

The Context of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

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A controlling assumption among critics of Southern literature today seems to be that the Southern Renaissance is over. Walter Sullivan, for example, views the extinction of literary Florence in the South as an inevitable outcome. The myth of the past which sustained the renaissance in the last few decades, he believes, was not substantial enough to resist the surge "of social programs on the one hand, the attack of science and materialism on the other hand."¹⁾ Lewis P. Simpson does not declare the close of the Southern Renaissance. He views, however, the Southern literature to have gone through two major stages since 1920s. In the first stage which covers from 1920s to about 1950, Southern writing records "an attempted reconstruction of the meaning of the past by the literary mind."²⁾ The second stage, he continues, is a period in which Southern writing tends to record "the breakdown of the endeavor in reconstruction,"³⁾ and to suggest "that the only meaningful covenant for the latter-day writer is one with the self on terms generally defined as existential."⁴⁾

William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is one of the most germane novels in the controversy about the continuity of the Southern Renaissance. A predominant opinion about the novel is that Styron took quite a different line from his preceding generation. Most critics regard the novel as characteristically modern, interpreting Styron's version of Nat's rebellion as essentially solipsistic, if not selfish. C. Hugh Holman, for instance, sees in this novel a sign that "our contemporary tendencies toward introspection and the private self are so strong that the society fades almost into nothingness."⁵⁾ Some others, categorizing Styron among post war novelists, regard Nat's rebellion essentially as a personal struggle to find some meaning in the absurd world. After two world wars, they say, the motive of rebels is primarily to identify themselves. They no longer have any establishment against

1) Walter Sullivan, *A Requiem for the Renaissance: The State of Fiction in the Modern South* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1976), p. 18.

2) Lewis P. Simpson, *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 70.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 70.

4) *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

5) C. Hugh Holman, *The Immoderate Past: The Southern Writer and History* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1977), p. 90.

which to rebel.⁶⁾

In this paper I will examine the closely related view, expressed by Simpson among others, that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* marks a turning point in modern Southern literature. It supposes that the origin of Nat's conflicts are more social than personal. Thus, Styron's novel proves a continuation of the Southern Renaissance into the 1960s rather than its end or a turning point. This paper also postulates that the development of his confession is closely related to the growth of the rebellion in his mind. This study, inevitably, will exclude Nat's sense of a relationship with God which, no doubt, is important to the development of his plan.

In "Judgement Day," Nat's attorney, Thomas Gray, frequently interrupts the confession. After sporadic questions and answers, Nat's story gradually narrows down to his life under Joseph Travis, his last master, which is shown to have been peaceful and satisfactory. This is enough to show that the insurrection was plotted neither under violent emotion nor for his private self.

So, all things being equal, from the beginning of my stay with Travis, I was in as palmy and benign a state as I could remember in many years.⁷⁾

During this time, Nat's experience is depicted largely through his relationship with Hark, a fellow Negro. The basic question of slavery—inhuman relationship between the white and the black—is approached through their friendship. "There's a certain inward sense that every Negro possesses," he explains, "when...he becomes aware that he is only merchandise, goods, in the eyes of all white people devoid of character or moral sense or soul." (53) Hark calls this "black-assed" feeling. Nat is annoyed by Hark's servile manner in the presence of their master—"the unspeakable, bootlicking Sambo, all giggles and smirks and oily, snivelling severely." (55) Nat tries somehow to eliminate from Hark's character this weakling trait at the very sight of white skin. But Hark's deplorable answer, "I tries and tries. But hit seem I can't get over dat black-assed feeling. I tries though," (58) is frustrating. In "Old Time Past," the second chapter, Nat relates his experience that might be one possible source of this feeling among black people. After watching his mother raped by McBride, the act of which he did not understand then, he feels himself utterly powerless in front of a white man.

...and it is McBride alone who seems to fill the entire space within my sight, prodigious...yet mysterious in his terrible authority, filling me with dread. The appearance of his round, heavy face...sickens me inside, and I feel a sense of my weakness, my smallness, my defenselessness, my *niggerness* invading me like a wind to the marrow of my bones. (150)

6) Marc L. Ratner, *William Styron* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1972), p. 18. See also Lewis P. Simpson, p. 90.

7) The quotations from *The Confessions of Nat Turner* are from Random House (1967) edition. The pagination will be indicated in the parenthesis.

In the second stage of recollection, "The Old Time Past," Nat's memory goes back to his earlier back to his earlier days. Bitter experiences that he confesses here shows his mind going deeper into the problem of the inhumanity on the part of the white—deprivation of the black family ties and love. He traces his own genealogy. His grandmother was sold in auction when she was thirteen. She died soon after she gave birth to his mother who had been "publicly begat upon the same slave ship by some unknown black father." (130) Both Nat's mother and father were slaves of Benjamin Turner, but his father ran off to God knows where as "he couldn't stand to be hit in de face by nobody." (135) His mother was raped by a white man with Nat watching the scene helplessly. He recalls that he had been drawn irresistibly back to the graveyard where his grandmother had been lain dead. When he reached thirteen, Nat saw the Negro graveyard burned to be replaced by a new one. During the short time between the removal and the replacement, the tiny land is used to raise sweet potatoes. Standing there, Nat heard a Negro voice amid the swirling smoke, "Dam old dead people is sho gwine grow a nice passel of yams." (132) It was just then that he realized for the first time "what the true value of black folk is, not just for white men but for niggers." All black destiny—birth and death as well as meeting and separation of a family is at the mercy of white hands.

