Chapter 6: LITERARY JIM CROW
William Styron and *Confessions of Nat Turner*

If Hannah Arendt had not been a Jew, some of her detractors probably would have added the charge that she had no right to "steal" the Holocaust and use it to continue the persecution of Jews by the majority oppressors she represented. Such accusations were made against William Styron, a white novelist who was and continues to be condemned as a liar, a racist, and a defender of slavery who not only stole a black hero but maligned all African-Americans.

William Styron was born in 1925 of an ethnically Scandinavian-Anglo family rooted in the southeastern United States for two centuries. In his 1995 acceptance of an award from the National Arts Club of New York City, Styron said, "When I was young I was in a constant rage . . . and often let it out . . . I was saved by the class system and some education. Had I not been brought up in nice Virginia bourgeois surroundings, my renegade impulses might have led me to prison."

Styron spent his first fifteen years in Newport News, Virginia, where the roads near his home were studded with historical markers. One of them read

SOUTHAMPTON
INSURRECTION

SEVEN MILES SOUTHWEST NAT TURNER, A NEGRO, INAUGURATED, AUGUST 21, 1831, A SLAVE INSURRECTION THAT LASTED TWO DAYS AND COST THE LIVES OF ABOUT SIXTY WHITES. THE SLAVES BEGAN THE MASSACRE NEAR CROSS KEYS AND MOVED EASTWARD TOWARDS COURTLAND (JERUSALEM). ON MEETING RESISTANCE, THE INSURRECTION SPEEDILY COLLAPSED.

Styron writes that his Jim Crow childhood made the many black people in the area a mystery that "comprised a kind of obsession . . . not by their presence so much as by their absence . . . Why weren't they at school with me? Why didn't they belong to the Presbyterian church, like I did? Why weren't they in the movie theaters, at the baseball games? Why were Florence, the cook, whom I was so fond of, and old William, who mowed the lawn and told me funny stories, finally such strangers, disappearing at night into a world of utter mystery? . . .Even now I marvel at the outward appurtenances of segregation, which in retrospect have an unreal, almost nightmarish quality."

Styron read early and constantly but was a lazy student, doing poorly in school. His father, however, saw his own thwarted literary talents in his son and supported William's taking his time on his own path. His mother fought cancer throughout most of Styron's childhood and died when he was fourteen. In 1942, at age seventeen, he joined the Marine Corps but did his service as a V-12 student at Duke University (another benefit of middle-class status—qualified college age draftees served part of their hitch at college). Again, he did poorly at everything but literature. When he was about to be shipped to the Pacific, he was saved by the atom bombing of Hiroshima. His only wartime "adventure" was a false-positive result on a blood test for syphilis, which gave him material for a play he wrote thirty years later.

He had been lucky to find a superb writing and literature teacher at Duke, William Blackburn. When Styron went to New York in 1947, he went with an introduction from Blackburn to the distinguished editor Hiram Haydn. Haydn, impressed with some of Styron's short pieces, gave him an advance on the novel he had been trying to write. In 1951, at the age of twenty-five, he published *Lie Down in Darkness*.

This novel takes place in the course of one day in August 1945 as World War II is being brought to a sudden end by the atom bombing of Hiroshima. It is the day of the funeral of Peyton, a young woman who has committed suicide (inspired by Styron's learning of the suicide of a girl he had known). The book opens and closes in the voice of an omniscient narrator, but otherwise the narrative voice shifts in flashbacks from one character to another: Peyton's father Milton, who loved and indulged her too much; her mother Helen, who could not love her (said to be based on Styron's stepmother, with whom there was little love lost); Carey, a minister and spiritual advisor to Helen; Dolly, the woman for whom Milton leaves Helen; and finally Peyton herself, in a long monologue. A coda in the omniscient narrator's voice describes the family's black servants mourning Peyton as they undergo an ecstatic baptismal service (such as Styron had observed from a distance while growing up) led by a charismatic black preacher.

Styron later said that he wanted to show "the hell of bourgeois family life." This indictment is summed up by Peyton before her suicide: "Those people back in the Lost Generation. Daddy, I guess. Anybody who thought about anything at all. They thought they were lost. They were crazy. They weren't lost. What they were doing was losing us." These 400 plus pages convey an image of unrelenting ruin, waste, guilt, and needless but inevitable tragedy. They are relieved only by the final baptismal scene, as the black servants glimpse forgiveness and redemption, "all sins washed away."

Lie Down in Darkness was an impressive start by a very young, very talented, very well-read (especially in Joyce and Faulkner) writer. The power of the writing was praised in glowing reviews, more than 100 of them. The *New York Times* proclaimed the book
" . . . a first novel containing some of the elements of greatness, one with which the work of no other young writer of 25 can be compared . . . he has done brilliant justice to the Southern tradition from which his talent derives." Styron had achieved the dream of every young writer. With his first book he had joined the company of post-war young men with literary blockbusters: Norman Mailer, James Jones, J. D. Salinger.

