

## TEMPORAL QUALITIES IN THE NOVELS OF WILLIAM STYRON

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The sixties in America were a hostile decade for a white, southern-born writer to attempt to re-create the life and thoughts of a black hero. In a day of black studies, identity, and power, literature's past failure to cast the black man in more than an unfavorable stereotype has become painfully evident. With the exception of Albion Tourgee's *The Fool's Errand* (1879), a little-known but honest portrait of the Reconstruction, fiction has rarely risen above the level of propaganda or penetrated below superficiality. Read within this tradition, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* has been labeled a perversion of black history and its author, William Styron, a racist.<sup>(1)</sup> The "white literary establishment" had at first praised the book, provoking the contention from black readers that a white author is incapable of portraying black character. Even more neutral critics, who took into account *The Confession's* appeal as fiction and faults as a documentary, did not forgive Styron's failure to reevaluate the American slave legacy in a more constructive light.<sup>(2)</sup>

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(1) *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, John Henrik Clarke, ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

(2) Jervis Anderson, "Styron and His Black Critics," *Dissent* (March-April, 1969), pp. 157-166. Anderson summarizes the attacks upon Styron and examines the problems of value, belief, consciousness, method, and moral concern, which the novel poses as historical fiction.

What has come to be viewed as the central issue in American life, the issue of race, is presently being argued and rebutted in various forms of rhetoric. Styron's medium, however, is the novel and he is not to be dismissed as propagandistic or superficial. As a serious novelist, he proposes not to prove or disprove a racial myth, nor to generalize about the commonly held past, but actually to create the form and content of an individual's past through selecting and arranging patterns of language, thereby expressing the variety and texture of human experience, the inner life of man, and the multiplicity of life.

## I

The modern novelist holds that we are all at any moment the sum of all our moments, the product of all our experiences. Everything we have met is part of us.<sup>(3)</sup> To know ourselves, it would seem to follow, may be possible through reflecting upon our past moments and experiences. Yet we suspect that human hindsight never succeeds in application. Things remembered are fused with things feared and things hoped for. Wishes and fantasies may not only be remembered as facts, but the facts remembered are constantly modified, re-interpreted, and lived in the light of present needs, past fears and future hopes.<sup>(4)</sup> In

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(3) A. A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (New York: Peter Nevill Ltd., 1952), p. 223. This critic maintains that the time-element in fiction is of major importance, that in a large measure it determines the author's choice and treatment of his subject, the way he articulates and arranges the elements of his narrative, and the way he uses language to express his sense of the process and meaning of living. The novelist's new conception of time, in Mendilow's view, began with Laurence Stern's *Tristram Shandy*.

(4) Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 21. In his preface, Meyerhoff compares his own approach to the problem of time with Mendilow's: "His work differs from the \*

short, we must grant in looking backward that time never fails to deceive us.

But the particular way in which time can be shown to deceive certain characters attracts the interest of novelists. Each novelist, like every other person, has his own conceptions of what constitutes the past and how the past affects the present. To Hemingway the shades of the past seemed relatively unimportant. Only two kinds of time enter into his fiction: "geological time," used to measure the erosion of continents and the shrinking of mountains; and the "now," which is described as "the moment of truth," "the captive now," or "the perpetual now."<sup>(5)</sup> Hemingway creates an illusion of immediacy by presenting as directly as possible how each character acts and interacts, while keeping himself as author out of his work. Quite a different sense of time arises in stream-of-consciousness fiction where the emphasis is placed not on dramatic action but on the exploration of the pre-speech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of characters.<sup>(6)</sup> In a way that often defies reason and the conventions of language, the past breaks into a character's consciousness to divert his mind into seemingly unpatterned mental activity.

A third variety of modern fiction seeks neither the perpetual now,

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\* present study in that Mr. Mendilow is primarily concerned with different perspectives of time in the total literary process—temporal dimensions of the story, the characters, the writer, the reader, and their respective interactions—whereas I have tried to place the literary treatment of time in a more general philosophical and social framework."

(5) Earl Rovit, *Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Twayne, 1963), p. 126.

