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The Confessional Hero in William Styron's *The Long March*

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Confession is regarded as necessary for attaining divine/social forgiveness or appeasing the burdened conscience. In the *Old Testament*, the Lord, God said to Amram's son, Moses: "Say to the people of Israel, when a man or a woman commits any of the sins that men commit by breaking faith with the Lord, that persons is guilty, he shall confess his sin which he has committed" (Num V.6). If in the ecclesiastical terms, it is "breaking faith with the Lord", then in the social terms it is necessitated by "breaking faith" with the society.

Encyclopaedia Brittanica (Vol.6) cites another interpretation of confession- "an extra-judicial statement acknowledging guilt of an offence". The voluntary confession, in most jurisdictions, must be corroborated by other evidence before a defendant may be convicted, which can relate to the authenticity of the occurrence of the crime. It also means "self-humiliation and abusement by the acknowledgement of sin", and immediately the image presented to the mind is of a forlorn individual struggling to appease not only the deity and society but also his own conscience. Self-accusation appeases the personal and the collective conscience.

A slightly more comprehensive interpretation of confession can be had from the third volume of *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*: "A confession is a public avowal and formal statement, more or less detailed, of the doctrinal contents of religious belief, framed by an individual or by a group of individuals. It may be addressed orally, orally or in writing, to a few persons in sympathy or out of sympathy with it, or to a congregation, or to a Church, or to the world". Since it is "addressed, orally or in writing to a few persons in sympathy or out of sympathy with it, or to a congregation, or to a Church, or to the world", it makes the gap between the ostracized individual and the social spectrum, conspicuous. We come to appreciate the cleavage and comprehend, but at the same time this "address" links the confessor to the society demanding it. Thus, confession carried out for the purposes of expiation, whether religious or social, acts as the vital link between the individual and the society that is pitted against him. It can take many forms. It can rob the individual of his will to act or to hibernate like Ellison's hero or express himself, attended by tremendous suffering.

The ecclesiastical confession is the basis from which various types of modern confession spring. These confessions may not be necessarily religious. They can be, to be more precise, amoral. The religious confession can be compared to Northrope Frye's (*Anatomy of Criticism, 1957*) archetype, which is the basis, and just as there are displaced myths originating from it, in the same way the confessions of the modern individual are the displaced confessions whose archetype is the religious confession. Perhaps this branching out, neglecting the roots, can be traced back to the advancement of science and technology at the end of the pervious century that has robbed man of his basic religious and existential assumptions and religion and its large manna-like promises have

lost credence. Matthew Arnold's prediction that poetry will take the place of religion has not come true because what abounds in the modern fiction is not the love for poetry or literature but some sort of, stark and stripped of all grandeur, humanity. This is the last yard-stick that man can said to be in possession of. Even in the degenerated world of Samuel Beckett where everything has failed, the personal relationships still count. The companionship is still present. It is different from Forster's personal relationships. The element of humanity varies with every author, but they all throw it up for tentative acclaim now and then, in some form or the other. This stark stripped humanity is perhaps the only answer to the existential predicament and alienations of the modern individual. In this respect William Styron is neither alone nor unique. He is in the tradition of novelists like Dostoevsky and can be placed at par with the modern novelists like Saul Bellow who is his contemporary.

Novels with confessional heroes have been in vogue long before William Styron began writing. The origin of this kind of novel can be traced in the fictions of Fyodor Dostoevsky. This was used by other modern novelists, like Andre Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Koestler, Golding, Saul Bellow and William Styron. In the modern times, the confessional technique has not only been used but also intensified and interiorised. The central character's or protagonist's concern is with self-discovery trying to find out the meaning of the meaning. The confessional hero dwells on the metaphysical questions of 'how' and 'why', He questions the primary causes of which the hypothesis has to be built and is sceptical of the foundations. He feels that he can arrive at some sort of solution or conclusion through a "sincere and single minded self-analysis".William Styron's second novel *The Long March* which William O'Connor calls an "extended story."[1] is by his own account largely autobiographical. Like its two principal characters - Lieutenant Culver and Captain Mannix, Styron served in Marine Corps during World War Second and was recalled to active duty in 1950 as a reserve officer when the Korean War erupted. In the course of his nine-month hitch, he participated in the forced march on the action of which this novel is based. Jonathan Baumbach calls it a "novelette."[2]

