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# A Study of the Protest and Transcendence in William Styron's *The Long March*

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### ABSTRACT

The novella titled, *The Long March* offers an interesting study of the narrative art of William Styron, through which he shares his vision of human predicament based on his guileless observations of violence all around, especially against marginalised races of Jews and Blacks. Man has always fought against injustice and struggled for justice, through dialogue, protests and sometimes through violent protests. Not always these battles succeed and bring justice, but, most of the times ripen and offer transcendence to the seeker of justice. Captain Al Mannix is a Jew and oppressed in this novella, who is commanding the reserve marines and treats the orders of Rocky Colonel Templeton's (a regular marine officer) order for the thirty six miles forced long march as a metaphor of blatant violence against the marginalised reserve marines. Mannix adopts a strange way to register his protest against this unjustified violence, by committing himself to outwalk Colonel Templeton in the long march. The paper offers an intriguing study and fathoms out the ways protesting Mannix gains enlightenment at the cost of his insubordination and disrespect to the oppressor Templeton, and through this enlightenment he changes and shares his suffering and comradeship with the negro maid in the end.

William Styron (1925-2006) has been universally accepted as one of the foremost American creative writer of the twentieth century. He has also secured an important place as a novelist in the world literature. He reached this reputation through his art consistently projecting his vision of human predicament with utmost sincerity and without any compromise with the truth as he saw it, absorbing it from his ambience with his fine perception, filtering it through his feelings and intellect, heart and head in the line of Wordsworth's dictum of observation, recollection, interrogation and composition. Since the publication of his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), Styron has largely been interpreted in terms of his Southern background.

Styron's second fiction in the form of a novella titled, *The Long March* initially appeared in December 1952 as a contribution to *discovery*, a periodical edited by John W. Aldridge and Vance Bourjaily and published by Pocket Books. Translated editions of the novella have appeared in France, Germany, Italy, Brazil, Portugal, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Netherlands, Mexico, Russia, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. This novella offers an account of a forced march in a Marine Corps training camp, during the Korean conflict, in the South of American States, to which he is always nostalgically involved. Styron himself had first hand experience of World War II, as a reserve marine like his characters in the novella, Lt. Culver and Captain Al Mannix. Just before the completion of *Lie Down in Darkness*, Styron was recalled as a reserve marine during the Korean War and he himself had participated in the forced long march on which the whole action of the novella rests.

Captain Al Mannix is the commander of the reserve marine corps and is also the autobiographical protagonist. He is the protester who in order to resist the unjust violence in general and Colonel Templeton's brutal, cold and mechanical military bureaucracy against the reserve marines in particular, chooses to resist and register his protest, though futilely. Often, protest is considered to be an individual or collective public expression of dissent or dejection against a particular policy, issue, or order for political, social, economic or cultural change. Though Styron's characters in the novella are individualized in their situations, feelings and actions, the major figures fall into three categories: a futilely protesting hero (Al Mannix) who is outraged at the falseness, purposelessness and corruption of society, yet is ignorant of his own weakness and involvement in that society; an ineffectual passive but not unaffected observer (Culver), sympathetic to the protesting figure but lacking his obsessive fury; and finally, the most abstract of all, a representative of the society and its evils who either hates or tries to control the protestor (Templeton). The individual protest of the rebel against the abstract evil proves futile in this novella, nonetheless it succeeds in rewarding the protagonist with the enlightenment. The whole novella offers a conflict between the forces of endurance represented by Mannix and his reserve marines and the forces of destruction represented by Templeton and his regular marines.

