

Looking for Cazabon

Preface

In 2006 I returned home to Trinidad from London to live for three years in order to research the life and times of Michel Jean Cazabon, Trinidad's most famous 19th-century painter. This research led to and concluded with the writing of my novel, *Light Falling on Bamboo*. As I searched for any paintings of Cazabon I could find in both public and private collections, I kept a number of notebooks which chronicled my research, both of the paintings and the landscapes in which he painted.

These research journeys began in Trinidad, discovering where he had painted, often in the intimate walkways of Port of Spain and on the west and south coast, others along the east and north coast of Trinidad, in the foothills of what are the beginning of the Andes – Trinidad is just eight miles or so off Venezuela. The highest mountains you see from Port of Spain are on the east coast of Venezuela. Journeys also took me to Georgetown, Guyana, where Cazabon travelled with the Martiniquan photographer Hippolyte Hartmann for the paintings of what became his Demerara Album; another voyage was to Martinique where he lived in Saint Pierre for eight years. The paintings completed there became Cazabon's Album Martiniquaise.

At this time I was writing sonnet-like poems in my notebook. They were written spontaneously as I began my novel, and seemed a sideways look, or subliminal index to my main work, a glance at Cazabon and his *les paysages*; particularly the effect of the landscape on my thoughts and feelings. This was like the art work which Cezanne called "realisation", which he linked to his personal experiences and "sensations".

While Derek Walcott, in *Another Life*, expressed the hope that the art of poetry and painting might "cohere," I began to hope that my writing of prose might "cohere" in some way with the writing of poetry, each influencing the other. I once showed Walcott some of these sonnets. I remember him saying that I should continue with the sonnet form and build them into a series. They came to represent a sort of random narrative. The writing of prose and poetry began to influence and ignite each other. Much later, I gave the collection this present shape.

One of the crucial aspects of my research had been to learn about painting and the skills required by the artist. I am not a painter and have not ever had a training in art. When I look at the sonnets, they seem to me to be part of my learning to write about landscape and about landscape painting, particularly water-colours, almost like random sketches as I worked on my novel.

The rendering of landscape as word has been a notable aspect of the descriptions in my previous novels and short stories, and Wilson Harris's perception of landscape as providing an "alphabet" as quoted in my epigraph, had already begun to influence how I thought about the employment of landscape in writing, as more than backdrop or context, but as something almost a living character.

As I reflected on the choice of the sonnet form, I saw that it gave me that very precise shape, which reflected Cazabon's principal medium, his small watercolour paintings. I then began to alter their structure with line-spacing and enjambment where I felt I wanted to signal change and disruption.

Cazabon returned home from Paris in 1848 where he had trained, leaving his wife Louise and three children, including his son Louis Michel, nicknamed Wap. They were reunited in 1852 when he went back to Paris, and then returning to Trinidad together as a family in 1854. My partner, Jenny Green, and I were separated from time to time during my period of research and writing, she in London and then reuniting in Trinidad with further travel elsewhere, to Martinique and Guyana, together for research. This helped me to understand some of the tensions which might have existed for Cazabon in his separations from his wife and children.

I think my poems, like Cazabon's water-colours, attempt a geography of home at a particular time, as I myself arrived back from London and began to write a fiction of his life, caught between here, there and

elsewhere through the migrating day as Jenny and I began to visit many of the sites of his paintings in order to compare the contemporary with the 19th century.

Each morning began with what I called the migrating day, parrots in their multitudes, crossing the skies from one side of Port of Spain's Savannah in the early morning to the other side of the city in the west to forage, and then returning again in the evening; hence the long poem, *The Migrating Day* is included as a reflection on the landscape in the same period, but written in a different form; a free verse, long poem.

Lawrence Scott