Nat Turner and *Sab*: The Prophetic Tradition and Slave Uprisings

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In his book *Exodus and Revolution*, Michel Walzer argues that because the Bible is such a fundamental text in Western culture the model established by the book of Exodus permeated it so deeply it has been able to survive the secularizing influence of political theory. History is still seen in teleological terms and made to fit a model of struggle and redemption. According to Walzer: "It isn't only the case that events fall, almost naturally, into an Exodus shape; we work actively to give them that shape. We complain about oppression; we hope (against all odds of human history) for deliverance; we join in covenants and constitutions; we aim at a new and better social order."[1]

Anyone familiar with the history of slavery in America knows the important place that religious faith had in the aspirations for freedom of enslaved Africans. The use of Vodú in the Haitian revolution, the topic of Alejo Carpentier's novel *El reino de este mundo* [The Kingdom of this World], and the story of the slave Nat Turner (1800-1831) in the United States, are two paradigmatic examples of this. It was at a meeting of Vodú practitioners that planning for the slave uprising in the French colony began; it

was also a similar religious but Biblical fervor that moved Nat Turner to revolt in Virginia. In both cases the followers rose up against their white masters, claiming a divine and prophetic right. They called Nat Turner "The Prophet" and after having executed a considerable number of whites he was arrested and condemned to die.

In 1831, Thomas R. Gray, Turner's lawyer, published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, where the imprisoned Turner spoke about how he organized the uprising, and about the supernatural forces that inspired him. Turner cites significant Bible passages in this confession, so much so that a period drawing of him shows him with a machete in one hand and a Bible in the other. Thus, religion became a weapon for the weak, part of that political secret that subverts the State's official ideology, like songs, stories, rumors and jokes.

As Roy Johnson asserts in *The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection*, no one at the plantation when Turner was born, in 1800, could have imagined that the blend of pagan and Christian images the boy absorbed as a child would result in such a blood bath.[2] Yet, Johnson also says that the Haitian revolution served as an example to many U.S. blacks who were looking for a way to end slavery, something about which slavers were very much alarmed and conscious.[3] In his confession Nat Turner tells his lawyer Thomas R. Gray that " the Spirit spoke to [him]" and that he had had "the same revelation, which fully confirmed [him] in the impression that [he] was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty," just like the prophets.[4]

In some curious but not unexplicable way, when we consider this tradition we see that something similar happens in the novel *Sab* (1841), by Cuban writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. In this narrative, the first anti-slave text written in America, the author has her slave protagonist articulate a confession that is also in this prophetic and millenarist spirit. At the moment the mulatto seems to hallucinate, almost dead, and taken over by an other worldly vision he has, Sab writes the following to Teresa:

"The word of salvation will resonate throughout the entire world. The old idols will drop from their filthy altars and the throne of justice will brilliantly rise up upon the ruins of the old societies. *Yes, a celestial voice is announcing this to me*. In vain, it says, in vain the ancient elements of the moral world struggled against the regenerating principle; in vain will there be days of darkness and hours of discouragement in the terrible struggle…the day of truth will dawn clear and bright. *God made his people wait forty years for the promised land, and those who doubted it were punished by not ever entering it, but their children saw it* [my emphasis]."[5]

These words, the last the mulatto utters in the novel, would confirm that he had been about to see a sudden and inevitable change over the land. They speak of the destruction of one world and the creation of another, of a forthcoming society founded upon intelligence, justice and truth. In other words, by talking about the religious faith of the Jews in two of the Bible's most important books, the Apocalypse and Exodus, the words are referring to the destruction of the slave order, as in the Bible. Faith and divine inspiration are the forces that nourish those slaves' emancipatory visions. History is thought of as a path of struggle and redemption in which justice will come after darkness, misery and exploitation. The change that is near is of a violent sort. If we understand these prophecies within the context of Cuba's different struggles during the

first half of the nineteenth century, Avellaneda could not have been referring to anything but an uprising of African slaves, a definitive one like Haiti's, which brought down the island's government, when she mentioned that "terrible struggle."

Of course, this prophetic spirit was not the exclusive purvue of the Atlantic anti-slave movements. Many other texts from that period were characterized by a similar bent. Nineteenth-century politicians like Lincoln, Marx, and even Martí referred to religion to more efficiently transmit their revolutionary rhetoric. Thus it was not unusual that slaves did so years earlier.

In a certain sense one could say that the name of 'Sab' is a shortened version of something that identifies him as a prophet: he is the one who "knows" [Sp. sabe]. He is the master of privileged knowledge not only because he has read about his rights in his owner's books but also because he has received his knowledge directly from God. This "celestial voice" is the one that "announces" to Sab the end of his race's captivity. According to the mulatto slave, the wait would soon be over. The children of Israel would wait in the desert the same amount of time before arriving in the Promised Land—forty years. We should consider that this coincides with the duration of the most intense period of slavery in Cuba, from the end of the eighteenth century to 1841, when the *Sab* was published. "God made his people wait forty years for the Promised Land, and those who doubted it were punished by not being allowed to enter it."

Of course, black slavery in Cuba started much earlier, with the first Africans brought over from Spain by the conquistadores. But it was in 1792, when Francisco Arango y Parreño wrote his "Discourse about Agriculture in Havana and ways to promote it" that the slave system sprung in Cuba and the greatest number of blacks arrived from Africa.[6] Thus, it is impossible to extract Avellaneda's text from the tradition that began with the Haitian revolution and continues with the confessions of Nat Turner in Virginia. Each one of the slaves see himself as having been chosen by God to announce the day their race would be redeemed; both use the Bible to support their visions. With these words Sab becomes another "prophet" and forsees the day when his brethren would be freed. Forty-five years after Avellaneda wrote this book, the government of Spain did just that: it declared the end of slavery in Cuba.

Bibliography

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3- Johnson, Op.cit: 36

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