The reason for the conflict and subsequent protest of Mannix against Templeton is the forced long march of thirty six miles ordered by the latter for the regimentation of reserve marines joining back after years of peace. For Templeton it is just a task and to be performed for reserve marines' readiness to face the aggressor. For Templeton aggressor is always eluding them:

This enemy was labeled Aggressor, on maps brightly spattered with arrows and symbolic tanks and guns, but although there was no sign of his aggression he fled them nonetheless and they pushed the sinister chase, sending up shells and flares as they went. (25)

In this novella individuals can be seen reduced to mere functions, men to marines, and become resigned, conformist and even absurd when viewed as mere cogs in a wheel. And from this focus individual rebellion or protest proves futile at functional level, but, enlightening at metaphysical level, since

such protests can make the individual's situation worse at one level but also enlightened and able to share, sympathize and control as propounded as *data*, *dayadhvam* and *damyata* by T.S. Eliot in his *The Waste Land*, at another. As Styron mentions in the novella:

Born into a generation of conformists, even Mannix (so Culver sensed) was aware that his gestures were not symbolic, but individual, therefore hopeless, maybe even absurd, and that he was trapped like all of them in a predicament which one personal insurrection could, if anything, only make worse. (37-38)

Protest is the motivating force in the novella. At least one of his characters i.e. Captain Mannix (oppressed) chooses to stand up against Colonel Templeton's (oppressor's) rule rather than to surrender meekly, though the former, "only mutilated himself by this perverse and violent rebellion" (70). If Mannix protests, as he does, by willfully submitting to Templeton's long march, then he in effect only proves how pervasive the system really is. He proves that the self has been so corrupted by the system that it can view itself only as a function of that system, and its way to protest or to conform prove the same thing, then Mannix's revolt only proves that without the system, there is no self. The individual self is a liberal myth that no longer exists, and every individual action, protest is doomed to meaninglessness, absurdity, futility, but sometimes protest is rewarding and enlightening. Samuel Coale very appropriately argues in this context:

*The long march* also looks more closely at the individual's relationship with society, at the familiar oedipal struggles of the first novel, at the kind of Manichean mysteries involving the confrontational polarities and unresolved oppositions in the book, and at Styron's own attempts to come to some metaphysical vision that can encompass all these many attributes and perspectives. (50)

The novella deals with a thirty-six mile long march ordered by Colonel Templeton in order to toughen his regiment of marine reservists and strengthen them in *esprit de corps*, who are called up during the Korean conflict. Lieutenant Culver and Captain Mannix both resent the forced long march; but, while Culver chooses to follow orders, Mannix as a typical Southerner registers his protest by forcing his men and by cursing Colonel Templeton for his inhuman command. In this novella, Mannix consciously protests against the system of the Marine Corps. Mannix's fury, though achieving more forceful proportions, becomes his solitary passion and in protesting the abstract evil of non-human state, he becomes a more fervid representative of its deadly banality than its major exponent, Colonel Templeton. Like Albert Camus' *The Rebel*, *The Long March*, is above the necessity of rebellion, though it proves futile, and above the necessity of endurance in a world without God. And its central metaphor in that seemingly senseless and laborious "walk through the night" that all men must take until they finally disappear into the universal darkness. Pointing out the technical virtuosity of Styron in the novel **Marc Ratner** writes, "The complexity of the novel lies not in its fairly common subject but in the poetic description and structural devices which Styron utilizes in enlarging the narrative into his general theme of rebellion" (*William Styron* 57).

Styron very skillfully unfolds the story of *The Long March* which deals with an individual's (Mannix's) protest against the organized forces of the environment (Templeton) that would wreck his will and drive him to hopeless surrender to the authority. The protest also ripens him and transcends him to the level where he can connect with the oppressed in the end. It is a brutal indictment of the society which, conditioned by war, has worked itself into the process of steady dehumanization. The novella celebrates the fact of man's courageous protest in a world shaped and ruled by inexorable forces. The irrational world of *The Long March* is epitomized in the first scene, a scene that is to haunt Culver and Mannix throughout and make the single day in which the action of the novella takes place:

One noon, in the blaze of a cloudless Carolina summer, what was left of eight dead boys 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 . . . they lay now, alive but stricken in a welter of blood and brain. . . . (1-2)