Awarded the Prix de Rome, which included a year in Europe, he went off to become part of the expatriate scene in Paris and Rome. He partied with literary and film celebrities. He sat in on the meetings at which the *Paris Review* was founded. And he began to plan a novel about Nat Turner. But Hiram Haydn discouraged him from attempting it yet. "I would hate to see you get involved in subject matter as purple as your own imaginations is . . . romantic coloring is not only the strength of your imaginative gift and indeed of your vision, but also a potential danger." We'll never know whether Haydn was right in judging Styron not yet ready to tackle Nat Turner. But it's safe to say that if Styron had started the book then and published it in the fifties instead of in the sixties, he would have been spared a lot of grief.

Styron decided to prove that he could write in a non "purple," pared-down style, telling a story based on an incident he experienced during the Korean War when he was briefly called back into the Marines. (He managed to get out because of a eye disability.)

In training camp he had seen his first wounded and dead men—in a training accident. He also had taken part in a senseless all-night march that exacerbated his disgust and rage at meaningless military practice. He might also have been inspired by his new friends Mailer, Jones, and Irwin Shaw to write his own "war" story. *The Long March* describes a fatal accident and a nightmarish forced march. Mannix, a New York Jew who is the most rebellious of the reserve officers, can rebel only in a way prescribed by the macho Marine code. Captured by his own rage, he outdoes, in abusing his men, the colonel who had ordered the march in the first place. Only at the end is Mannix able to direct his rage toward its proper target, shouting "fuck you" at his superior—an epithet that seems a weak reaction to all this senseless and deadly destruction, yet sure to bring upon him unpleasant but unspecified consequences. Instead, in a much rewritten finale, Styron creates a scene similar to the one that ended *Lie Down In Darkness*. He brings in one of the people that haunt his white southern consciousness, a woman totally alien to military macho, a compassionate black maid in the hospital where Mannix is being treated for an injured foot. She sympathizes, and he is able to agree with her about his injury that "deed it does" hurt. Mercy and redemption again has a black face.

In most of this 20,000 word novella Styron accomplished what he set out to do, proving that without using "purple" prose or "romantic coloring," he could write simple yet vivid description, for example, of the men ordered to move on after a five minute rest: " . . . the battalion rose to its feet, not all at once but in a steady gradual surge, like rows of corn snapping back erect after the passing of a wind."

Styron married an American in Rome, and he and his wife Rose returned to the United States in 1953. They moved to Roxbury, Connecticut where he could get more work done than in New York City. (They have lived there ever since, raising four children. Styron is a firm believer in Flaubert's advice to writers—you must be very bourgeois in your life, so that you may be wild in your work.) In Roxbury he began six years of work on a second big novel, *Set This House on Fire*. (The title comes from a letter by John Donne, lamenting his feeling of abandonment by God.)

Set This House on Fire is the story of a rape and murder in the southern Italian coastal town of Sambuco (Ravello, where Styron had spent some time) during the early fifties. The rapist is Mason Flagg, a rich, handsome American who has established a household visited by celebrities of all kinds—film, art, literature, politics—and various expatriate hangers-on. Mason is the stereotypically spoiled rich American, handsome and generous, yet gross and ruthless, flaunting his wealth and power in what appears to be an ongoing orgiastic party celebrated in the midst of the desperate poverty of postwar southern Italy.

He is eventually murdered in retaliation for his rape of an Italian peasant girl. His killer is another American, Cass Kinsolving, an artist mired in alcohol and creative block. Cass, with his wife and four children, had become one of the hangers-on, literally dependent on Mason for food and shelter, helpless to pull himself out of his increasingly humiliating and self-destructive trap.

The third central character is Peter Leverett, an American lawyer working in relief agencies in France and Italy. Peter shares a southern boyhood with Mason and is one of the guests at his palazzo when the bloody events take place. Peter serves mainly as a narrator of events laid out in the first half of the book—events he does not fully understand. Two years later, back in the states, Peter manages to arrange a meeting with

Cass. In the second half of the book Peter and Cass review the events at Sambuco, retelling Cass's story, sometimes in his own voice, sometimes in Peter's third-person narrative paraphrasing what Cass has told him.

As in his previous two books, black people are important components—distant yet central in the symbolic framework of the story. But this time black people are not a comforting presence, offering hope of forgiveness, healing, or redemption. One of Cass's guilty memories of his southern boyhood is that of vandalizing a black man's house. Now that memory has become a nightmare that haunts him like his obsessive, chaste love for an Italian peasant girl whose fatally ill father he tries to help. He sees the miserable condition of this Italian family as analogous to that of blacks in the United States. His obsession with these "niggers" of Italy is the first sign that he might be redeemed.

