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David Dabydeen and Turner's Sublime Aesthetic

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Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived. Only when art's other is sensed as a primary layer in the experience of art does it become possible to sublimate this layer, to dissolve the thematic bonds, without the autonomy of the artwork becoming a matter of indifference.

—Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The Guyanese poet David Dabydeen based his poetic sequence *Turner* (1995) on J. M. W. Turner's painting of 1840, *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying), Typhoon Coming On*.¹ Tobias Döring's excellent analysis of the poems informs us that Turner's painting,

. . . depicts an actual scene from the archives of the British slave trade: the case of the *Zhong* of 1783, 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. ("Turning the Colonial Gaze" 3)

By way of framing the discussion here, Döring's essay is worth considering further as his argument relates closely to the concern that Turner's painting risks turning slavery into something sensational that appeals to a sublime form of aestheticism:

This canvas, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1840 and ranking among Turner's best known works, invests in the iconography of the slave trade while at the same time, engaging the beholder's eye with an ecstasy of light and color culminating in the central image of a blindingly white sun. The painting derives its power and effect through the visual rhetoric of the sublime which pervades both the theme and its execution and which, on a linguistic level, also figures prominently in the imagery of Dabydeen's poem. Dabydeen's *Turner* and Turner's *Slave Ship*, therefore, would seem to sketch out an arena of discursive forces which lends itself to analyzing the politics of imperial eyes as strategies by which terror becomes a social energy that confers with the imperial project. ("Turning the Colonial Gaze" 4)

Döring is right to use the word "invest" as he implies the way in which Turner's painting is inevitably an item that will be traded, as were the slaves. More important is his charge that Turner's painting sensationalizes the subject matter as the bodies of the dying slaves are obscured while the painter focuses on his sublime sky, turning a moment of horror into something beautiful. According to Döring, it is the very suggestive obscurity of the painting that makes it sublime. Of course, this leads us to dwell on Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*

into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757), which introduces the idea that sublimity is constituted by a fear of alterity whereby the sublime is achieved artistically by a tantalizing obscuring of otherness. As Burke argues,

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind if capable of feeling. (39)

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: "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 40). Burke argues that for the sublime to function, it is necessary to keep pain at a certain distance.

In his "Preface" to the *Turner* poems, Dabydeen dwells on the submerged African hazily painted into the foreground of Turner's painting. All we see is a shackled foot as the African is plunged head first into the sea. It is therefore apt that the subject of Turner's painting being both slavery and the drowned human subject of the African who is subjected but denied any subjectivity is "relegated to a brief footnote" in John Ruskin's art criticism, reading "like an after-thought, something tossed overboard" (*Turner* 7). As Marina Warner argues, Turner's approach "sublimates the theme: the drowning scarcely appear."² Granted, Turner's painting occludes the dying slaves, but is this an endorsement or a critique of their subjugation?

The answer to this question can only be left undecided as Dabydeen reacts less to Turner's painting of the *Slave Ship*, and more to Ruskin's discussion of it in *Modern Painters* (1843) (7). In so doing, Dabydeen tends to conflate Ruskin's response to the painting with Turner's artistic intentions and the effects of the painting. It is necessary though to realize that these are three separate issues: just as Ruskin's critical response may not mirror Turner's intentions, the effects of the painting may not reflect Turner's intentions since the painting exceeds the painter. Notably, Ruskin bought Turner's painting of the "Slave Ship," and rather like the slaver William Beckford purchasing William Hogarth's *Harlot's Progress* (1732), he was insensitive to its subject. Commenting that the *Slave Ship* was the "noblest sea that Turner ever painted," Ruskin's discussion of the painting is worth quoting at length since detailed analysis of it lends us an acute awareness of Ruskin's response to eighteenth century conceptions of the sublime in the mid-nineteenth century:³

It is a sunset on the Atlantic, after prolonged storm; but the storm is partially lulled, and the torn and streaming rain-clouds are moving in scarlet lines to lose themselves in the hollow of the night. The whole surface of sea included in the picture is divided into two ridges of enormous swell, not high, not local, but a low broad heaving of the whole ocean, like the lifting of its bosom by deep-drawn breath after the torture of the storm. Between these two ridges the fire of the sunset falls along the trough of the sea, dyeing it with an awful but glorious light, the intense and lurid splendor which burns like gold, and bathes like blood. Along this fiery path and valley, the tossing waves by which the swell of the sea is relentlessly divided, lift themselves in dark, indefinite, fantastic forms, each casting a faint and ghastly shadow behind it along the illumined foam. They do not rise everywhere, but three or four together in wild groups, fitfully and furiously, as the under strength of the swell compels or permits them; leaving between them treacherous spaces of level and whirling water, now lighted with green and lamp-like fire, now flashing back the gold of the declining sun, now fearfully dyed from above with the indistinguishable images of the burning clouds, which fall upon them in flakes of crimson and scarlet, and give to the reckless waves the added motion of their own fiery flying. Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty* ship as it labors amidst the lightening of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and, cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea.⁴

