of poetry, and language itself, denies us access to the primary, the originary, and our condition is one of belatedness. This is the recognition of section X of "Turner":

What sleep will leave me restless when I wake?
 What mindfulness that nothing has remained
 Original? (15)

In the first section of "Turner" the slave-speaker insists that "I have given fresh names," and yet names the "part-born" baby Turner, leaving it for the reader to decide whether in so doing the speaker is designating Dabydeen's poem (of which the baby, Turner, is metonymic), as redemptive, as a source of hope and new life, or as hopelessly secondary, accessory. The allusion to Eliot in section XXI of "Turner," even if revisionary, tells us that Manu and this (imagined) Africa are not originary, or original — and Manu himself, elaborating on the oxymoron of emptiness-and-surfeit in "Coolie Odyssey," tells the children of his African village that scattered in foreign lands, as they will be, "Each / Will be barren of ancestral memory / But each endowed richly with such emptiness / From which to dream, surmise, invent, immortalise" (33).

Where *Coolie Odyssey*, Dabydeen's previous sequence of poems, had been dedicated to the poet's grandmother, "Turner," a poem steeped in maternal imagery, is dedicated to Dabydeen's mother, but this is a mother whom Dabydeen construes as an absent presence in his life: Dabydeen has said that "I grew up without a mother, so that the absent mother is probably what moves me very deeply and creates writing. 'Turner' is really about the absent mother, too"; and he has identified himself with the "part born"

progeny of his poem's slave mother — "I feel like the stillborn child in 'Turner'" (Dawes 220, 219). Elsewhere, Dabydeen places the absent mother in a wider context when he suggests that West Indian emigration to Britain is "complicated by the assumption of a shared heritage with the mother country" which is an illusion, since "West Indian immigrants faced the reality of rejection by the Motherland" (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 49), a reality more starkly expressed in Dabydeen's first novel *The Intended*: "Just because you ain't got a mother don't mean that England will mother you" (246). Dabydeen's poem begins with the word "Stillborn," in which death and life are merged: a stillborn baby is a dead baby, but in the poem the "still birth" is also the still, the calm after the storm (of childbirth). Throughout the poem Dabydeen weaves his extended metaphor of birthing as maritime activity, birth passage as sea passage — the baby "broke the waters" (11); the child is something we "cannot fathom."¹³

"Turner" conducts a search for an origin which is itself known to be an "illusion," a fiction, something "fabricated" (15). In section XIX of "Turner," Dabydeen discusses African culture and its destruction at the hands of the West: when he asks "Shall I summon up such a pageant of fruit, / Peopling a country with musicians, dancers, / Poets" (30), Dabydeen's slave-speaker echoes Olaudah Equiano's defence of Africa as "a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets" (qtd. in Walvin 6), but with the difference that the Africa of Dabydeen's speaker is a projection, another imaginative fabrication. Dabydeen's recent novel *A Harlot's Progress*, a prose rewriting and elaboration of aspects of "Turner,"¹⁴ is similarly focalized through the trickster-like fabulations of a slave whose myriad imaginative scenarios take the place of an originary narrative demanded by a white abolitionist patron but which the slave himself withholds and perhaps knows to be unavailable: at the end of "Turner," the slave-speaker cannot go "In search of another image of himself" (40), this signalling, perhaps, Dabydeen's subsequent and one hopes temporary turn away from poetry to fiction. "Turner," then, is a poem, to quote from *The Waste Land* of "the deep sea swell / And the profit and loss" (Eliot 75). About the beginnings of life (the sea), it is also a poem about death; and it is, if only potentially in sections XX and XXV, a

redemption song in which “the dead / Survive catastrophe to speak in one / Redemptive and prophetic voice” (31), a representation in which Turner’s drowned slave is redeemed from anteriority and subordination.¹⁵ Yet the poem ends with a list of negatives, the last of which, ending the poem, is “No mother” (40).