This is only one element of a complex plot whose pieces don't always fit together logically. As in Italian opera, the reader must suspend logic and let the "music" feed emotions deeper than rationality. One (and only one) way of interpreting the story is to see the characters as features of global postwar forces. Symbolically, Mason is the postwar American power and affluence that in the fifties became the despair of artists and intellectuals, both American and European. Mason feeds on Cass's demoralization and the perversion of his talent because Cass's collapse justifies Mason's own philistinism, his lack of talent, his materialism. In raping the peasant girl, Mason violates the prostrate, impoverished but beautiful and culturally rich country where he lives like a new, incredibly vulgar incarnation of the historic Bourbon princes. His "friendship" spells death to the best in Cass, who frees himself and avenges the girl by killing Mason.

Cass comes to realize that in killing Mason he has destroyed only Mason, not evil. Instead, by the act of murder, Cass has fallen deeper into evil. And he has no one else to blame—no bourgeois family, no military superiors, only himself. As in his previous work, Styron is concerned with waste, guilt, and the yearning for redemption. But in this case, it seems possible that, having taken all responsibility upon himself, Cass may have some hope of working out his own redemption.

At the beginning of the novel, while driving to Sambuco, Peter had accidentally hit a reckless Italian motorcyclist, who lies in a coma, hardly mentioned, throughout the 500-plus pages of the novel. At the end, Peter is informed that the Italian has miraculously awakened, recovered, and already recommenced his reckless driving. Cass too has awakened, and, as imperfect as he is, now has "hope of being what I could be 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 would do, would suffice."

Set This House on Fire was published in 1960 to mostly negative reviews. Some reviewers disliked its "anti-Americanism" but most complained of its style and structure. The wordy wanderings back and forth in time over the same incidents, which had seemed "promising" in a twenty-five-year-old first novelist, were called "hollow and windy" in a thirty-five-year-old. English reviewers were even less kind. But in France an enthusiastic reception firmly established Styron in Europe as an important writer.

Styron now began preparing to write about Nat Turner, reading what little he could find on the man: the purportedly dictated *Confessions of Nat Turner* according to Thomas R. Gray; an account of the 1831 Southampton Uprising written by a white historian seventy years later; and many books on the history of slavery in America. At about this time he learned that James Baldwin needed a place to stay while writing *In*

Another Country. He offered the little studio cottage near his house. Baldwin stayed for more than six months. Almost every evening after writing, this black New Yorker and white southerner met to drink and talk, often about Nat Turner, about race, about slavery, about what it meant to be black. Baldwin encouraged Styron to write his novel and to make Nat Turner his point-of-view narrator. "I am certain that it was his encouragement—so strong that it was as if he were daring me not to—that caused me finally to impersonate a black man."

While working on the Nat Turner book, Styron was asked to contribute to a *Harpers* issue on the South. He wrote "This Quiet Dust," telling of his lifelong fascination with the sketchy figure called Nat Turner. He dismisses as an empty myth the white southerner's boast that he "knows the Negro.". On the contrary, the white southerner raised under Jim Crow became a bit "loony" from being required to "disclaim the very reality" of the people whose presence "has marked every acre of the land, every hamlet and crossroad and city and town . . . " Styron's further comments, were they spoken today, would probably be attacked by some intellectuals as a sign of arrogant white complacency, but in 1960 good intentions counted for more. "To break down the old law, to come to know the Negro, has become the moral imperative of every white Southerner. I suspect that my search of Nat Turner, my own private attempt as a novelist to re-create and bring alive that dim and prodigious black man, has been at least a partial fulfillment of this mandate." He ends with a description of his tour of the route of Turner's rebellion—where no one he spoke to, black or white, recognized (or admitted to recognizing) the name Nat Turner—and his finding the old ruined house he thought might be the home of Margaret Whitehead, the only person Nat Turner himself killed.

In 1960, historians agreed on a few basic events of the Nat Turner Revolt, gathered from newspaper reports, slave records, the trial transcript, and Daly's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (with due skepticism regarding the self-described transcriber). On August 22, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, a 31-year-old slave Nat Turner led a revolt of slaves. Going from house to house on small farms scattered between Cross Keys and Jerusalem, they killed about sixty white people in about three days. Starting with only half a dozen men, Turner drew another "fifty or sixty mounted insurgents" along the way. By the third day white militias stopped and scattered the rebels, killing or capturing all except Turner. At this point a wave of terror by whites erupted, and at least 200 blacks, slave and free and totally unknown to Turner, were beaten or killed. Turner's followers were tried, and seventeen were hanged. Nat Turner was captured two months after the revolt, on October 30. On November 5 he was tried and convicted, and on November 11 he was hanged.