As Dabydeen notices, Ruskin provides a footnote to this passage where he acknowledges the nature of the ship: “*She is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is encumbered with corpses.” Reduced to merely a footnote, the presence of the dead slaves haunts the language of Ruskin’s response to the painting where his word choice betrays the relish in pain, fear and violence that is integral to Burke’s understanding of the sublime. We see things “torn,” “the torture of the storm,” “an awful but glorious light,” “blood,” the “treacherous,” the “fearful,” the “lurid,” the “guilty” and the “desolate,” but there is no attention paid to the dead. Particularly telling is Ruskin’s choice of the word “incarnadines,” meaning that the sea is turned into a flesh color. As the sea heaves with flesh, the blood red colors surrounding the dying slaves are metamorphosed into merely another tint on the artist’s palette. Had Europeans been depicted drowning, one wonders whether Ruskin would have paid so much attention to the glorious hues of Turner’s sunset.

Ruskin concludes:

I believe, if I were reduced to rest Turner’s immortality upon any single work, I should choose this. Its daring conception, ideal in the highest sense of the word, is

based on the purest truth, and wrought out with the concentrated knowledge of a life; its color is absolutely perfect, not one false or morbid hue in any part or line, and so modulated that every square inch of canvas is a perfect composition; its drawing as accurate as fearless; the ship buoyant, bending, and full of motion; its tones as true as they are wonderful; and the whole picture dedicated to the most sublime of subjects and impressions (Completing thus the perfect system of all truth, which we have shown to be formed by Turner's work)—the power, majesty and deathfulness of the open, deep, illimitable seas. (160)

Ruskin once again overlooks the “guilty” content of the painting preferring to turn to matters of aesthetic form or the lines of Turner's composition, which Ruskin sees as an expression of higher truth. Ruskin praises the hues of the painting because they are not “morbid;” the ship remains “buoyant” yet the slaves sink to their morbid fate in the “deathful” sea. It is not surprising then that Döring criticizes Ruskin's response, calling it an “aesthetics of non-representation,” as the slaves are forgotten in favor of the sublime nothingness of the white sun depicted in the painting.⁵ The “other” is edited out of Ruskin's criticism of the picture in favor of a vague gesture towards the fetishized sublime of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century aesthetics.

Unlike Ruskin, the contemporary poet Kathleen Raine, is horrified by Turner's seas:

We call them beautiful,
Turner's appalling seas, shipwreck and deluge
Where man's contraptions, mast and hull,
Lurch, capsize, shatter to driftwood in the whelming surge and swell. (209)

As Burke has suggested, the sublime is not that beautiful as it inspires terror; this terror of the unrepresentable other is integral to the discourse of slavery where alterity is obscured so as to heighten the fear of an unimaginable darkness. Bearing in mind Raine's response, which is so different from that of Ruskin, how far can we assume that Turner glorifies the sacrifice of the slaves? If different viewers see this painting as something that is simultaneously sublime and terrible then what we have is a painting that provides us with an ambivalent response to the subject matter. Turner's overlooked slaves drowning in his terrible seas are an expression of his culture at the time the picture was painted. From this, it does not automatically follow that Turner supported slavery or that he can be blamed for the slaves' occlusion.

In fact, if we turn to Turner's politics, we find a painter who was inspired by Milton's republican vision in his 1798 painting, *Morning Amongst the Coniston Fells*, exhibited at the Royal Academy and accompanied by a passage from *Paradise Lost* (1667). The painting was exhibited in the year of the rebellion in Ireland, which was inspired by the revolution in France. If Turner's sympathies were with radical republicanism, then it would not necessarily follow that he was a supporter of the inequalities of slavery.⁶ Turner's politics were never explicit. According to Sam Smiles, “His patrons came from a variety of backgrounds. Whig and Tory,

progressive and reactionary, aristocratic and, towards the end of his career, commercial or industrial, but those with whom he established relationships tended towards liberalism" (57). Turner's friends included Sir John Leicester, a moderate Whig, Lord Egremont who was "noted for his liberality towards the poor, and Walter Fawkes, a Whig of fairly radical opinions who championed Parliamentary reform" (57). Turner's close friends were enlightened, tolerant, and liberal which suggests a very different kind of artist to the one presented in Dabydeen's poems.