“Turner” is, in one register, an urgent act of historical reclamation or rememory — the poem’s occasion is a maritime atrocity which is metonymic of the atrocity of the Atlantic slave trade as a whole — for Dabydeen as for Walcott, “The Sea is History” (Walcott, *Collected Poems* 364). In another register, however, “The sea is so many written words” (Stevens 252), and the poem is a self-reflexive allegory of Dabydeen’s own complex relationship — as son and heir and as disinherited orphan — with Western literary tradition. It is not the intention of this essay either to submerge the individual talent of David Dabydeen in that tradition, or to deny the textuality of his Caribbean inheritance; but it may be that Dabydeen’s achievement as a poet is inseparable from his own recognition that “the connections,” although “difficult,” are unavoidable.¹⁶

Dabydeen, despite his caveats in “Coolie Odyssey” about the poetic company he will keep, has been co-opted by some as a member of the British New Generation, and yet he fits uneasily at best into most of the available critical paradigms. Dabydeen’s interest in troping, or signifying, upon other texts doesn’t answer satisfactorily to Bhabha’s analysis of “the *ambivalence of mimicry*,” where postcolonial writing inhabits an “area between mimicry and mockery” (86). Dabydeen’s own background derives from “the importation of indentured labour from India” into the West Indies, which ‘introduced a new racial element, complicating the white / black dichotomy’ (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 31) — and so Jan-Mohammed’s Manichean allegory does not apply here either. A poet who has not chosen Brathwaite’s “model of Creolisation” or Nation Language writing, but who is concerned with intertexts, is perhaps open to the kind of criticism levelled seventy years ago at the poet of *The Waste Land*, for speaking in the voices of others as he had no authentic voice of his own.¹⁷ And yet, if Eliot is, indeed, the “parent of Caribbean poetry,” all Dabydeen’s work indicates that the parent is absent.

In his 1993 novel, *Disappearance*, Dabydeen's Guyanese narrator says, of the sea, "I was seduced by its endless transformations which promised me freedom from being fixed as an African, a West-Indian, a member of a particular nationality of a particular epoch" (132): and, although the speaker goes on to resist the dissolution of his identity, it is such a sense of "the intercultural and transnational formation" called the Black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy (ix) which may most appropriately describes Dabydeen: as his speaker tells us in section XII of "Turner," "the sea has brought me tribute from many lands," including "scrolls in different letterings" (17).¹⁸

NOTES

- 1 The focus of this essay is Dabydeen's relation to the European and Anglo-American literary traditions, but this is not to deny the equal significance of his Caribbean literary parentage, the troping on Caribbean forefathers which discloses Dabydeen's debt to and dialogue with, among others, Claude McKay, Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, and fellow Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, upon whose formulation of the "limbo imagination" of the Caribbean, "in which nothing is ultimately alien," the methodology of this essay is adapted (9, 10). For further discussion of Harris, see note 16, below.
- 2 Fred D'Aguiar suggests that the poem "Coolie Odyssey" projects the creation of a "possible world" of "the unifying poetic mind" out of the "complex dualities" Dabydeen explores (Hampson and Barry 65).
- 3 Dabydeen is presumably referring to Dunne's *Terry Street* and to Harrison's *School of Eloquence*; much of Heaney's early poetry, of course, "bubbles up from peat bogs" — from "Bogland" in the 1969 collection *Door into the Dark*, to "The Tollund Man" and "Nerthus" in *Wintering Out* (1972), to the majority of poems in the first part of *North* (1975).
- 4 Heaney's counterpart to Harrison's stammering and dumb uncles is the father of "Follower" from the 1966 collection *Death of a Naturalist*; and Corcoran notes the importance of tongue-tied figures in Heaney's first two collections (1-27).
- 5 Thompson describes "a ticket which was perhaps one of the last 'covers' for the old LCS: *Admit for the Season to the School of Eloquence*" (qtd. in Harrison 9).
- 6 Davidson was in fact one of the leaders of the Cato Street Conspiracy, the plan to blow up the British Cabinet, and as Dabydeen and Edwards note, "a grim irony of the situation is that Davidson was a Cabinet maker by profession" (127). Davidson had joined the Marylebone Union Reading Society, an offshoot of the London Corresponding Society, after the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, and it appears the Marylebone Society supplied Davidson with gunpowder — after the storming of the conspirators' Cato Street loft, "Davidson was led away . . . singing 'Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled'" (Dabydeen and Edwards 129). The Guyanese narrator of Dabydeen's novel *Disappearance* ponders the possible histories of those to whom the old books, in his English landlady's library, are inscribed: did these people "go on to become Professor of Classics at Oxford, Jack the Ripper's pimp, or a leader of the Cato Street Conspiracy?" (9).
- 7 Dabydeen's use of the sea in his poetry, his concern with memory, with slavery and with the past, his Homeric themes, and his dialogue with canonical texts all suggest an ongoing negotiation with the work of Walcott and with what Walcott calls "the

marine dialect of the Caribbean" (*Omeros* 314). The figure of Odysseus appears throughout Walcott's work, and is central to *Another Life* and *Omeros*. A version of the Hanged Man of *The Waste Land* appears in the poem "Mass Man" from *The Gulf* (*Collected Poems* 99). The obeh-woman of *Omeros* is likened to Petronius' and Eliot's sybil (245).