(6) Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), p. 2.

nor the pre-speech level of characters. Instead a character of this type attempts to unravel the secrets of his past by verbalizing, confessing or testifying about an event that has long since been blurred in his mind by the passing of time. The character may try to reconstruct the chain of events in either his own life or the life of another character. An episode of violence may jar his memory, solidify the past, and serve as a unifying and integrating principle for less clear fragments of remembrance. In order to avoid a distorted picture, however, the character-narrator is aware that he must distinguish between his own subjective past and the past as others view it collectively, or objective history. He asks himself: What are successive stages of the past and what is the proper context of the chain of events which I am relating? The hearers of his story, or the readers of the novel in which it appears, have the option of asking additional questions: In what way has the passing of time influenced this character as he tells his story? Does he deliberately evade suggestions of personal guilt? Does the mere fact that he tells the story change his orientation to time? And finally, the unanswerable question, what *is* the truth?

These are the questions that will be applied to the novels of Styron, whose special genius belongs exclusively to the novel as a genre: the ability to depict not only the exterior world of action, but the interior world of character—and one crucial thing more, the relation between them. Time here is of the essence. It is narrative interaction, that is, in time, in the storyteller's own good time—between the subjective and objective worlds that creates what we call the novel.<sup>(7)</sup> Narrative

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(7) Alan Friedman, *The Turn of the Novel*, (New York: Oxford, 1966), xiv.

interaction underlies Styron's earlier works of the 1950's as well as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, his controversial bestseller.

## II

Styron published his first major novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, at the age of 26. Having responded to the title's fact of man's inevitable surrendering to death, young, beautiful and sophisticated Peyton Loftis has already committed suicide when the novel opens. Between the time her coffin arrives on a train from New York, and the time it is finally buried in the cemetery of Port Warwick, Virginia, her hometown, Peyton's mourning parents reflect upon the stages in their daughter's rise and fall.

The novel's time span is not limited by the heroine's birth and death. In addition to the "present" sequence leading to her burial, and an extended stream-of-consciousness account of her thoughts on the day of her suicide, there are three "pasts" in which the characters interact throughout the novel. First, what we shall call the distant past goes back to the turn of the century. Second, the completed past consists of seven major events in the life of Peyton, accompanied by historical references to the 1930's and '40's in Virginia. Finally, the incompleting, continuing past represents the time sequences during which Milton and Helen, Peyton's parents, narrate the events of the completed past with the help of two minor characters, Dolly Bonner and the Rev. Carey Carr.

Since the setting of the novel is Virginia, the distant past draws on the tradition of the Old South, abundant with associations of fallen aristocracy and family ledgers. In this novel, the distant past is equi-

valent to what Milton and Helen remember from their premarital lives. Milton recalls the didactic voice of his father, a lawyer, intoning paternal counsel from behind his stiff-wing collars and Edwardian mustache :

I do not intend to presume upon your own good judgment, a faculty which I believe you possess in abundance inherited not from me but from your sainted mother, so as you go out into the world I can only admonish you with the words of the Scotch man, videlicet, keep your chin up and your kilts down and let the wind blow.<sup>(8)</sup>

Another stirring voice from the distant past belongs to Helen's father, Colonel Peyton, who had been on Pershing's staff during the war : "Helen, sweetheart. We must stand fast with the good. The army of the Lord is on the march. We'll lick the Huns and the devil comes next. Your daddy knows what's right."<sup>(9)</sup>

The completed past, a series of major events in Peyton's life, is arranged chronologically : "That Sunday long ago ...", an incident that climaxes with the discovery of Peyton's tying and gagging her retarded sister, Maudie;<sup>(10)</sup> Peyton's sixteenth birthday at the country club, August, 1939;<sup>(11)</sup> Peyton entering Sweet Briar College on the day that her mother confronts Dolly Bonner;<sup>(12)</sup> Peyton coming home from college for Christmas, 1941;<sup>(13)</sup> the football game in Charlottesville, November, 1942, which also includes Milton's search for Peyton, Maudie's death in the hospital and

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(8) William Styron, *Lie Down in Darkness* (New York: Random House, 1951), pp. 14-15.