For three days before his trial, he was interviewed by Thomas Gray, who hoped to profit by publishing Turner's "as told to" confessions. Gray, a white slave owner writing for a panicky white audience, editorializes freely in melodramatic phrases sure to appeal to his audience. Imbedded among the approximately 7,000 words of the *Confessions*, however, are some specifics of Turner's life generally accepted by historians in the 1960s: his birth thirty-one years before, his early signs of intelligence, his literacy, his sense of a religious (that is, Old Testament) mission confirmed for him by visions (one vision was of white spirits and black spirits in combat), the recognition of his prophetic powers by others. This recognition gave him a small following. When he saw a sign in the heavens (an eclipse), he began what he had hoped would become a general slave

revolt. The details of the insurrection and Turner's escape seem to be told mostly in his own words (with possible insertions by Gray of the bloodthirsty expressions), objectively told and ending with the sentence, "I am here loaded with chains, and willing to suffer the fate that awaits me." The final 1,000 words of purple prose about "fiend-like barbarity" are entirely in the voice of Gray, who published *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as a pamphlet on November 25, 1831, two weeks after Nat Turner was hanged.

There were scrappy accounts and articles in the (white, of course) press following the insurrection. Even the sympathetic ones written by abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison abhorred the violence to which slavery had driven Nat. Turner became a legendary hero among a few slaves and their descendants, fables carried by oral tradition. In print there was very little. The bibliography in a 1996 source book lists only four books published before Styron's novel—one in 1900, another in 1941, and the other two only the year before Styron's book. The *Journal of Negro History* published one article about Nat Turner in 1920. A play was produced briefly in the 1940s. Except for a few details of his life recorded in old documents of slave sales, few verifiable facts about him, apart from the insurrection, were written down. He was and remains a shadowy figure about whom little is known—a perfect subject for a novel.

Styron's research included "a vast amount of reading on slavery in general . . . ." He already knew the setting of Turner's rebellion. But he had not solved his major problem in tackling the subject. After reading Nat Turner's *Confessions* "countless times, trying to pick up useful clues about the man and his background . . . I was struck by the impression that our hero was a madman. A singularly gifted and intelligent madman, but mad nonetheless. . . . While the institution of slavery was so horrible that it could readily produce psycho pathology, and often did, I wished to demonstrate subtler motives, springing from social and behavioral roots, that could drive a young man of thirty-one to embark on his fearsome errand of revenge . . . to give him dimensions of humanity that were almost totally absent in the documentary evidence." In other words, whether or not the figure represented by Gray actually was a briefly charismatic madman, Styron meant to present him with "dimensions of humanity" and reasons for revenge that we could all identify with.

To carry out this intention, Styron made five major decisions about how to write his novel. The most important one was the first person point of view encouraged by James Baldwin. Styron gave Turner a "literary" inner voice—a voice like the prophets whose Old Testament eloquence Turner had memorized, like a nineteenth century man of dignity, intelligence and some education (some say like black abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass), and, of course, like Styron's own voice. Asleep in his cell at the opening of the book, Nat lives his recurring dream of floating in a small boat out to sea: "The shores of the river are unpeopled, silent; no deer run through the forests, nor do any gulls rise up from the deserted, sandy beaches. There is an effect of great silence and of an even greater solitude, as if life here had not so much perished as simply disappeared, leaving all—river shore and estuary and rolling sea—to exist forever unchanged like this beneath the light of a motionless afternoon sun."

Nat's outer voice is different. When speaking to other slaves, he speaks (Styron's approximation of) slave dialect. Sometimes angrily: "Daggone, Willis. He didn't mention nothin' at all about bein' hired out to Major Vaughan. Nothin'! Now daggone it, you goin' to be over at the Vaughans' for two years choppin' tobacco . . . . " Sometimes playfully: "I

fixed chicken and there's cider too! C'mon, nigger boys, move your butts!" Sometimes seriously, as when he preaches his first sermon: "They is a time for ev'ything. This is no time fo' singin', fo' laughter. Look aroun' you, my brothers, look into each other's eyes! You jest seen a white man pit brother 'gainst brother! Ain't none of you no four-legged beasts what can be whupped an' hurt like some flea-bit cur dog. You is men! You is *men,* my dear brothers, look at yo'selves, look to yo' *pride!*"

When he speaks to whites, he must warily use all his intelligence as his inner voice directs his outer voice to make sure his dialect projects a safely obsequious demeanor: "'I'se twenty, massah,' I replied, 'twenty-one come de first day October.' It is good for a Negro, when trying to ingratiate himself with a strange white man, to convey an impression of earnest simplicity and this may often be achieved by adding to such a reply as mine some phrase like 'Das de truth,' or 'Das right.'".

These contrasting inner and outer voices not only give the narrative voice a necessary range of expression, they dramatize the psychic split forced upon a slave who must conform to his oppressor's expectations or die.

