On a Voyage to Demerara, 1859

For Hena Maes–Jelinek

... I sensed, over the years, as a surveyor, that the landscape possessed resonance; the landscape possessed a life, because the landscape, for me, is like an open book, and the alphabet with which one worked was all around me...

—Wilson Harris, “The Music of Living Landscapes”

They had left the wharf in Port of Spain by sloop in the early hours of the morning. By mid-afternoon, the low-lying land of the Icacos coastline emerged out of the accumulating haze, which had collected in the gulf of Paria. They were about to enter The Serpent’s Mouth, the channel between the island and the continent. Cazabon began to wonder at the absurdity of his decision, as he stood on deck with the young Hartmann, bound for an adventure with a stranger. He had allowed himself to be seduced by the young photographer’s enthusiasm. He had eventually relented to his persuasive tales and agreed to collaborate with the unknown.

The wind had picked up as they made their way into the open Atlantic. The island had disappeared. There was no turning back. Some miles off the coast, the captain began to tack east towards the larger land-mass of Venezuela, of which the island had once been part; and still was, with smaller islands in between, appearing and disappearing: geysers shooting into the sky from a subterranean world beneath the ocean. What was land and what mirage was a

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1 In 1859 the free-coloured French creole artist Michel Jean Cazabon visited Demerara with the Alsatian photographer Hippolyte Antoine Hartmann (1818–). In 1860 they published the Album of Demerara (Paris: Lemercier). See Geoffrey MacLean’s The Illustrated Biography of Trinidad’s 19th Century Painter Michel Jean Cazabon (Port-of-Spain: Aquarela Galleries, 1986). This piece is an extract from an early draft of my novel Light Falling on Bamboo published in 2012 by Tindal Street Press, an imprint of Profile Books. The episode was not included in the final draft.
continual debate as the two men stood on deck like explorers exchanging points of view, eager to be the first to spot land through their own spy-glass.

‘There, that’s the mangrove coast,’ the young Hartmann pointed, trying to sound authoritative, only to be disappointed by an optical illusion of light on water. ‘Oh, no, I don’t think it’s land,’ he said with disappointment.

‘There’s so much sky,’ Cazabon mused to himself. ‘What’s that you say?’

‘The sky governs all…’

‘Ah, the painter! The Englishman, Constable, isn’t it? You can’t escape that way of seeing, can you? But, you must, you know.’

Cazabon glanced at his new acquaintance, irritated by Hartmann’s know-all attitude, by his youthful eagerness for the new. But he resolved to be patient. Something in his tone irked the older man.

‘It’s very difficult to find the actual mouth of the river,’ Hartmann began to explain, hurrying on now with his own thoughts, and suddenly embarking on an encyclopaedic reference to his countryman Humboldt and his explorations in the Guianas, as he looked out towards the murky horizon. The sky was the colour of pewter and the rain clouds loomed threateningly.

‘The river?’ Cazabon inquired again. He was not so familiar with the geography beyond the islands.

‘We’re too far south for hurricanes, but there are storms, which can be brewed in this cauldron.’ Hartmann did not respond to the question immediately, carrying on with his own reflections. Both men were looking for shade on the deck from some corner of shadow cast by the sails and masts.

‘To which river are you referring?’ Cazabon repeated his question.

The wind had dropped markedly.

‘The Orinoco. You can be lost quite quickly in a maze of canals, leading you to tributaries of the great river, but never finding the main course itself.’ Hartmann spoke with such certainty; one could have sworn that he had accompanied Humboldt on his expedition in an earlier part of the century. ‘In no time you can be a hostage to caimans and anacondas, dragged off into the mangrove, encrusted with oysters, the very same ones which startled the poet–explorer, Raleigh.’ Hartmann continued with poetry of flora and fauna, culled from explorers’ tales.

Cazabon’s patience was not holding out against the young man’s exuberance, which he knew he should tolerate, admire, and entertain as an older man. ‘Do you…’

‘What’s that you say…’