(9) *Lie Down in Darkness*, p. 114.

(10) *Ibid.*, pp. 54-67, Milton's account ; pp. 129-134, Helen's account.

(11) *Ibid.*, pp. 71-102.

(12) *Ibid.*, pp. 134-140.

(13) *Ibid.*, pp. 155-173.

Peyton's drive with Dick to Maryland<sup>(14)</sup>; the wedding of Peyton and Harry in Port Warwick, October, 1943, and their honeymoon trip to Florida<sup>(15)</sup>; Peyton's married life in New York as revealed in her letter to Milton<sup>(16)</sup>, and the stream-of-consciousness passage ending in her suicide<sup>(17)</sup>.

The continuing past, unlike the completed past, contains no chronological, unified story. It provides only the narrative occasions which reflect back upon Peyton's life in the completed past. The continuing past portrays Milton's and Helen's failure to reconcile their marriage, a tension that is not relaxed even in the novel's final pages. A two-sided, divorce-court situation develops. Milton pleads his case with the help of Dolly Bonner and Helen uses the Rev. Carey Carr for the same purpose. In this way, the point of view becomes multiplied as the events in Peyton's life, the completed past, are recalled.

Since Milton's memory has been too often influenced by alcohol to be trusted, Dolly helps him define the stages in Peyton's life: "Now here at the club in August, 1939—the time that Dolly remembered, that first time—Peyton had her sixteenth birthday, which to call back ancient history was the day before the war began."<sup>(18)</sup> Dolly also serves as Milton's excuse for verbalizing thoughts that otherwise might not find their way into the novel: "'I am a fool maybe,' he'd say to himself or to Dolly."<sup>(19)</sup>

Peyton's tragedy comes to the reader not only through Milton's memory, but also through a series of interviews in the continuing past

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(14) *Ibid.*, pp. 184–236.

(15) *Ibid.*, pp. 247–322.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 22.

(17) *Ibid.*, pp. 335–386.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 77.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 153.

between Helen and the Rev. Carey Carr. The contents and time references correspond to those in Milton's story, but the point of view changes. As the minister drives to Peyton's burial, Styron sorts through his associations with his previous interviews with Helen: October's leaves, the chill wind, the need of a new furnace in the parsonage, the coming of Advent and World War II, the difficulty of preaching in a faithless age ... Suddenly Helen appears in his memory at the front door of his house. She relates her problems: Milton's infidelity, her own loss of faith in God, Peyton's rebelliousness. Carey Carr's memory thus acts as a filter on Helen's version. Rather than "having it out" with each other, the appeals of husband and wife are directed to mistress and pastor, a process which entangles the four living characters—Milton, Helen, Dolly and Carey—in the suicide of Peyton. The relation between Carey's observation of falling leaves and Peyton's death is not causal. It is temporal, simultaneous recollection on a late fall day, the season of death.

Disorientation to time finally drives Peyton to suicide. Unlike Helen and Milton, who view themselves as weak creatures, sustained by the common props of pride and alcoholism, Peyton's despair takes on cosmic dimensions. She tries desperately to escape not merely into dreams and drink but into a state of absolute timelessness, symbolized by a newly purchased alarm clock.<sup>(20)</sup> She also refers to "the birds" in both her last letter to her father and the stream-of-consciousness passage before her death.<sup>(21)</sup> Together the birds and the clock represent free agents that are not subject to "dark space" and irreversible time.

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(20) *Ibid.*, p. 335 f, esp. p. 370.

(21) *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.