Another decision Styron made was to invent a plan of insurrection (not in Gray's *Confessions*) so as to give Turner's actions a definite purpose, however unlikely to succeed. He believed that the reader might recoil from a man whose visions simply sent him on a rampage.

A third decision was to fictionalize the Virginia landscape somewhat. According to Styron, the area was, even in 1831, a rather depressed and infertile backwater (ruined by tobacco farming) divided into small landholdings and worked by white farmers who each owned a few slaves. Styron changed it into an area that had at one time supported some large, rich plantations. In that way he could move Nat Turner through a variety of conditions, making the novel an indictment of slavery at all its locations and levels.

Another major decision was to invent a childhood (historically unknown) for Turner that would entail some small privilege within his slave status. Special treatment by a rich, indulgent master would make Nat's accomplishments, his betrayed hopes, and his fury all the more credible.

Finally, since Turner mentioned his grandmother and his parents, but never mentioned a wife or children in Gray's *Confessions,* and had identified himself as a preacher, Styron portrayed Turner as a Bible-reading celibate and ascetic. His Nat Turner had all the frustrated spiritual and sexual passions of young manhood boiling in him as he read the blood-and-thunder Old Testament prophets. (Later researchers have said there is a mention of a wife in records of slave sales, but Styron found no mention of her in his reading at the time.)

Then Styron divided his story into four parts.

Part One takes place during the few days between Turner's apprehension and his execution. He dictates his *Confessions* to Gray, tries to keep contact with his friend and sole surviving follower Hark through the cell wall, and thinks through his memories. Most agonizing of all, he tries to pray to the God of whose will he believed himself to be the instrument, but who now seems to have abandoned him. " . . . there seemed no way at all to bridge the gulf between myself and God. So for a moment, as I stood with my eyes closed and with my head pressed against the cold wood sill, I felt a terrible emptiness."

In his memories, two white people stand out. The first is Jeremiah Cobb, the judge at his trial. Cobb lives in a drunken despair, haunted by his perception of "our

human decency brought down" by the institution of slavery. When he is most drunk he mumbles to himself about "my poor Virginia, blighted domain . . .Woe, thrice woe, and ever damned in memory be the day when poor black men in chains first trod upon thy sacred strand!"

The other white person is just as surely, though not so consciously, to be destroyed by black slavery. The innocent young Margaret Whitehead's friendly, affectionate prattle provokes in Nat both lust and something like hatred. "And why I should feel such an angry turmoil over this gentle creature baffles me, for save for my one-time master Samuel Turner, and perhaps Jeremiah Cobb, she is the only white person with whom I have experienced even one moment of a warm and mysterious and mutual confluence of sympathy. Then all at once I realize that from just that sympathy, irresistible on my part, and unwanted—a disturbance to the great plans which this spring are gathering together into a fatal shape and architecture—arises my sudden rage and confusion." Fear of weakening of his resolve is not the only reason for his rage at both her and Cobb. "I will say this, without which you cannot understand the central madness of nigger existence: beat a nigger, starve him, leave him wallowing in his own shit, and he will be yours for life. Awe him by some unforeseen hint of philanthropy, tickle him with the idea of hope, and he will want to slice your throat." Styron was consciously paraphrasing a statement by Frederick Douglass. This psychological paradox is also similar to the one cited by Simone Weil (whose work Styron knew)—that if you feed a starving beggar and he then abuses you, it is a sign that not all his humanity has been destroyed by his misfortune.

This section ends with a final cruelty by Gray, his cynical, angry harangue attacking Nat's faith as delusion. The force of Gray's statement has a desperate tone, as if it is more a statement of Gray's dark view of his own existence, his lack of faith in anything, and his hostility toward anyone who held religious faith. By following what he heard as God's command, Gray tells him, Turner had "done more with your Christianity to assure the defeat of abolition than all the meddlin' and pryin' Quakers that ever set foot in Virginia put together."

(This statement actually reflected Styron's more mild and tentative opinion on the period of his novel. His research had persuaded him that Virginia had been making moves toward abolition and that the reaction to Nat Turner's rebellion reversed that trend. This seems impossible to prove or to disprove. The historical record shows only that conditions for blacks worsened considerably in Southampton after the rebellion. However historians stand on the point, it is, in any case, expressed briefly by an unsympathetic character, the exploitive Gray, who has descended on the condemned man like a vulture smelling an imminent death on which he may profit. Styron's creation of Gray's fictional statement reads like a simple act of kicking a man when he is down. It took on importance only later, as one of the bases on which Styron was attacked.)