A group of young Marines, just finishing their noontime meal, have been hit by a short round of mortar fire and are lying incongruously sprawled in a welter of blood and flesh and half eaten food. This scene of absurd slaughter in the bright Carolina landscape affects the contrast and sets the tone of the novella. Culver observes the shock:

The sight of death was the sort of thing which in wartime is expected, which one protects oneself against, and which is finally excused or at least ignored, in the same way that a beggar is ignored, or a head cold, or a social problem. (3)

The sight of a faceless youth with "gawky tousled grace" in death outrages Captain Mannix, the real rebel, the real protester of the novella:

The Captain was sobbing helplessly. He cast an agonized look toward the Colonel, standing across the field, then down again at the boy, then at Culver. "Won't they ever let us alone, the sons of bitches," he murmured, weeping. "Won't they ever let us alone?" (43)

As Camus says that rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition, Mannix's protest commences by this gruesome and horrible situation of butchered youth and the behaviour of Rocky Colonel Templeton, the real representative of demonic, abstract evil, "a man to whom the greatest embarrassment would be a show of emotion." The Colonel symbolizing the amoral and dehumanizing forces of the organization receives the news of the terrible accident as mechanically as if he were receiving the most routine of messages:

The Colonel had said nothing at first. The brief flicker of uneasiness in his eyes had fled, and when he put down his messkit and looked up at Hobbs it was only to wipe his hands on his handkerchief and squint casually into the sun, as if he were receiving the most routine of messages. It was absolutely typical of the man . . . the frail, little-boned, almost pretty face peering upward with a look of attitudinized contemplation . . . Perhaps fifteen seconds passed before he spoke. (9 -10)

The most chilling aspect of the Colonel is his utter lack of humanity. He is portrayed as a “mechanical toy” who responds mechanically to the news of slaughter. “It was a battalion made up mostly of young reserves and it was one in which, he suddenly thanked God, he knew no one” (12). The mechanical approach of ‘regulars’ is manifested towards the ‘reserves’. Templeton’s callous and inhuman response is quite evident from the above attitude. He does so in a casual way because the accident had struck a battalion which consists of reserves. It clearly shows that the Colonel is not treating the reserves on equal terms. He has no sympathy with the innocent marines who were killed by the two misfired mortar shells. On the other hand, the sight of the eight dead bodies and innumerable wounded marines moaning painfully moves the sensitive hearts of persons like Lt. Culver and Captain Mannix. The absurd tragedy lays Mannix’s compassionate heart open like a wound and he makes up his mind to protest against this world to which regulars like Colonel Templeton and his regulars belong. Colonel Templeton with his set of fixed attitudes and habitualized gestures embodies the system perfectly; “he had too long been conditioned by the system to perform with grace a human act” (61). For him every action to be performed is a task, not a personal action involving moral value. He is as devoted as a priest to his religious rites, “almost benevolent . . . in whom passion and faith had made an alloy . . . above meanness or petty spite, he was leading a march to some humorless salvation” (60). No doubt, Templeton is a father figure to his men, the man with the responsibility, half worshipped, half feared but never ever questioned. His men comply with the voice that command, once again, “*you will*” for after they seem to be as “helpless as children,” and “they were only marines, responding anew to the old commands” (48) (emphasis original). This “stern father” is someone to both hate and placate. He establishes the rules, and his “children” obey or disobey them, but they never question his godlike role. “Culver almost liked the Colonel, in some negative way which had nothing to do with affection, but to which “respect . . . was the nearest approach” (20). Culver rightly acknowledges that Templeton is not a bad guy but he is just a regular marine. Culver reveals, reducing the father to a function and letting that function circumscribe and conjure up a world in which to function. Mannix’s protest is revealed in bright colours in contrast to the surrender that is exhibited by Culver. Culver knows that he is not a man enough to display the courage in protest like that of Mannix. Styron states about Culver’s unmanliness and frustration:

Frustration at the fact that he was not independent enough, nor possessed of enough free will, was not *man* enough to say to hell with it and crap out himself; that he was not man enough to disavow all his determination and endurance and suffering, cash in his chips, and by that act flaunt his contempt of the march, the Colonel, the whole bloody Marine Corps. But he was *not* man enough, he knew, far less simply a free man; he was just a marine—as was Mannix, and so many of the others—and they had been marines, it seemed, all their lives, would go on being marines forever; and the frustration implicit in this thought brought him suddenly close to tears. (71) (emphasis original)

Mannix in contrast to Culver is a real protestor, a heavy-set Jew from Brooklyn; the real oppressed like the Southern Negro, who has overcome the feeling of futility and isolation through protest, endurance and enlightenment in this Godless world. Contrasting Culver, he reveals himself as a bitter protestor and makes no secret of his profound dislike of the torturous, dehumanizing and demonic life in the Marine camp. Away from his wife and children, Mannix makes use of his disgruntled sense of humour to despise everything about the Marine Corps. As a protestor and a bitter rebel he is acutely conscious of his helpless plight, but he hates the Marine camp life and laughs at its absurdity. He terribly hates the useless sweat, the exertion and the final danger and has no interest for the kind of heroism associated with the code hero of Hemingway fiction and denounces it as the “Hemingway Crap.” Unlike Culver, Mannix knows suffering more strongly as he was a victim of mortar fire in the last war which had scarred him terribly. With the sight of eight dead boys still fresh in his mind and the bitter remarks of Colonel against his reserves, Mannix makes his mind to register his protest by out walking the Colonel in the march. Mannix is forced to protest by two irrational situations: Sudden death and meaningless forced long march through the night. Mannix decides to protest against the Colonel who for him is a symbol of the absolute authority, of a system, who Mannix considers debased, demonic and dehumanizing. He does not believe in the system to which Colonel and Company belong. His protest is a sort of spontaneous protestation. He could have shown his disapproval to the Colonel by refusing to obey his orders as he does at the end of the novella by refusing to board a truck. Instead in his proud and willful submission is his “rebellion in reverse”. He completes the hike—not because it is good or reasonable but simply to spite the system. He is so courageously determined to complete the hike that he remarks, “My company’s going to make it if I have to *drag in their bodies*” (48) (emphasis original). Through out the hike he continuously motivates the reserves of his Battalion to complete the march. There is something peculiar in his tone which Culver has never heard before, “All right, H&S Company, saddle up, saddle up! You people get off your asses and straighten up!” (49). A sore hole in the heels of Mannix develops because of the incessant pricking of the nail which had emerged the previous night in one of his shoes. He puts a piece of cloth on the nail and under the hole in order to soften the pinch of the nail, but it proves of no use. In spite of his severe pain in the foot he keeps on marching:

Mannix’s perpetual tread on his toe alone gave to his gait a ponderous, bobbing motion which resembled that of a man wretchedly spastic and paralyzed. It lent to his face . . . an aspect of deep, almost prayerfully passionate concentration—eyes thrown skyward and lips fluttering feverishly in pain—so that if one did not know he was in agony one might imagine that he was a communicant in rapture, offering up breaths of hot desire to the heaven . . . it was the painted, suffering face of a clown, and the heaving gait was a grotesque and indecent parody of a hopeless cripple, with shoulders gyrating like a seesaw and with flapping, stricken arms. (78)

The Colonel orders Mannix to take the lift in the truck when he witnesses sore in the heel of Mannix with his flashlight. Culver highlights the mechanic, callous attitude of Templeton on seeing the wound of Mannix:

He didn’t hate him for himself, nor even for his brutal march. Bad as it was, there were no doubt worse ordeals; it was at least a peaceful landscape they had to cross. But he did hate him for his perverse and brainless gesture: squatting in the sand, gently, almost indecently now, stroking Mannix’s foot, he had too long been conditioned by the system to perform with grace a human act. (61)