To free herself of spacial and temporal relativity, Peyton tries to emulate the birds by leaping to her death after she fails to "go into my clock,"<sup>(22)</sup> an object that measures time without being subject to it. In contrast to her grandfathers' certitude, Peyton acknowledges her lack of a "moral censor"<sup>(23)</sup> and admits that her thoughts "... don't seem to have any distinctness or real point of reference."<sup>(24)</sup>

When Peyton denied membership in her family, she not only became liberated, but permanently lost a sense of temporal placement, continuity and belongingness which was once achieved—however weakly—in her family. By immersing herself in the seemingly better world of Manhattan, an intellectual community that looked down on Southern ways, she confined her life to a much narrower span of time than when she consciously felt herself a link between several generations. In the final moments before her suicide, she becomes increasingly isolated within the present moment.<sup>(25)</sup>

### III

Sixteen years separate *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951) and *The Confession of Nat Turner* (1967). During this interval, Styron produced *The Long March* (1952), a novelette concerning a forced march by Marines in the Carolinas, and *Set This House on Fire* (1959), a long novel portraying the revenge slaying of an international playboy in Italy. In both works Styron's main characters undergo radical changes in their orientations to time. Their memories falter and they struggle to find

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(22) *Ibid.*, p. 362.

(23) *Ibid.*, p. 335.

(24) *Ibid.*, p. 38.

(25) Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature*, p. 113.

meaning in re-constructing the violence of the past.

One-fourth the length of his major novels, *The Long March* expands upon the modern theme of temporal displacement. Here the temporal background is limited to the period 1945 to 1951 in the life of Lt. Culver, a lawyer, who finds himself back in a Marine's uniform during the Korean conflict after six years of civilian life. The march itself and the misfiring of mortar shells, resulting in the deaths of eight fellow Marines, are events of the fictive present, which soon becomes a blurred segment of the recent past. Due to the novel's brevity, the distant past is not a major factor.

Lt. Culver's mind is the chamber where the tension between past civilian life and present military life nearly results in breakdown. Even as he prepares to face the torturing prospect of the thirty-six mile hike ahead of him, Lt. Culver continues to think of himself as a civilian. He clings to the happy memory of peaceful Sunday afternoon strolls with his family. Only the rantings of Capt. Mannix can make the march into a present, physical reality:

But Mannix had made the march seem menacing, there was no doubt about that, and Culver—who for the moment had been regarding the hike as a sort of abstraction, a prolonged evenings stroll—felt a solid dread creep into his bones, along with the chill of night. Involuntarily, he shuddered. He felt suddenly unreal and disoriented, as if through some curious second sight or seventh sense his surroundings had shifted, ever so imperceptibly, into another dimension of space and time.<sup>(26)</sup>

His mental and physical condition approximates that of Peyton Loftis

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(26) Willam Styron, *The Long March* (New York: Vintage, 1952), p. 34.

on the brink of suicide. The concrete, secure image of Peyton's clock becomes a tent for Lt. Culver, while limitless "dark space" changes to the infinity of the "compassless ocean." There is a variation on the meaning of this analogy in that Lt. Culver, a middle aged man, does not strive to attain freedom from the past in the form of anything concrete. Instead he tries to escape from the present into his irrecoverable civilian past :

What he had had for the last years—wife and child and home—seemed to have existed in the infinite past, or dreamlike again, never at all, and what he had done yesterday and the day before, moving wearily with his tent from one strange thicket to a stranger swamp and on to the green depths of some stranger ravine, had no sequence, like the dream of a man delirious with fever. All time and space seemed for a moment to be enclosed within the tent, itself unmoored and unhelmed upon a dark and compassless ocean.<sup>(27)</sup>

As he marches, the completed past becomes lost to him. The recent past, the events of "yesterday," the misfired shells and the eight dead boys, are reduced to a set of irreversible, cold facts in a world without hope or justice :

His memory went back no further than the day before ; he no longer thought of anything so unattainable as home. Even the end of the march seemed a fanciful thing, beyond all possibility, and what small aspirations he now had were only to endure this one hour, if just to attain the microscopic bliss of ten minutes' rest and a mouthful of warm water. And bordering his memory was ever the violent and haunting picture of the

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(27) *The Long March*, p. 35.

mangled bodies he had seen—when? where? It seemed weeks, years ago, beneath the light of an almost pre-historic sun; try as he could, to dwell upon the consoling scenes—home, music, sleep—his mind was balked beyond that vision: the shattered youth with slumbering eyes, the blood, the swarming noon.<sup>(28)</sup>

*The Long March* ends in paradox, with much energy spent and nothing resolved. Within a relatively short period, we are drawn to the point at which man yields to the deception of time.