In Part Two, Nat reminisces about his childhood. Born to a house slave, he is indulged by his master, his love of books encouraged. Nat is taught to read and given a Bible of his own. (In Gray's *Confessions,* Nat mentioned that his parents taught him to read. Styron chose instead to heighten the sense of indulgence and betrayal by having the master's family foster his education.) Nat is also trained in carpentry. This is all part of his master's announced plan to send him to Richmond a free man capable of a supporting himself by the time he is twenty-five. But Turner's Mill is in decline, and when all is lost,

Nat, at nineteen, is betrayed—sold by the "good" master who had promised him freedom. " . . . during the dark years of my twenties, after I had passed out of Samuel Turner's life, and he and I were shut of each other forever, I spend a great deal of idle and useless time wondering what may have befallen my lot had I not been so unfortunate as to have become the beneficiary (or perhaps the victim) of my owner's zeal to tamper with a nigger's destiny . . . an experiment as a lesson in pig-breeding or the broadcasting of a new type of manure."

Nat is left with nothing but his Bible and the rage that must be submerged in "nigger talk" and respectful shuffling "to convey an impression of earnest simplicity" when dealing with even the most stupid, offensive, and abusive white man. Encouraged to believe in illusory promises of freedom, taught to believe in himself as a human being with accomplishments and hopes, Nat is sold into an even more degraded slave status.

Part Three covers the ten years during which Nat carefully hides his fury, "a paragon of rectitude, of alacrity, of lively industriousness, of sweet equanimity and uncomplaining obedience" under a succession of masters who work him to exhaustion at the various levels of slavery Styron had researched. Nat commits more and more Old Testament prophecies to memory and undertakes fasts in order "to retreat deeply into myself, into the vivid, swarming world of contemplation." His fierce religious self-discipline includes sexual abstinence. No white puritanical preacher could be more "pure." He allows himself no indulgence "behind the barn" with available slave girls. Except for one adolescent, almost accidental homosexual moment with a friend, he remains celibate but haunted by lustful fantasies. It is not surprising these fantasies become fixed on prizes owned by the free, privileged, powerful men who own him—young white women like Margaret Whitehead.

(There is an interesting resemblance between Styron's Nat Turner and Turgenev's Bazarov. Bazarov becomes a rich, three-dimensional character because his irrational side undercuts his nihilist resolve. His obsession with Odentsava—a product of everything he hates—infuriates and shames him. Styron gives Nat a similar irrational obsession that goes against all his resolve, and, because Styron was writing a century after Turgenev, he was able to express more frankly and physically [in graphic dreams and unwelcome erections] the power of the irrational. In both books this irrational force completes the humanity of the central character, and at the point of death, both men recognize the value of this "weakness" and summon up the women who inspired it.)

After fasting, Nat sees visions: "Then swiftly in the very midst of the rent in the clouds I saw a black angel clothed in black armor with black wings outspread from east to west; gigantic, hovering, he spoke in a thunderous voice louder than anything I had ever heard: '*Fear God and give glory to Him for the hour of His judgment is come* . . . ' " Nat interprets the visions not as hallucinations induced by hunger and despair, but as messages from God. (We readers can see them as both if we agree with Jefferson's famous comment about slavery: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.") He preaches sermons on pride and self-respect to other slaves, he gathers young men as his followers, and "I gradually laid my plans for annihilation and escape." Only when he is on the brink of executing his plan does he tells his half-dozen followers his "grander design involving the necessity of death, cataclysm, annihilation." When the attack is finally made, he almost loses leadership to the one follower he fears as an incarnation of uncontrollable, violent hatred. The problem is that Nat himself is strangely

inefficient at killing, as if some inner force deflects his ax as he tries to bring it down on his enemies. In the end (historical fact, as far as we know) he personally kills, by stabbing and clubbing, only one of the sixty white people who die, young Margaret Whitehead. (Styron had worked backward from this historical fact to invent the friendly relationship between them that torments Nat.) Nat botches that killing too, so that as he turns away, Margaret begs him (fiction again) "Oh Nat I hurt so. Please kill me Nat I hurt so."

Part Four briefly details the moments before Nat is taken out to be hanged. He is again immersed in his recurring dream of drifting as "the little boat rocks gently in our benign descent together toward the sea." He awakes to the reality of waiting for the hangman. Mr. Gray, in one act of kindness that costs him nothing, brings him the forbidden Bible he had requested.

Styron's first two big novels had established a pattern: whatever dark depths they plumbed, he tried to end them with some kind of redemption or at least the hope of redemption. *Confessions* followed that pattern, and because Christian religious symbols are integral to the story, Nat's redemption is expressed in their terms. Nat's ascent from hell comes with the memory of Margaret, "and I am stirred by a longing so great . . ." that he can pray again. He is saved, reunited with his God. In fact, it would seemed that, after the thirty-one-year hell of Nat's life, not only he is transformed, but so is his God. In a mere eight pages he makes the leap from Old Testament vengeance to the New Testament God of love—by way of the mystical oneness of spiritual and sexual longing. Nat's dreams, his desperate prayers, and his memory of Margaret fuse into a masturbatory release in which "the twain—black and white—are one." It is a phrase that echoed James Baldwin's insistence that all Americans are inseparably and unavoidably both black and white.