Mannix dishonours the Colonel’s order and refuses to ride in one of the trucks. He even accuses the Colonel of deceitfully riding alongside the suffering troops in a jeep. Thus in his protest he commits double blunder of grossly violating the Marine Corps’ code of conduct by the act of gross insubordination

and also by accusing his senior officer. To this the Colonel reacts calmly and informs him of his mistake. Mannix interrupts the Colonel and shouts obscenely, "Fuck you and your information". August Nigro has very sharply pointed out the furious and rebellious protest of Mannix towards the Colonel; "His rebellion in reverse, his "rocklike" resistance of "Old Rocky", ricochets on his men and he becomes to them what Templeton is to himself; he becomes the force against which he rebels: the enslaver" (105). Mannix's gross indiscipline, obstinacy with which he greets his senior, the Colonel, makes his impending doom in the form of a court martial. He is allowed by Templeton to complete the march as per his wishes and is also warned by him about the court-martial, "I think you're going to regret it" (62), to which Mannix responds, "Who cares what you think" (62). For Camus, "Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is" (17). Camus believes that man's rebellion or protest is necessary because:

In every act of rebellion, the man concerned experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights but also a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself. Thus he implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being false that he is willing to preserve them at all costs. (19-20)

Mannix is so firm with his protest that inspite of his nail pierced ankle he refuses to get on the truck and invites the wrath of Colonel for gross insubordination in the form of impending court-martial. He prioritizes his protest in the form of his loyalty to himself at the price of probable tetanus and very certain court-martial. For Mannix Colonel represents the world without values so he does not reveal his pain to him. "Old Rocky" with his priest like methodicity can either forgive or punish, but cannot feel, sympathize and understand.

Perhaps only victimhood is ensured when Mannix is confronted naked by the black Negro maid at the end of the novella and thus symbolizing the total futility of his protest, as if, as each relates to the enlightenment, the transcendence and belonging to one another on the basic human level of sympathy, pain, compassion and endurance both are recognizing their roles as victims in the larger society and system. Replying the Negro maid who asks him the question, pointing out his swollen ankle, "Oh my, you poor man. What you been doin'? Do it hurt?" he replies "'Deed it does" (83-84). The stubborn Captain who discountenanced the Colonel even on pain of court martial sheds his pride before a Negro maid who enquires whether the lacerated ankle hurt him. The Jew and the Negro come face to face at human level. The two comprehend each other because they both have suffered irrational violence and violation of human dignity through the ages at the hands of dehumanizing system. They have endured and they have lasted and this is their success in disguise which Styron very successfully makes us realize in this novella through Mannix's protest and his enlightenment. They have achieved the complete understanding of suffering, sympathy, compassion and endurance through the experience of blind violence and courageous protest. As enlightenment and transcendence Maanix's human grace and compassion missing throughout in all his other encounters, come with sudden revelation to him in his encounter with the Negro maid at the climax of the narrative. Almost at precisely the same instant, the towel slipped away slowly from Mannix's waist and falls with a soft plop to the floor; Mannix then, standing there, weaving dizzily and clutching for support at the wall, a mess of scars and naked as the day he emerged from his mother's womb, save for the soap which he held feebly in one hand. He seemed to have neither the strength nor the ability to lean down and retrieve the towel and so he merely stood there huge and naked in the slanting dusty light and blinked and sent toward the woman, finally, a sour, apologetic smile, his words uttered, it seemed to Culver, not with self-pity but only with the tone of a man who, having endured and lasted, was too weary to tell her anything but what was true. "Deed it does", he said (84). His being able to connect with the fellow oppressed results out of the enlightenment that he gains out of his protest that transcends him philosophically to be able to connect with the larger whole of marginalised like negro maid.

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