#### IV

In *Set This House on Fire*, Styron again constructs through a double point of view the context of violent incidents in the completed past, this time homicide rather than suicide or military catastrophe and authoritarianism. Again memory loss on the part of the narrator accounts for a temporal split: on one time level, this is the story of two friends meeting after two years and exchanging memories of the completed past. On another level, it is the contents of what they remember as the truth about the Sambuco crimes, which make up the completed past. As they talk about old times, adding episodes from the distant past to clarify their own involvement in the crimes, it becomes apparent that one of the men, Cass, is guilty of murder.

After returning from Italy to America, a young lawyer named Peter Leverett runs across his friend's cartoon in the newspaper. He decides to visit his friend, Cass, in order to clarify the mystery which still surrounds the deaths of an Italian girl and a playboy friend, Mason Flagg, which occurred two years before in Sambuco, Italy. At

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(28) *Ibid.*, p. 93.

the outset, Peter's temporal displacement suggests both Culver and Peyton:

Estranged from myself and from my time, dwelling neither in the destroyed past nor in the fantastic and incomprehensible present, I knew that I must find the answer to at least several things before taking hold of myself and getting on with the job ... That evening I sent a wire to Cass Kinsolving in Charleston, telling him I would be coming down the next day. I had rarely done so rash a thing before, and I knew I had to take a chance on his good will. But without knowing about Cass, I could never learn about what happened in Sambuco—about Mason, and my part in the matter.<sup>(29)</sup>

As Peter and Cass converse about Sambuco, the chronology is at first jumbled in their minds, the images vague, the voices indistinct. Their globetrotting to Italy and back has distorted their sense of the past. To complicate matters, Cass plays on his drunkenness as an excuse for not remembering the crime for which, if revealed, he could be prosecuted.

When Cass finally agrees to tell the story of Sambuco in Part II of the novel, he finds it necessary to introduce more distant flashbacks from his own life: his life in France, his first sexual experience, his first deep awareness of racism. In the same way, as Peter summons Mason's ghost from Sambuco, he also goes back to his earlier days with him in Greenwich Village and boarding school. It is only by going back to the associations from the distant past that Peter and Cass can even begin to weave a context for the truth. During the initial reading,

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(29) *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

the chronology of incidents seems incoherent and the details often irrelevant. But gradually and surprisingly, clues and links fall into place. Cass' version illuminates the blanks and sharpens the blurs in Peter's. We finally discover the truth of how Cass pursued and murdered Mason.

But why is it expedient to have both men tell essentially the same story? Styron found himself at odds with the problem of retrospective novels: There is an avowed temporal distance between fictional time (or the "completed past")—that is, the events as they happened—and the narrator's actual time—his time of recording those events.<sup>(30)</sup> Instead of Richardsonian letters and diaries, Styron re-creates the completed past through conversations between Cass and Peter. One man stimulates the memory of the other until the one responsible for Mason's death, Cass, finally confesses without fear of judgement from the other. At first Cass rejects Peter to test his empathy: "... as if I were a radio which he snapped off gently, courteously, but with absolute and final determination: about Mason, he would utter scarcely a word."<sup>(31)</sup> Later, Cass takes over the narrative with the statement, "I always figured you knew I killed him."<sup>(32)</sup> In this way, the intimate confession from one character to another helps the reader overcome the temporal distance between the time of reading and the fictitious Sambuco crimes.

Unlike Peyton, who was driven to suicide, and Lt. Culver, who found ambiguity, Cass arrives at a state of temporary being at the novel's end:

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(30) Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, p. 106.

(31) *Ibid.*, p. 52.

(32) *Ibid.*, p. 236.

Now I suppose I should tell you that through some sort of suffering I had reached grace, and how at that moment I knew it, but this would not be true, because at that moment I didn't really know what I had reached or found. I wish I could tell you that I had found some belief, some rock, and that here on this rock anything might prevail—that here madness might become reason, and grief joy, and no yes. And even death itself death no longer, but a resurrection.