Nat's long experience under Samuel Turner, in this chapter, constitutes an important link in the process that leads to his rebellion. Nat's earlier phase under Sam taught him sense of pride. Without the sense of being "quite an unusual darky" (190) that Sam has awoken in him, and without the pleasant expectation of being a free man, he could not have thought that "the other Negroes at Turner's mill might be sold...but the notion that *I* could be disposed of in this way was...quite inconceivable." (222) When he was helplessly sold to Thomas Moore, he experienced "a kind of disbelief which verged close upon madness, then the fury such as I had never known before..." (226) Though not direct a motive for his insurrection, this experience, no doubt, constituted an important turning point in Nat's attitude toward white people, especially toward their kindness and pity. Later in "Study War," he confesses "the more tolerable and human white people became in their dealings with me the keener was my passion to destroy them." (342)

During the several years approaching 1831, his recollections, in "Study War," come closer to the direct motive of his rebellion. What frustrated him most, he confesses, is the lack of *pride* on the part of the black. The kind of hatred they have, he complains, is not of that "calm and intelligent unrepenting purity" which is "so necessary in order to murder" but is "all sullenness and impotent resentment." (258) While speaking of the cruelty of Nathaniel Francis, he reflects on the scene of a "cock fight" between Will and Sam. Neither of them wanted to fight but each time one of them drew back and didn't strike the other, Francis gave that man a stroke with his whip. The other Negroes reacted, to Nat's disappointment, with laughter. He made a speech to them: "You is *men*, my brothers, *men* not beasts of the field!...Where oh where, my brothers, is yo' pride?" (307)

Nat is extremely perplexed when asked by Gray, "What you had pure and simple was not an army but a draggledy mob of drunken black ruffians who couldn't keep out of them stills and cider presses and thus in true nigger fashion contributed further to your downfall.... I ask you, Reverend, is that any way to run a proper revolution?" This was the only case Nat couldn't help lying to his attorney: "I gave orders about that, but when my troops grew in size—why, I had somehow lost control over them. I just couldn't keep an eye on them all at once and I—" (396) But his true answer to this is, "*But Mr. Gray... what else could you expect from mostly young men deaf, dumb, blind, crippled, shackled and hamstrung from the moment of their first baby-squall on a bare clay floor? It was prodigious that we come as far as we did, that we nearly took Jerusalem...!*" (396) This seems the hardest thing to admit even to himself. "And I thought," he recollects, "*lying to myself: Yes, they are black but they've been forced, drageoned by white men who have threatened them with their very lives.*" (399) (Italics added)

It is clear, from his perplexity and self-deception, that Nat ascribes his failure, eventually, to the white's inhumanity—the inhumanity that deprived the black of his whole humanity. Moreover the most horrible cruelty, Nat seems to say, the unpardonable sin of the white man is neither his overwhelming manner, his separation of black families and love, nor his infidelity to the black, but this degradation of men to beasts. When he saw a Negro pissing into a hollow mouth of a dead woman still clutching a child, he thought, "It was because of you, old woman, that we didn't learn to fight nobly." (397)

Many critics see the immediate motive for Nat's rebellion in denied sexual fulfillment. A careful study of "Study War" will cast doubt on the validity of this viewpoint. "Study War" begins with a recollection of a particular sexual attraction to a white woman. Nat confesses, "The sight of [the woman's] pity, the vision of that tender self... caused me an irresistible, flooding moment of desire." (264~265) He feels a deep shame and prays "supplicating His pardon for this terrible moment of lasciviousness." (266) He ponders on some key to this powerful emotion and the reason for his thinking these savage thoughts. He answers himself that "it was not a white person's abuse or scorn or even indifference which could ignite in him this murderous hatred but his pity, maybe even his tenderest moment of charity." (267) It is clear from this statement that Nat's sexual desire for the white woman is an extreme expression of "murderous hatred" rather than of desire to conquer the white, as some critics believe. More intensified feeling of this experience is shown in his relationship with Margaret Whitehead. His passion for her, as for the white woman, is mingled with violent anger.

How could she with this thoughtlessness and innocence provoke me so? Godless white bitch. (399)
 "God damn her soul," I say again, hating her even more than seconds before.... (340)

Here, it would be useful to go back to the memory of Emeline. His admiration for Emeline approaches for saintliness. He "worshipped her—from a distance of course—with that

the chaste, evangelical passion," he confesses, "that could be nurtured in the innocent heart of a boy like myself...." (177) It is not before he heard blasphemous words from her lips that he is "agitated" by his dreams. It is notable that the violent anger, mingled with his sexual desire for the white woman is related to his loss of faith in white people's tenderness. For he clearly remembers that it was not until the day "when Moore fetched me from the market and we drove to the farm in the wagon through waning summer fields" (266) that he felt the most "murderous hatred" toward the pity and the charity of the white people. His desperate struggle against the sexual attraction of the white woman can be equated with his strife against the white's "clemency" which he will not allow "to overtake him." The scene where Nat contrasts his surrender to Margaret's sexual attraction with his "great mission" supports this point of view.

Take her, a voice said. Take her here on this bank by this quiet brook. Spend upon her all afternoon a backed-up life-time of passion. Without mercy take your pleasure upon her innocent round young body until she is half mad with fright and pain. Forget your great mission. Abandon all for these hours of terror and bliss.... (372)

As can be clearly seen, Nat's confession traces and reveals the white inhumanity from the superficial level to the core. I conclude from this study that the immediate source of Nat's rebellion is not his personal conflicts—neither denied sexual fulfillment nor his complete isolation from love. It was the white inhumanity that made him raise *and fail in* the insurrection. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is a bitter revelation of the white's inhumanity. At the same time it is a justification of his rebellion. His conflicts are neither more personal nor purely existential than those of the preceding generation has been.