Styron finished *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in January 1967, and it was published the following October.

Styron's publisher had been building promotion and subsidiary sales for two years. *Confessions* was launched with a printing of 125,000 copies, which quickly sold out. Reprinted, the book continued to sell briskly. It was bought by English and European publishers and by two major American book clubs. The film option went for $800,000, an enormous sum in 1967. Initial reviews, including those by two distinguished black writers—Saunders Redding and historian John Hope Franklin—were mostly positive.

Exceptions included white critics Wilfred Sheed *[New York Times]* who called the book artificial, and Martin Duberman *[Village Voice]* who faulted Styron for following the then-accepted historical record too closely instead of using his "rich powers of invention." Duberman made an interesting point. Writers who dramatize history have always played fast and loose with what have come down to us as "facts." Compared to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and Brecht's *Gallileo*, and hundreds of other "historical" fictions, Styron's *Nat Turner* was a model of inhibition. Taking almost no liberties (and those insignificant) Styron had colored in what "might have happened" strictly between the lines of what available records had told him "really happened."

Styron's triumph reached its height on November 21, 1967, when black Wilberforce University awarded him an honorary degree. Styron learned that his book was to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Then suddenly everything changed. A wave of reviews by black writers attacked Styron as a racist and a liar. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee began organizing black people in the film industry to either gain power over or boycott the proposed movie. White people in Southampton were just as upset at the way they feared their ancestors would be portrayed. Hate mail began to arrive—from angry blacks who said Styron had turned "their" hero into a villain, from angry whites who said he had turned a villain into a hero. There were threats against him and his wife.

In August 1968, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* was published. It was (as Martin Duberman wrote) "an assault" on Styron, accusing him of lies, racism, ignorance of history, a defense of slavery, and a "deliberate" literary crime against black people. (The writers are all male. One of them mentions a favorable review written by a black woman, but reassuringly points out that two months later she took it all back and joined the attack.) These essays have the tone and content, not of criticism of a book, but of an emotional release of stored-up, generalized anguish.

Samples: "the distortion of the true character of Nat Turner was deliberate."; "deliberate attempt to steal the meaning of a man's life"; "reviving Big Black Sambo"; "weighing Nat down with white complexes"; "fails the test of simple honesty"; "manifestations of white racist attitudes"; "(Styron) has not been able to transcend his southern-peckerwood background"; "demonstrates how white Americans use black Americans, no matter what we do"; "Styron's despicable, racist descriptions of Negroes"; "when writers themselves are alienated and psychologically sick as in Styron's case . . . ."; "a conscious parody of the prose voice of James Baldwin"; "White writers are guilty of two fundamental faults, to which William Styron is no exception. First they are incapable of portraying black characters as human types, and second, they look upon the black man's condition of social degradation as being natural to his inferior character"; "Styron's *Confessions* is the worst thing that has happened to Nat Turner since Nat's Last White Man broke his neck with a rope on the gallows."

One of the ten black writers, Mike Thelwel, raised legitimate literary-historical questions on whether or not certain deviations from the few generally accepted facts worked well, but concluded with a sweeping indictment of Styron's "white southern myths, racial stereotypes, and literary clichés."

Novelist John A. Williams cited curious reasons for faulting Styron. "Styron has transplanted the present back into the past." Well—yes. Good historians and biographers carefully limit themselves to what they hope are facts set in a time, as well as a place, which may be quite foreign to the modern sensibility. A good novelist selects points from those past events and uses his own intuition to embroider upon them. The tests of a novel's success are, first, that the liberties taken by the novelist do not violate fundamental known facts, and, second, that in imagining what people might have done and might have thought, the author helps us to see deeper truths about them and ourselves. Williams accused Styron of creating "a modern black intellectual cast back over one hundred thirty-six years," a complaint that reads like a considerable tribute to a white novelist who had been dismissed, along with all white writers, by another of these black writers, as "incapable of portraying black characters as human types."

Everything in Styron's novel was a target for accusations of racism. A glimpse of an oppressed free black man was interpreted as Styron's assertion that slavery was better for blacks than freedom. The terror of a slave with fear of heights forced up a tree became

Styron's statement that blacks were cowardly clowns. Nat's disgust with the way some slaves humiliated themselves playing up to their masters' prejudices became Styron's statement that Nat hated his people. Even Styron's brief paragraph of introduction to the novel was condemned for referring to Nat Turner's rebellion as "the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro slavery." Dissenting black writers cited Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* (which some equally respected historians claimed inflates every rumor, aborted plot, undocumented anecdote, and folk tale into a "revolt").

