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A BOOK REVIEW

For immediate Release

May 14, 2020

A Review of Christopher Tomlins’ “In the Matter of Nat Turner, A Speculative History”

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The Mid-South Tribune

I received an advance copy of “In the Matter of Nat Turner, A Speculative History” by Christopher Tomlins (from Princeton University Press), but it has taken me more than a while to review it—not because I didn’t want to. On the contrary, because I wanted to reread “The Confessions of Nat Turner” by William Styron along with Tomlins’ work. Alas, I did not get a chance at my reread (but will do it at a later date for my own pleasure and consternation.). Styron’s controversial 1967 novel is one foundational piece to Tomlins’ “speculative history” along with the pamphlet with the elongated title of “The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray” which serves as the historical blueprint for both Styron’s and Tomlins’ treatments of one of America’s most controversial figures. Turner may be in fact the epitome of that old adage of ‘one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist.’ Of course, Styron’s work is a historical novel personifying Nat Turner as the narrator; and Tomlins’ work is a high-brow and low-brow exploration of Styron’s and Thomas R. Gray’s works juxtaposed against his own ‘speculation’ of the real Nat Turner.

In the black community and in black history, Turner is a freedom fighter; albeit in generic American history he is not much of a subject at all as is the subject of slavery itself.

Styron's "The Confessions of Nat Turner" set off its own civil war between white intellectuals and black intellectuals. Remember, it was the 1960's and Styron's Nat T. was coming three years from the 1964 civil rights bill, and bordering on the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. where the non-violence doctrine was lost in the midst of riots and rage after King's brutal murder on April 4th in Memphis on the steps of the Lorraine Motel (now the National Civil Rights Museum).

Tomlins writes: "Americans have a penchant for historical amnesia. Very few Americans are aware of the continuity that exists between slavery and the racial dilemma we still live with in this country. Without an understanding of slavery, I don't think there can be any true perception of the complexity of the racial agony in the nation. And any legitimate story, such as the one that involves Nat Turner, or any other aspect of slavery, could be an illumination for our society. Most people don't understand the extent of the utter dehumanization created by American slavery, the almost uniquely monolithic emasculating quality that slavery possessed. If a story like Nat Turner could be made part of the general consciousness of Americans at this time, I think it would be of enormous value..."

In the above statement, what Tomlins *presupposes* is that the "General Consciousness of Americans" would be exclusively relegated to white Americans, and somehow that buys into what I view as no more than a strange white pseudo liberal idealism of slavery to a point where slavery in America is romanticized and justified for whatever is wrong in America from morality to political to socio-economic. If 'romanticized' seems to be too cruel of a description of the 'General Consciousness of Americans', then so be it. After all, romance does run the gamut of human emotions to reach some idealized happily-ever-after consequence. I don't know of Tomlins' political bent, but slavery has dehumanized any person caught in its whiplashes regardless of race, color, or creed. Throughout world history, every race has endured slavery at some point, but somehow in history, black slavery in America has been elevated as being unique; thus, establishing and reestablishing the state of perpetual white guilt and the façade of white superiority as if no Caucasian race has ever been enslaved or even discriminated against, for that matter. Of course, I digress. Somewhat.

Tomlins' treatment in his 'speculative history' is so high-brow that it is brutal. Tomlins' style is brutal. I like it. Love it, in fact. When a writer can intellectualize the motive(s) of violence and describe the blood and guts of violence this well, he renders a realism to his subject; therefore, his 'speculative history' is more believable—more so than I recalled with Styron's Nat Turner. Maybe because Tomlins is not as obsessed with Turner's character as was Styron—but, of course, "The Confessions of Nat Turner" is classified as a historical *novel* and not a speculative history. Nevertheless, I have found it peculiar that American black violence seems to fascinate historical writers rather than the white violence as exhibited by John Brown. Both men rebelled against black slavery; yet, Turner's violence remains a hidden fixation of writers in Styron's and Tomlins' ilk. Yes, there still remains in the 21st Century the absurdity of segregating violence into black and white, as if blood isn't red. Tomlins' writing skill in depicting Turner's violence and perhaps justification for violence is, indeed, the 'low-brow'.