Captain Mannix is the central character and a symbol of rebellion. An outcry against the ceaseless war, the depersonalising of persons and the secularising of spiritual authority in our time, *The Long March* also raises a more timeless question : What should a man do when confronted with those apparently irresistible forces that would not only control his body but break his will, subdue his spirit and reduce him to robot-like obedience ?[3] Like Camu's*The Rebel*, Styron's book is about the necessity of rebellion and endurance in a world without God. And its central metaphor is that seemingly senseless and laborious "walk through the night that all men must take until they finally disappear into the universal darkness."[4] Speaking about the theme of the novel, Styron observed :

"...my story's hero is also a rebellious soul, a young Marine reserve officer whose mutinous rage against authority in general and his commanding officer in particular, leads to his downfall. ...He resists the system and it is his ruin. You cannot buck the system... I think that is what I was trying to say... for if you do you will disaster upon your head... At the end of my story the Captain, (who is not without his foolish and impulsive moments), having faced down his commanding officer at the conclusion of the senseless and brutal like ordered by the same CO, stands to receive a court martial. The tragedy is implicit here."[5]

TheLong March projects a world which is almost "absurd". The World of Corps, filtered through the consciousness of Culver, is disordered, unreal and distorted "in a scattered, disordered riot, like a movie film pieced together by an idiot."[6] The observer Culver feels himself "suddenly unreal and disoriented" at many points in the novel. The irrational world of the novel is epitomised in the opening scene. It begins on a note of suffering which is the chief characteristic of the confessional novel :

One noon, in the blaze of a cloudless Carolina summer, what was left of eight dead bodies lay strewn about the landscape, among the poison ivy and the pine needles and loblolly saplings. It was not so much as if they had departed this life but as if, sprayed from a hose, they were only shreds of bone, gut, and dangling tissue to which it would have been impossible ever to impute the quality of life, far less the capacity to relinguish it. Of course, though, these had really died quickly, no doubt before the faintest flicker of recognition, of wonder, apprehension, or terror had had time to register in their minds... had hurled them earthward where they lay now, alive but stricken in a welter of blood and brain, scattered messkits and mashed potatoes, and puddles of melting ice cream.[6]

The very opening scene indicates the disorder and confusion in a stable and orderly cosmos. There was complete peace among the Marines when the two mortal shells broke the ice. The forks and spoons have been shown lying as "pathetic metal flowers." Contemplating this 'slaughter of the innocents', Culver realises that it is simply a terrible accident. But why ? And that too during peace time in America when one does not feel the necessity of protection. It is a scene which is to haunt Culver and Captain Mannix throughout the novel and make the single day in which the action of the book takes place, seem absurd and unreal. Mannix is comparably shocked. Mannix's rebellion commences at the moment when he sees the spectacle of "faceless youth", who seems to retain, even in death, a "gawky tousled grace". It is a shock mixed with frustration, torment and outrage. Sobbing, he cries out : "Won't they ever let us alone, the sons of bitches... Won't they ever let us alone ?"(63)

Styron's evocation of a peaceful existence is achieved through Culver's vision of the girls on the lawn :

It was one happy and ascending bar that he remembered, a dozen bright notes through which he passed in memory to an earlier, untroubled day at the end of childhood. There, like tumbling flowers against the sunny grass; their motions as nimble as the music itself, two lovely little girls, called to him voicelessly, as in a dream, and waved their arms.(10)

This vision of the girls is shown three times in the novel. Indirectly, the present is contrasted through this image. The present in the novel is depicted as full of despair, gloom, frustration, desperation and torment. The whole scene brings hatred and malice against the system in the eyes of Mannix when he sees:

One boy's eyes lay gently closed, and his long dark lashes were washed in tears, as though he had cried himself to sleep. As they bent over him they saw that he was very young, and a breeze came up from the edges of the swamp, bearing with it a scorched odor of smoke and powder, and touched the edges of his hair. A lock fell across his brow with a sort of gawky, tousled grace, as if preserving even in that blank and mindless repose some gesture proper to his years, a callow charm. Around his curly head grasshoppers darted along the weeds. Below, beneath the slumbering eyes, his face had been blasted out of sight.(63)

Thus the hero of the novel is pre-occupied with suffering which is an important characteristic of the confessional novel. It is this torture which follows Mannix throughout the novel till he gets the awakening or enlightenment.