Turner's liberal sympathies are conveyed in his paintings, for example in his picture of *Sidmouth* (c.1825) which Smiles notes, "seems to have included a sly attack on the sexual proclivities of Lord Sidmouth, an arch-Conservative who, as Home Secretary, was responsible for political repressive legislation and was ultimately to blame for the Peterloo massacre" (58). Likewise, his painting *Northampton* celebrates the "return of the progressive Whig Lord Althorp as a county member for Northamptonshire in 1830," and in "the left foreground Turner has included the figure of Marianne, touching the shoulder of an opponent of reform," which provokes Smiles to conclude that the "intended message must surely be reform or revolution" (58). If we consider Turner's portrait in the Tate of "The Decline of the Carthagian Empire" (1817), depicting Carthage's "decline to the evils of commerce," we can see his painting questioning the power of imperialism as he holds up the example of "Carthage as a moral lesson to a new victorious England" (Smiles 62).

In view of all this, Smiles is right to assume that "Turner's liberal sympathies are very much apparent in *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying*," which he refers to as "a painting that confronts the horrors of the slave trade" (63). Although Ruskin fails to confront these horrors, it hardly follows that the painter also neglects the issue of slavery. Turner would have read about the slave ship *Zhong* of 1783 in Clarkson's *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, published in 1839, a year earlier than Turner's painting. Even more important are the verses from his poem *Fallacies of Hope* which accompanied the picture and which end with the couplet: "Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope! / Where is thy market now?" As Smiles suggests, in "such a context, the drowning and still shackled slaves are victims of a feeding frenzy which might also symbolize commercial hungers, feeding voraciously off slavery" (64). Turner's *Slave Ship* is as much a deeply foreboding painting as one that glorifies slavery and, apart from the obvious stylistic skill that so seduces Ruskin, it is precisely this complexity that explains why the painting has endured. More interesting than guessing Turner's political intentions in painting the *Slave Ship* is the question of why spectators looking at the picture are curiously torn between the pleasure and pain described by Burke. It is this contradictory response that needs to be interrogated further with reference to Dabydeen's *Turner* poems.

For Dabydeen, "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."⁷ Dabydeen is quick to implicate Turner within the trends of Gothic horror. In spite of his uncompromising judgment of the artist,

he offers a subtle insight into the way a nineteenth century sense of the sublime is inextricably linked with the ideology of slavery as it both occludes and sensationalizes “the other,” and in such a way as to play on Western neuroses regarding an unknowable darkness or alterity that will always be irrationally fetishized by the colonial gaze, since any attempt to understand this otherness would demand an ethical engagement with “the other” that is the very antithesis of colonialism.

This view is explored in the opening of Dabydeen’s *Turner* poems where he describes the Middle Passage through the voice of a newly born slave:

Stillborn from all the signs. First a woman sobs
Above the creak of timbers and the cleaving
Of the sea, sobs from the depths of true
Hurt and grief, as you will never hear
But from woman giving birth, belly
Blown and flapping loose and torn like sails,
Rough sailors’ hands jerking and tugging
At ropes of veins, to no avail. Blood vessels
Burst asunder, all below - deck are drowned. (*Turner 9*)

This moment in the poem is reminiscent of another Guyanese poet, Grace Nichols, whose *i is a long memoried woman* (1983) also opens with an extended metaphor that imagines the Middle Passage in terms of a painful birth (5). Here, the stillborn slave child is pulled into the New World through the watery passage of the Atlantic only to be born into a living death. Using a poetic line that often falls short of iambic pentameter by one syllable, Dabydeen catalectically conveys the damage inflicted on the child in a broken language that, although in no way as vernacular as his poem *Slave Song* (1984), nevertheless manages to convey colonial violence using pounding alliteration and abrupt caesuras. The child, named Turner, loses its mother, its African roots and its language.