Tomlins' analysis of Gray's interview with Nat Turner before the slave rebel was hanged was so intellectualized that Tomlins' assessment of Gray himself became brutal. Read the chapter

entitled “Confessions: Of Text and Paratext”, where, regarding Styron and Gray, Tomlins takes Gray’s pamphlet analysis to a new level not only to define Turner as the confessor but Gray as a quasi-priest hearing the confessions, but not to record it as history but to profit from it. Tomlins’ utilization of paratext was bold and creative in furthering his assessment of Turner’s place in American history, a history which fails Turner as it does black history itself. This entire chapter is full of religious symbols and symbolism of Turner’s life from the massacre of slaveowners’ families in St. Luke’s Parish in Southampton County to his being taken to Jerusalem on Oct. 31 (Halloween or in translation Hallows’ Evening’) which, ironically and inadvertently captures Turner as a saintly martyr he perhaps thought of himself before and during the slaughter and as he walked up the gallows to meet his Maker. If it were not for the fact that these holy symbols existed alongside Turner’s demeanor, this black man’s individual history might not have seemed so surreal; yet, it was this surrealness which makes his death very real and a romanticized poetic justice in morality. A casting director couldn’t have asked for a better stage already set with a main character and sub-characters and place. Tomlins utilizes well his style of intellectualizing Turner’s brutality when he pushes forth his own assessment in Chapter 6, where he also cites other historical observers of Turner to sharpen his point-of-view—his speculation:

“Massacre also scourges bodies to create script. In Southampton County, ‘bodily brutality perpetrated by ordinary persons against other persons with whom they may have . . . previously lived in relative amity’ created a text that followed Semelin’s ‘logic of the sacred through murder’ to its own—distinct radiance of justice. This justice owed nothing to law; its text was one of ‘brutal intrusions of justice beyond law.’ Turner’s death-work was what Walter Benjamin would later call divine violence.”

‘Divine violence’? That aches for an underscore. Nat Turner was no Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. though he—Turner-- remains a fearsome and heroic figure among (to be sarcastic) the ‘general consciousness of Black Americans’.

To reiterate, Tomlins managed to bring Turner to life in the context of brutality and morality; but he also brings into perspective Styron’s obsession with Turner. Styron grew up in the vicinity where Turner and his slave raiders went on a methodical, vengeful rampage of beheading, chopping, and torturing white individuals and families of Virginia’s slavocracy, which is to perhaps understand any prejudices (racial stereotypes) that Styron had when he went inside Turner’s head making Turner serve as narrator in his novel or when Gray went inside Turner’s head to serve as his day’s National Enquirer reporter. Of course, one can say with the same sarcasm that what is one man’s subjectivity is another man’s objectivity. In short, Turner does in most instances come off as a very charismatic figure which has morphed into a heroic figure among African Americans, and a troublesome ghost if not an enigma among the General Consciousness of (white) Americans.

To reiterate, William Styron’s 1967 “The Confessions of Nat Turner” divided the color line between white intellectuals (who sided with Styron) and black intellectuals who were anti-Styron.

Tomlins effectively explores the outrage of these black intellectuals in their 1960s timeslot. They lambasted Styron intellectually, of course. Black critic John Henrik Clarke stated outright as Tomlins cites in his book: “No event in recent years has touched and stirred the black intellectual community more than this book... the Nat Turner created by William Styron has little resemblance to the Virginia slave insurrectionist who is a hero to his people.”

Perhaps, I go off on a color-line tangent here, but it's worth it because I do appreciate how Tomlins presents his speculative history of Nat Turner much better than I did Styron's "The Confessions of Nat Turner" which was as much of a PC (politically correct) albeit controversial product of the 1960s as much as blackface was a PC non-controversial product of the 1930s. Politically correctness is about timeslots and hypocrisy in real life as much as brutality and vengeance are about timeslots and excuses to justify them. Having said that, in the realm of everyday living, most humans—as most slaves then-- want to be free or escape to be free. John Brown and Nat Turner may be more kindred in their brutality in spite of the color line. Both did not mind being martyrs and seemingly sought out martyrdom by committing what they deemed justifiable on their way to being nailed to a cross called freedom. Both thought themselves as religious, however misplaced that could have been. Of course, it depends on who is doing the misplacing: One who was treated like a non-human during slavery or one who enslaved and committed the sin of inhumanity. But when one examines the brutality of slavery, one might be able to understand the eye for an eye doctrine; therefore, understand Nat Turner; therefore, understand Tomlins' Nat Turner.

As the reader ventures towards the end of the 'speculative history', he/she sees how Tomlins brings in slave labor and capitalism. I reread these chapters several times; thus, my slowness in bringing this review to fruition (and I still could explore more for my own satisfaction forgetting the reader of this review may be neither amused nor appeased by my inclination). Tomlins' treatment (speculative history) of Nat Turner is more mature and thought-provoking than Styron's which was, simply, more *provoking*. As a matter of fact, I get the feeling if I were to meet Tomlins he would be a coldblooded idealist.

You can peel off layers, break off pieces and grab chunks out of "In the Matter of Nat Turner, A Speculative History" by Christopher Tomlins and have what I call a good book chew. Indigestion only comes because it makes you think about what you're chewing.

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