The Long March can be called a tragedy of rebellion like his other novels. It is this mode of rebellion which leads the hero to greater and greater suffering. When Colonel Templeton orders a "forced march" of thirty-six miles in thirteen hours, partly as punishment for sins of the flesh (the flabbiness of the troops) and partly as preparation for some "humorless salvation", Mannix heretically and absolutely rebels. This forced march cannot be totally unjustified on the part of Templeton because he wants to toughen up his marines and also wants to inculcate the 'group esprit'. The object of his rebellion, however, is not Templeton the man, even though he mistakenly believes the Colonel's motives to be tainted by a cold and purposeful evil; its object is Templeton the Marine, representative of the absolute authority of a system whose values Mannix considers debased :

...his face broke out into the comical, exasperated smile which always heralded his bitterest moments of outrage at the Marine Corps, at the system, at their helpless plight, the stage of the world-tirades which, in their unqualified cynicism, would have been intolerable were they not always delivered with such gusto and humor and a kind of grisly delight.(33)

Mannix feels as helpless now as he had been then when he was dangled, naked and upside-down, from a hotel window two floors above the street by two drunken men. Like the protest of Camus' absurd hero, Mannix's action has no calculated issue, it is "spontaneous protestation". Nor does he rebel by refusing to march. Instead, in "proud and wilful submission, rebellion in reverse", he completes the hike - not because it is good or reasonable but simply to spite the "System".

Colonel Templeton has been depicted in the novel as 'god' and that is why he is called as the 'Old Rocky'. In *The Long March*, it has been replaced by a profane parody-belief in the supreme efficacy of military power. The spirit of this new religion is the famous Marine *esprit de corps*; its dogma is the new, the grandiose "amphibious doctrine" and its ultimate aim is the "group destiny" of victory over its version of Satan, the "Aggressor Enemy". The institution supporting the theology of wars is the Corps. The rock on which its temple is built, its high priest (even, perhaps, its god) is Colonel Rockey Templeton. The Colonel is as filled with religious fervour as a priest, and sometimes looks, "like certain young ecclesiastics, prematurely aged and perhaps even wise".(18) Although Culver sees him as a kind of "priest in whom passion and faith had made an alloy --- of only the purest good intentions," his acts are beyond the ordinary categories of good and evil. He is obeyed unquestioningly by officers such as Major Lawrence who with his "baby-blue gaze and parted mouth" and "third person flattery", is a mechanical-cherub to this mechanical-god. He is obeyed by regulars as Hobb and O'Leary, who seem to have no existence outside the system. These obedient believers are immune to the god's wrath. But "with piety and with vengeance", he decrees damnation for a heretic such as Mannix.

When Colonel announces this journey a day earlier, Mannix goes out of his wits and it seems almost impossible for him to make it. When Colonel asked "you think that's too long ?", then Mannix replied, rather nervously and hesitantly, "No, Sir --- I don't think it's long, but it's certainly going to be some hike". Initially, it does not give him the heroic stature. He is only a hero of the absurd rather than a hero in the classical sense. History, in turn, has consistently awarded the role of a hero to the man who prefers suffering to submission. Mannix becomes a hero in the classical sense when he accepts the challenge of completing the march even at the cost of his life. Even the sceptical Culver recognises that since

suffering is implicit in the hero's role, Mannix is as heroic as anybody. Because he is human rather than divine, the Captain may be only a suffering buffoon; yet his scar and defiant look on his face suggest his kinship with other significant rebels. His nail-bruised heel, his refusal to honour the religion of the Corps, the great emptiness in his tormented soul, the "smoking bonfire" of his hubris-smitten spirit-all of these imply that he is a type of Satan or Old Adam to Templeton's God.

In his suffering, Mannix has been likened to the Satan of *The Paradise Lost*. Mannix's revolt against Templeton on this earth is equated with the revolt of Satan against God in Heaven. Mannix insists on setting fire to "Heaven's Gate":

"---like a prison where you could have anything you wanted except happiness, and once, in a rare mid night moment when he allowed himself to get drunk, he got paper and wood together from his room and announced to Culver in an unsteady but determined voice that he was going to burn the place down."(53-54)

It echoes Satan's revolt against God when he is inspiring the fallen angels in Hell. Mannix's dominant voice through the journey reminds the dominance of Satan in Hell. This domination can be seen at many places in the novel :

All right, goddammit, move out ! We got sand here, now. Move out !and close it up ! Close it up, I say, goddamit ! Lead better, get that barn out ofyour ass and close it up ! Close it up, I say !(LM,85)