In an otherwise persuasive essay, Karen McIntyre interprets the poem as offering the poetic speaker freedom to forge a “truly ‘decolonized’ post-colonial aesthetic,” although surely this inherited nothingness provides us with anything but a complete and “untainted” narrative (141). There are many competing figures of Turner, who appears in different guises throughout the poem, but rather than finding in this an assertion of self within the poem as does McIntyre, there is instead a loss of self, a disempowered protagonist and a child “unknown,/ Dimly recalled, or dead” (*Turner 9*). McIntyre views the stillborn child as *born still* and thus imagines it provides a symbol of resistance, but this is undercut by the violence inflicted upon the child throughout the sequence where violence is once again sensationalized and aestheticized so as to undermine any notion of a “decolonized aesthetic” (148).

If we are to follow the argument that for Dabydeen there is no possibility of a “decolonized aesthetic,” then we can understand how Dabydeen’s choice not to write the *Turner* poems in the vernacular may have been undertaken to demonstrate the oppressive power of an imposed language rather than the opportunity for resistance. In his essay “On Not Being Milton,” Dabydeen attacks Andrew Motion’s poem, “Anne Frank Huis” (1983), to argue that there is something obscene about the way in which English eloquence is used to convey emotions that should surely undercut such an artificial construction of civility.⁸ Has he therefore used a more standard form of English in his poem to describe colonial violence as a way of emphasizing the way that civil speech fails? For Dabydeen, “glibness and gentility” are “disguised as understatement” but really they amount “to a kind of obscenity” (“On Not Being Milton” 11).

If this is the case, then it is appropriate when in Poem XXIV we find the slaver Turner teaching his slaves English whilst raping them, with the effect that like Caliban they are confined by a discourse that relentlessly interpellates them as “the other:”

Turner crammed our boys’ mouths too with riches,
 His tongue spurting strange potions upon ours
 Which left us dazed, which made us forget
 The very sound of our speech. Each night
 Aboard ship he gave selflessly the nipple
 Of his tongue until we learnt to say profitably
 In his own language, *we desire you, we love
 You, we forgive you*. He whispered eloquently
 Into our ears even as we wriggled beneath him
 Breathless with pain, wanting to remove his hook
 Implanted in our flesh. (40)

Silenced by his violence, their acquisition of the English language brings the slaver more “profit” as he grooms them into boy prostitutes and their language is born out of sadomasochism:

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. (40)

Here, language is imagined as a form of oral sex as words are uttered at the moment of ejaculation only to be swallowed by the slaves. The words that Turner the slaver utters are associated with both a Christian and an aesthetic discourse, which once again links the more “heightened” aspects of European civilization with sex, violence and colonialism. Repeating the word “endlessly” in a sort of orgasmic sigh, Dabydeen uses the rhythms of his lines to lend a physicality to the language which, as Benita Parry has observed in relation to *Slave Song*, “is the

poetry's strength" but "also signals its danger." In spite of Parry's assurance that such writing, "will generate its own critique," we must wonder whether in Dabydeen's *Turner* the "morbid erotic energies released by colonialism" can be adequately represented within a poem that has moments of high lyricism (Parry 4). Nevertheless, it is precisely Dabydeen's insistence on high lyricism as a mode through which to describe the violence that powerfully demonstrates his insistence that the European aesthetic is steeped within a guilty sensibility that is complicit with colonial horror.

As African girls are abused by Captain Turner, they are relentlessly sensationalized by their metamorphosis into objects of pornography within the poem and the reader is forced into the role of voyeur as in Poem XXIII:

The first of my sisters I have named Rima.
I endow her with a clear voice, fingers
That coax melody from the crudest instrument,
Melody that brings tears from men, even Turner
Who sits cross-legged before her beguiled by song.
Afterwards he will go to Ellar, the second-born,
Whom he will ravish with whips, stuff rags
In her mouth to stifle the rage, rub salt
Into the strips 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
. . . by the time he has done
With her he has taken the rage from her mouth,
It opens and closes. No word comes . . .
Each night he sits in rapture before Rima,
Weeping. (39)

As with Captain Thistlewood in *A Harlot's Progress*, Captain Turner is blessed with an aesthetic sensibility as he is moved to tears at Rima's song between beating and silencing her sister Ellar. His abuse of Ellar is turned into a ritual moment of ecstasy in a way that is comparable with his "*Sublime*" moment with the boys in Poem XXIV. The rendition of this in variations on iambic pentameter effectively conveys the "obscenity" that has been decried by Dabydeen as he uses a fairly conventional English poetic line to underline the repressed sadism beneath a tradition of civility in the English lyric poem.