But to be truthful, you see, I can only tell you this: that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I did know was that to choose between them was simply to choose being, not for the sake of being, or even the love of being, much less the desire to be forever—but in the hope of being what I could for a time. This would be an ecstasy. God knows, it would.

As for the rest, I had come back. And that for a while<sup>(33)</sup> would do, that would suffice.

## V

Styron has described his latest novel, *The Confessions of Nat. Turner*, as “less an historical novel in conventional terms than a meditation upon history.” Representing more than an attempt to avoid the less attractive epithet of “southern historical novel,” this phrase implies that Styron is using the history of a slave revolt and its leader to write a modern novel, rather than using fiction for historical ends. In evaluating the novel, this distinction is of primary importance. But in the “Author’s Note,” Styron himself seems to confuse the issue and invite reproach by half-promising to stay within the limits of the “facts”:

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(33) *Ibid.*, pp. 476–477.

During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the known facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events—yet I trust remaining within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery. The relativity of time allows us elastic definitions: the year 1831 was, simultaneously a long time ago and only yesterday.<sup>(34)</sup>

Among critics who have been inclined to read *The Confessions* more as a tract than a modern novel, the point of greatest dispute has become Styron's portrayal of slavery—which he admits here, rests on sketchy grounds. Approaches to his account of slavery have already been forcefully pursued by other writers.

Pertinent to this discussion of time in Styron's works, however, is the author's concern for establishing a mood of "timelessness" in the preceding quote. Such a mood is fundamental to the modern novel, for without it, the reader is unable to transcend the century and a half between his own life and the hero's. As in his previous novels, this technique is necessitated by the problem of temporal distance. Within this temporal relativity, there are numerous references to historical dates which illuminate Nat's autobiographical meditation. Patterns of both timelessness and chronology, the infinite and the finite, are formed by dreams against a background of history.

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(34) William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House, 1967), "Author's Note."



The novel opens with Nat's re-occurring dream in which he is "floating in the estuary of a silent river toward the sea."<sup>(35)</sup> This corresponds with Peyton's sensations of being adrift in time and space, Lt. Culver's "unmoored, unhelmed" tent "upon a dark and compassless ocean," and Cass' drunken stupor. Unlike Peyton, however, Nat does not consider suicide as escape from the burden of the past; unlike Lt. Culver, he does not experience memory loss; and unlike Cass, he does not try to repress the memory of his crimes.

Styron has indicated the three temporal stages in the "Contents": Nat's childhood, as the distant past, Part II—"Voices, Dreams, Recollections: Old Times Past"; the recent past, ending in the failure of the slave revolt, Part III—"Study War"; and the narrator's actual present, the time of Nat's imprisonment until the moment of his execution, Parts I and IV, "Judgment Day" and "It is Done."

The distant past extends back to when Nat's grandmother was taken in bondage from the African Gold Coast to be sold at a slave auction to Alpheus Turner, father of Samuel Turner, Nat's first master. It includes Nat's boyhood memories from ages nine to twelve.<sup>(36)</sup> Nat's religious training, his exceptional education, and his generally humane treatment as a houseboy set him apart from the field slaves. Although his master promises Nat freedom at age twenty-one, Nat finds himself

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(35) *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

(36) Here Anderson points out a self-contradiction in the Author's Note: "In a prefatory note, Styron claims to have 'rarely departed from the known facts ...' Yet not very far into the book it is discovered that there has in fact been a departure, notably from the facts of Turner's parentage and childhood (which Turner had dictated to Thomas Gray in his original "Confessions," a 4000-word document that serves as a basis for Styron's novel.)" *Dissent*, p. 160.

sold back into slavery by a depraved minister for the sum of \$460. His new master, Moore, starts him on a new life of slavery as the distant past draws to a close.

The recent past, which climaxes in the insurrection, consists of some twenty episodes in Nat's life between 1821 and 1831. During this period of "Study War," Nat re-discovers his own black identity, receives revelation God, and transforms his Bible class into black militants.<sup>(37)</sup> Knowing the "what" and "where" of God's will, Nat formulates a battle plan based upon the *Old Testament* while awaiting one more sign indicating "when." At last the eclipse of the sun occurs as his final mandate.