Mannix has not only been presented as an absurd, as was shown in the beginning, rather he has been projected as a Greek hero. He is also compared with all those heroes who have always spoken against the tyranny of this universe. Many references to the classical Greek characters are found in the novel. Styron has shown the conflict between Mannix and Templeton as the Greek classicals used to depict. "In the morbid, confortless light they were like classical Greek masks, made of chrome or tin, reflecting an almost theatrical disharmony..."(29) The swollen foot of Mannix, due to the piercing of a nail in his heel from his shoe, clearly indicates that he has some resemblance with the Greek hero Oedipus of *Oedipus Rex*. As Oedipus was bent upon avoiding his parents by renouncing them and thereby meeting his fate, similarly Mannix is determined to fight this rebellion thereby meeting his fate. He is even prepared to meet his fate by violating the orders of his boss, Templeton, to board a truck. Mannix's defiance against Templeton can be judged when Templeton orders him to board the truck, "Fuck you and your information" and again "you ordered this goddam hike and I'm going to walk it even if I haven't got one goddam man left."(111)

In the confessional novel, the hero after undergoing acute suffering, equates himself with Christ-figure who is a prototype of suffering. As Christ suffered for mankind, similarly Mannix is suffering for his men to free them from the bondage. The piercing of the nail in his heel before the start of the march and the consequent profuse bleeding from it, equates Mannis with Christ who was also nailed to death. Certainly, the thirty-six mile march, marked at each station by increasing pain from the nail in Mannix's shoe recalls Christ's journey to the cross as well as the period of time from his death to his resurrection. When the Colonel finally condemns him to court-martial for overt insubordination, Mannix's face even takes on "an aspect of deep, almost prayerful concentration --- so that if one did not know he was in agony one might imagine that he was a communicant in rupture". As this point, Mannix has accepted the suffering implicit infinitude.

Styron also reveals the consciousness of Mannix

through Culver who sees a figure in the sky diving in the sea with a splash thereby making the symbol of cross. This is again a reference to Christ. Thus, by juxtaposition Mannix with the Greek mythical hero and the Biblical, Styron underscores the futility of rebellion in our times. He suggests that the concept of redemption through rebellion has lost its justification in the modern world. This is so because individual suffering is ineffectual as an instrument of social change. Thus, Templeton who is a symbol of social order, is impervious to any such sentiments, regarding the forced march, "That with him the hike had nothing to do with courage or sacrifice or suffering, but was only a task to be performed---"(111)This is quite tangible from the above statement of Colonel that the suffering which Mannix is undergoing for the sake of his men, has no significance and is futile. Mannix ultimately comes to a complete recognition of his situation when he sheds the protective layers of self-delusion, standing naked in the barrack before the wash-room. Though Mannix is physically damned, yet he conquers intrinsically. It indicates Styron's vision towards evolving redemption :

As he rounded the corner he saw Mannix, naked except for a towel around his waist, making his slow and agonized way down the hall. He was hairy and enormous and as he inched his way towards the shower room, clawing at the wall for support, his face with its clenched eyes and tautdrawn-down mouth was one of the tortured and digantic suffering.(119)

This was exactly the posture when Jesus Christ was crucified against a wall. Mannix chooses to suffer and it is through confession (affirmation) that he comes closer to Grace. Styron uses the same image as used in *Lie Down in Darkness*, to symbolise redemption. Refusing to submit to his own exhaustion, he had endured and ended as a man. Styron himself has said that any credo must end on the word "endure" and that is evidently enough.

Just as at the beginning of his story, he juxtaposes the senseless slaughter of the young marines with a glimpse of a blasted Negro carbin, so in his final scene, he brings two representatives of racial endurance face to face. Naked except for a towel, around his waist, Mannix the Jew, encountered a black maid with a mop in the barrack hallway. With infinitely compassionate understanding, she asks, "Oh, my, you poor man. What you been doin '? Do it hurt ?" and then repeats "Do it hurt?" and then answers, "Oh, I bet it does ! Deed it does". Manix replies after glancing at the woman, "Deed it does" when he was standing in this posture :

Mannix then, standing there, weaving dizzily and clutching for support at the wall, a mass of scars and naked as the day he emerged from his mother's womb, save for the soap which he held feebly in his hand.(120)

Only a man who has "endured and lasted" only can speak, "Deed it does."

The soap is a symbol of purification, purgation for Styron. Through suffering and rebellion, Mannix moves towards self-awareness. The spark of enlightenment and understanding at the end of the novel makes for its tragic vision; it consists in the perception of injustice inherent in human life and the rebel's deep urge to combat it.