- 8 See section XXII of "Turner," where the remembered or invented sister of Dabydeen's slave is addressed as "my beloved" (35).
- 9 Rich's "Snapshots" like Dabydeen's "Turner," also deploys Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" as one of the poem's many intertexts.
- 10 "She seems to have been something of an afterthought since several years after the picture was acquired its owner [Ruskin] found to his dismay, that she was coming away from the canvas, having been hastily painted on paper and then simply stuck to the surface. When Turner heard of it he rushed round and painted her in again" (Frazer xvi-xvii).
- 11 As Dabydeen among very many others has noted, Eliot "ransacks" Frazer "for pre-Classical fertility images" (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 168). According to Wittgenstein, Frazer's *Golden Bough* is an enlightenment narrative, whereby primitive tribal practices have to be translated into terms both plausible and "backward" leading Wittgenstein to ask what gives Frazer this privileged position (see Perloff 63). At the same time, of course, Frazer gives primitive and mythic materials to modernism, and the modernists who use his sources invert what Frazer does. Ruskin also owned Turner's "Dudley Castle," a response to "the new waste-land, a waste-land where natural and organic activity was replaced by mechanical production" (Richards 1).
- 12 Caribbean writing, according to the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, foregrounds "unavoidable questions of the relationship between the imported European and the local, between ancestry and destiny, and between language and place": creative conflicts and possibilities are enabled by this "cultural clash and miscegenation" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 145).
- 13 Walcott notes that "*mer* was both mother and sea" in Antillean patois (*Omeros* 231).
- 14 The magician Manu reappears in the novel: while the violation of the slave child by Thomas Thistlewood complements Dabydeen's investigation of the sexual psychopathology of slavery in "Turner."
- 15 The proximity of the words "Turner" and "slave" may suggest insurrection as well as resurrection: Nat Turner may be one of the many latent personae of Dabydeen's slave. In correspondence with the author, Dabydeen has corroborated this suggestion, stating that "In 1987 I visited a statue put up for him [Nat Turner], in Jamaica" (E-mail to Lee M. Jenkins, 17 Aug. 1999).
- 16 Answers to Naipaul's charge that Caribbean man is a mimic man include Walcott's essay "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry," a reply to Naipaul's position that "no gesture . . . is authentic, every sentence is a quotation." For an extended discussion of Walcott and "mimicry" see Terada. For Wilson Harris the "limbo imagination" of the Caribbean and the Guianas invalidates Naipaul's diagnosis in that such an imagination accommodates "an original reconstitution of variables of myth and legend" (and literature), a reconfiguration which Harris links to Eliot's essay on the Metaphysical poets because of a shared "range and potency of association in which nothing is ultimately alien" (Harris 9, 10). Harris' notion of a Caribbean "reconstitution" suggests that a dichotomy of Western literary tradition and of a vernacular Caribbean tradition won't hold. Michael North points to the use of metatextual notes in the first Caribbean dialect poems to be published in book form, Claude McKay's *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) (North 105). As Lloyd Brown notes, Brathwaite "can be as sensitive as Walcott to the nuances and literary significance of the Western dimension in Afro-Caribbean culture" (147). According to Brown, Brathwaite's *Islands*, the second book of the "New World Trilogy" *The Arrivants*, echoes *The Waste Land*, from

its "mythic method" to its versions of the one-eyed merchant and Fisher King (Brown 147). Brathwaite's *X/Self* has its own textual apparatus in the form of notes, to which the author refers in a self-deprecating way (these notes "which I provide with great reluctance") — with a knowing irony that in so doing, Brathwaite comes closer still to the Eliot who referred to the notes to *The Waste Land* as bogus-scholarship. "Song Charlemagne" in *X/Self* tropes on Eliot in what the poem "Aachen" calls "the dialect of the tribes," as "London bridge is fall / in down" (113, 29, 23). Such signifying on Eliotic tradition in no sense detracts from Brathwaite's assertion in the notes that "there is a black Caliban Maroon world with its own aesthetics" (130).

¹⁷ And yet Brathwaite, who, as Breiner says, is "often reductively regarded as an Afrocentrist," has noted that "[Caribbean] poets who were moving from standard English to nation language were influenced basically . . . by T. S. Eliot" (Breiner viii; Brathwaite, *History* 30).

¹⁸ This essay is dedicated to Jack Mapanje.

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