The distinction between distant and recent past is arbitrary. More significant for the illustration of temporal qualities is the distinction between the narrator's actual time and the fictional time: that is, the period of Nat's conversations with lawyer T. R. Gray, resulting in Nat's written confession, and the acts that he confesses. His capture which is not portrayed in detail, serves as the point of separation between these two sequences. As Nat languishes in his cell, discusses with Gray, and goes through the motions of standing trial, his memory is drawn to visions, dreams, and memories from the distant past as well as emotions felt during the insurrection. The lawyer tries to summarize Nat's criminal motives in a way that will satisfy the minds of the white

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(37) "If Turner, a slave preacher, was as religious fanatic as Styron makes him, then one way of dramatizing this fanaticism would certainly be to portray Turner in some close ministerial relationship with his fellow slaves and the effect his ministry had upon them. This was not done, and there can be no more excuse for failing to do this than for making a fanatic out of him." *Dissent*, p. 164.

community. But there are no simple, clear-cut motives. Nat's whole life is the motive. The cruel institution of slavery is the motive. The sign from God is the motive. These cannot be summarized neatly into a document. As Gray reads Nat's confession, he is perplexed by this point :

"I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me!" That's the item! That's the item, Reverend! I found him staring at me. "How do you explain that? That's what I want to know, and so does everyone else. A man who you admit is kind and gentle to you and you butcher in cold blood!"

For a moment I was so surprised that I couldn't speak. I sat down slowly. Then the surprise became perplexity, and I was silent for a long time, saying finally even then: "That—that I can't give no reply to, Mr. Gray." And I couldn't—not because there was no reply to the question, but because there were matters which had to be withheld even from a confession, and certainly from Gray.<sup>(38)</sup>

The historian, of course, values the signed confession of the historical figure more than the re-creation by an author of later era who may try to "read in" eccentricities which aren't at all warranted by "the facts." Confessions are written for the purpose of answering the obvious questions of motive surrounding criminal acts. General statements about history can be asserted partially on that basis. But the complexity behind an individual's actions ultimately goes beyond generalizations as to causality and motives. The particular and often eccentric way

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(38) *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, p. 322.

in which Nat's life is acted out and realized in time is expressed more faithfully through the time art of the novel.

## VI CONCLUSION

By now it should be apparent that Styron, as a modern novelist, is deeply concerned with certain temporal qualities as categories of subjective human experience. These impressions of time, which all men somehow share, cannot be verified by scientific methods. They somehow defy scholarly statement. Instead, they are sometimes stated in the truisms of common sense: "When [time] seems long to you, then it is long; when it seems short, why, then, it is short. But how long or how short it is nobody knows."<sup>(39)</sup> This quality, "subjective relativity," is one of several aspects of time distinguished by Han Meyerhoff in his analysis entitled *Time in Literature*. Each of Styron's characters discovers that his own conception of time differs from those of other people. Nat's sign from God in the form of an eclipse has meaning for him only in the context of the planned insurrection.

More significant than subjective relativity is "duration," or the way in which man experiences time as continuous flow. The most familiar literary notation for making the quality of duration explicit is the symbolism of the "river" and the "sea," or the sensible images of "flight" and "flowing."<sup>(40)</sup> These symbols and images we find in Peyton's obsession with birds, Nat's dreams of the silent estuary, and Lt. Culver's "dark and compassless ocean."

Through a creative ordering of time sequences in his novels, Styron

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<sup>(39)</sup> Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>(40)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

manages to solve the problem of temporal distance while imparting his own conception of what constitutes the past. Styron's sense of the past is less involved with the history of institutions, insurrections and heroes than it is with what each man knows of his own past. As the characters develop through the various stages of narrative interaction—distant past, recent past and the present which contains the past—these characters become a mirror for the reader's own objective and subjective existences. Just as Nat's identity is revealed differently to the community of slaves, slave owners, and himself, each of us is known in a variety of ways to society, our acquaintances and ourselves. In this sense, all of Styron's novels become meditations upon the history of individuals—whether or not their concrete situations are enacted against an historical background in need of revaluation.