For Dabydeen, Turner is a sadist and the conclusion of his "Preface" to the *Turner* poems spells out his opinion of Turner's art:

The intensity of Turner's painting is such that I believe that artist in private must have savored the sadism he publicly denounced. I make Turner the captain of the slave ship (the stillborn child is also named Turner). Turner's well-chronicled love of children is seen in another light, as is his extreme prudence with money.
(8)

In his reassessment of Turner's role as an artist there is no question of whether he is reflecting or reinforcing racism as Dabydeen places his work firmly into the former category. In view of our earlier exploration of Turner's political sympathies, there are losses in Dabydeen's assessment of his work and it is disappointing that his response to the complexities of Turner's art is less nuanced than his appreciation of Hogarth in *A Harlot's Progress* (1999).

Nevertheless, Dabydeen's poems are insightful as they examine the relation between aesthetics, the sublime and violence. Captain Turner is a collector of art and the paintings displayed on his walls depict an idealized version of England that offers the slave boy "no reflection when I gaze into it, / The water will not see me, nor the villagers / In whose midst I stray" (27). The boy beholds a crucifix of,

Turner nailed to a tree, naked for all to see,
His back broken and splayed like the spine
Of his own book, blood leaking like leaves
From his arms and waist, but no one among
The silent worshippers hears me cry out
In pity and surprise. (28)

European art with its violent aesthetics offers salvation for neither abuser nor abused and especially not in the form of Christian iconography. Turner as Christ is likened to a book, which may evoke the Bible, or simply any text that is seeped in blood and worshipped without pity or surprise by silent readers; the onlookers risk being desensitized in the face of such displays of sadism. The suggestion here is that Turner's art offers no real protection against oppression but is rather a vehicle by which it is disseminated.

What this leaves us with in the *Turner* poems is a yawning "creative emptiness" whereby the slave compulsively goes off "[i]n search of another image of himself" in the face of (Döring, "Chains of Memory" 200):

No savannah, moon, gods, magician
To heal or curse, harvest, ceremonies,
No men to plough, corn to fatten their herds,
No stars, no land, no words, no community,
No mother. (42)

Whereas McIntyre and Döring ultimately read these lines to express freedom from the “chains of memory” and link this with Dabydeen’s assertions about “creative amnesia” in interview, it seems a rather forced optimism in the face of such a barren poetic landscape.⁹ The child “wanted a redemptive song,” but surely we should be wary of redemptive songs after Turner’s treatment of Ellar between Rima’s singing. At the conclusion of the poem we are told that “the child would not bear the future” and is left “a slave / To nothingness, to the white enfolding / Wings of Turner” (41). Turner’s art has obliterated everything with its sublime white sun. We might wonder whether the impulse of the boy caught in the aesthetic of non-representation is to become an iconoclast and smash it into silence. If this is the case, then it is fitting that the poem ends abruptly at this point with a shortened line.

Whether Turner’s painting aesthetically sublimates colonial violence or represents it, Dabydeen’s poem understands that the sublime effects described by Ruskin are achieved by “nothing other than the pleasure that results from the subject’s effort in going beyond the unpleasant object.”¹⁰ This reflects Burke’s notion of the necessity of distancing when faced with the sublime since it is only through distance that pleasure rather than pain can be procured (40). Pleasure is gained from Turner’s painting only from bracketing our uncomfortable reactions to it or, in Ruskin’s case, footnoting the dead slaves as if they are not part of the terrible beauty of the work of art. Ruskin’s “Theoria” about aesthetics has an evangelical vehemence about it as he declares that Turner’s work is “the noblest” of all as it expresses a “higher truth.” In “Of Ideas of Beauty” Ruskin asserts that aesthetics and ethics cannot be separated as his appreciation of beauty is bound to his idea of the moral:

All our moral feelings are so interwoven with our intellectual powers, that we cannot affect the one without in some degree addressing the other; and in all high ideas of beauty, it is more than probable that much of the pleasure depends on delicate and untraceable perceptions of fitness, propriety, and relation, which are purely intellectual, and through which we arrive at our noblest ideas of what is commonly and rightly called “intellectual beauty.” (15)

Here, Ruskin problematizes Immanuel Kant’s notion of a “disinterested” aesthetic attitude. In view of this, Ruskin’s response to Turner’s *Slave Ship* seems more than ironic since his criticism remains morally cauterized as he distances himself from the painful and “guilty” subject matter of the painting—the dying slaves—in order to arrive at a pleasurable appreciation of Turner’s aesthetic form.