Contrasted with the acute self-consciousness and suffering - redemption - affirmation of Captain Mannix is the mechanical, callous, routinised, dull, snobbish attitude of Old Rocky, Colonel Templeton. He is a temple of feelingless affected mannerisms, who never betrays any emotion whatsoever. The news of mortar shell burst is delivered to him, but most feelingly by Hobbs, which contrasts with his callousness and cold-self control. He listens to the news and merely

carries on with his food for quarter of a minute, squinting casually into the sun. Culver reflects - "it was absolutely typical of the man... too habitual to be an act yet still somehow too faintly self conscious to be entirely natural, how many years and what strange interior struggle had gone into the perfection of such a gesture ?" Colonel Templeton is an expert at not only suppressing, but crushing emotions. His idea of the commanding officer is to be devoid of all humane sentiment even to be found in a human being. What turns Mannix's stomach is received by the Colonel as one of the "most routine of messages". Culver showers on him the ironic applause - "the frail, little-boned-almost pretty face peering upward with a look of altitudinized contemplation... surely all this was more final, more commanding than the arrogant loud mastery of booth, more like the skill of Bernhardt..."(14) Contrasted with the suffering self-consciousness of Mannix, the Colonel is scarcely self-conscious at all.

The Colonel's mechanical approach is evident when he speaks to the other battalion commander, "It was a battalion made up mostly of young reserves and it was one in which, he suddenly thanked God, he knew no one."(17-18) Certainly, it was never the Colonel's idea to strike friendship anywhere in this battalion. He could make his subordinates shudder only through maintaining official impersonality. On the other hand, Culver mentions in detail the extreme sufferings of Captain Mannix :

He watched Mannix walk with an awful hobbling motion up the road, face screwed up in pain and eyes esquint like a man trying to gaze at the sun... his gait was terrible to behold - jerks and spasms which warded off, reacted to, or vainly tried to control great zones and areas of pain. Behind him most of his men lay in stupefied rows at the edge of the road and waited for the trucks to come.(108)

It is a great soul undergoing excessive suffering, who upholds the Styroneon credo of endurance and grit. This perhaps can be the only worthwhile approach to life as seen by the confessional hero. Mannix will complete the hike on foot at a terrible physical and emotional expense. He says, "Listen, Colonel", he rasped "you ordered this goddam hike and I'm going to walk it even if I haven't got one goddam man left. You can crap out yourself for half the march.(111) This is the self-defeating rebellion, a rebellion in reverse. Looking at the hike from the Colonel's perspective, it is rendered futile - "That with him the hike had had nothing to do with his courage, or sacrifice, or suffering, but was only a task to be performed..."(111)

The sufferings and self-consciousness isolate the hero. He feels alienated from man and nature :

And although Mannix was close by, he felt profoundly alone... Something that had happened that evening - something Mannix had said, or suggested, perhaps not even that, but only a fleeting look in the Captains fase; the old compressed look of torment mingled with seething outrage - something that evening, without a doubt, had added to the great load of his loneliness an almost intolerable burden.(35)

He is haunted by a nameless anxiety, which appears all the more menacing because of its being nameless for the moment. Exhaustion makes him vulnerable and he falls prey to innumerable anonymous fears. There is the nostalgia for the past and the lost hope that perhaps it would have been better in the roseate past which increases the disillusionment, disappointment and frustration in the present - he left each command post feelingly lonely and uprooted, as they pushed on after the spectral foe into the infinite strangeness of another swamp or grove." Or as he himself puts it more succinctly, "He was insecure and uprooted and the pray of many fears."(36) Although the

battalion is pursuing the foe, still the hero feels vulnerable and pursued by nameless haunting fears.

Finally, the redeeming factor in the personality of the confessional hero is his suffering which purifies him. It also measures him by the ethic of "endurance" valued by William Styron. His stature is to be measured by his endurance. Furthermore, this suffering infuses the Christ-like quality in the confessional hero. Next to that his self-expression, poured out in the form of candid confession, enhances his stature in the eyes of the beholder and the reader. In this sense, the hike is like that metaphysical Dantean journey through the underworld which is not only a literal, but also a spiritual journey that takes not only the confessional central character but also the reader from a lonely ignorant individual to a redeemed affirmed man, who has been refined by the fires of Hell in the form of suffering. These sufferings function like the purgatory and at the end, the hero is worth the Dantean Paradise. His weary plodding pre-supposes some sort of innate determination that guides him to his destination like the eyes of Beatrice. Even Culver ruminates - "Mannix's disavowal of faith, put him automatically out of the hero category, in the classical sense, yet if suffering was part of the hero's role, wasn't Mannix's as heroic as any ?" At least, Culver almost adores Mannix. Whatever tentative affirmation descends, it comes in only through redemptive suffering and frank confession. Contrasted with the nihilism of the modern age, the weary plodding and endurance of the Styronean hero makes him stand out from the fiction of others and join the class of writers like Saul Bellow.

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