Kojin Karantani’s essay on the “Uses of aesthetics: after orientalism” helps us to unpick the contradictions of Ruskin’s art criticism on Turner’s painting as he examines the response of the aesthete via a stringent critique of Kant:

The aesthetic stance, or aestheticism, get pleasure not from its object but by bracketing various reactions to the object . . . An aesthete kneels before something

not because he has really submitted to it but because he derives pleasure out of bracketing the displeasure of obeying an object that he can dominate if he wants to. We can liken this to the masochist who gets pleasure out of obeisance only in a relationship wherein his superiority to the master is confirmed and he can play within a set of rules that does not violate his ultimate security. It corresponds to what Kant saw in the sublime. (144)

It is particularly apt that Karantani should suggest that “[i]t was in this climate, in England, that John Ruskin represented the aesthetic movement.” Ruskin, the aesthete, can only find Turner’s painting sublime if he creates a cleavage between aesthetics and ethics by ensuring a critical distance from the slaves thrown overboard in the picture since without such a bracketing, the painting is too painful, too terrible. Dabydeen’s figure of the aesthete, Captain Turner, kneeling in tears before Rima comes to mind as a telling example of the effects of both Burke and Kant’s idea of the sublime. At this moment in the poem, Dabydeen sees a direct connection between Captain Turner’s aesthetic sensibility, the sublime and sadomasochism.¹¹ Dabydeen deliberately uncovers the underside of a whole discourse about the sublime within late eighteenth and early nineteenth century aesthetics, the “purity” of which is sullied by a morbid fascination with the power of inarticulate suffering and the infliction of pain.

Karantani insists that “one should always be ready to remove the brackets” so as not to conveniently obscure this pain, colonialism and the aesthetic stance that was “produced by the advent of industrial capital” (145-46). Like Dabydeen, Karantani connects “aestheticism” with colonialism, capitalism and “masochism.” This is not an attack on aesthetics *per se* but rather a questioning of an aestheticism that distances itself from political realities so as to be gratified by the effect of pleasure over pain. Turner’s painting *The Slave Ship* can only please the aesthete if his appalling seas filled with dead slaves are bracketed in a way that cannot be achieved by Raine when she tries to respond to Turner’s art in her poem, “Turner’s Seas.” These assertions are not meant to deny Turner’s skill as an artist as he painted *The Slave Ship*, just as Edward Said never denied the skill of “British authors (even Kipling) when he criticized them with respect to imperialism and colonialism” (151). Rather it is to remind us to unbracket the suppressed, to allow what has been consigned to the latent to be made manifest, as Dabydeen has done in his “sublime” poetic sequence *Turner*, and as Turner’s *Slave Ship* has done, whether intentionally or unintentionally. As Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) concludes: “The comprehension of an artwork as a complex of truth brings the work into relation with its untruth, for there is no artwork that does not participate in the untruth external to it, that of the historical moment” (347).

Notes

¹David Dabydeen, *Turner: New and Selected Poems* (2002). All further references are to this edition and are cited in parentheses in the text. See Turner's oil on canvas, Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

²Marina Warner, "Cannibal Tales: The Hunger for Conquest" (66); Döring, "Turning the Colonial Gaze" (10); and Paul Gilroy has also remarked on the painting in *Small Acts* (81).

³Döring also quotes from Ruskin but does not analyze the texture of the language of his art criticism, which is surely the most telling aspect of Ruskin's response.

⁴Cf. John Ruskin, "Of Water as Painted by Turner" (1843), *Modern Painters*, ed. David Barrie (159-60).

⁵Cf. Döring's discussion of Ruskin, "Turning the Colonial Gaze" (10).

⁶Cf. Tom Paulin's analysis of the painting in "This Way to Paradise," *The Guardian Review*, Saturday 17th July 2004 (4).

⁷Döring and Heike Härtung, "Amphibian Hermaphrodites: Marina Warner and David Dabydeen in Dialogue" (43); cited in Döring, "Turning the Colonial Gaze" (14).

⁸In Andrew Motion's *Secret Narratives* (1983).

⁹Döring, "Chains of Memory" (201); Cf. Döring and Härtung, "Amphibian Hermaphrodites" (42).

¹⁰Cf. Kojin Karantani, "Uses of Aesthetics: After Orientalism," *Edward Said and the work of the critic: speaking the truth to power*, ed., Paul A. Bové (139).

¹¹Cf. Burke and Kant but also the Greek philosopher Longinus (AD 1), translated by the French critic Boileau in 1674 and whose work appeared as *On the Sublime*; cited in Alan Singer & Allen Dunn, eds., *Literary Aesthetics: A Reader* (81-86).

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