The kindest thing that could be said about the attacks in *Ten Black Writers* was written by Martin Duberman (*In White America, Paul Robeson*). Concluding his *New York Times* (8/11/68) review of *Ten Black Writers*, Duberman wrote, "After several hundred years of white myth-making and polemic, it looks as if we're now in for some innings by the blacks. One hoped it was going to be different this time around. But that, I suppose, was one of the more recent myths: that blacks in this country could somehow transcend the destructive racism that permeates our culture, that they, unlike the whites, might somehow avoid distorting the past as a way of inciting one half of mankind to hate the other."

What had happened to suddenly turn praise into condemnation?

Styron had begun the novel in 1962. By that time several years of TV images of civil rights activists being hosed or beaten or found dead in a southern swamp had aroused shock among most whites and action among some. Among blacks, like Jews reviewing the Holocaust, long-suppressed rage began to pour out. Strangely enough, this display of rage was a sign of progress. It had become, for the first time in American history, just a little bit safer for blacks to respond angrily to racism, as Malcolm X had before he was gunned down in 1963 (not by the white bigots, who probably were overjoyed, but by Black Muslims, when Malcolm began to move away from separatism). After at least fifteen years of non-violent protest, jobs were still scarce for blacks; urban ghettos full of idle young men were erupting in violence.

After the high point of the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King Jr.'s prestige and influence had begun to slip, along with commitment to non-violent protest. King's reputation plummeted when he spoke out against the Vietnam War. Not only hawkish whites were angry. So were blacks, many of whom perceived anti-war activism as a detour from the struggle for equality. They had not made the connection, as King had, as Mohammed Ali had (refusing the draft) between the two movements. A black acquaintance told me bitterly at the time, "King should keep his nose out of that white man's war," not yet noticing that the American soldiers fighting and dying in that "white man's war" were largely black.

King's assassination in 1968 restored his prestige but not devotion to his principles of non-violent protest. Lyndon Johnson had taken himself out of the presidential race, but the candidate seen as the hope for civil rights and peace was removed when Robert Kennedy was killed. Riots at the Democratic Convention and college strikes and sit-ins might have been inevitable, but—when mixed with idealization of drugs—they frightened Middle America and may have helped to elect conservative Richard Nixon. The sixties were a time of hope for change, for the tearing down of old conformities and injustices. They were also a time of confusion, fear, disillusionment,

anger, and especially furious, exasperated impatience with the rate of progress toward real equality.

During the five years Styron spent working on the book, the Black Power movement was born. The civil discussion between blacks and whites that had barely begun—like the long talks between Baldwin and Styron—was replaced by the purging of whites from civil rights groups, the cutting of alliances, and by confrontation alternating with seething self-segregation. (A minor example: in April 1968, at a community march of mourning for King in the town where I was teaching, there was a brief hitch when some angry young blacks protested that white people, like my children and me, should be barred from the march. Black monitors quickly cooled them off and we proceeded. Insignificant, except that such an incident would have been inconceivable five years before.)

Another statement from *Ten Black Writers* invoked leaders who exemplified the new mood. "Have they [the "establishment press"] failed to see Nat Turner as a hero and revolutionist out of fear that they might have to see H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael [two of the younger Black Power leaders who were pushing aside older black integrationists like Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph] the same way?" The reader must search hard to find any discussion in this book of Styron's *Nat Turner* as a novel. Here's one: Norman Kelvin wrote that Styron had erred in trying to make Nat's passion for Margaret Whitehead a vehicle for his redemption before dying. Kelvin insisted that it was too great a stretch for Nat to see his relation to her a means to a revelation of the God of Love. Implicit in this redemption is an assertion that Nat is "a man whose better self becomes attached to the idea or memory of Margaret." This was an interesting comment on that problematical ending.

In his review "William Styron Before the People's Court" (1968), white historian Eugene D. Genovese challenged the dubious scholarship and deliberate distortions of *Ten Black Writers Respond*. "It is clear that the black intelligentsia faces a serious crisis. Its political affinities lie with the Black Power movement, which increasingly demands conformity, myth-making, and historical fabrication." Genovese defended Styron's fictional portrayal of Nat's lust for Margaret, listing several black writers whose recent books discussed how sexual fantasies become "translated into racial terms. . . If the racial translation of sexual fantasy proves so strong in modern America, what must it have been like in the slave South?" Aside from Duberman and Genovese, few white scholars had the nerve to point out the deliberate distortions of the attacks on Styron, which had little to do with Styron. They expressed deep, historical, generalized—and justifiable—black anger that collided with accidental, random targets, on the streets, in the schools, or on some more intellectual plane. Like Hannah Arendt three years before, Styron became a literary target for the expression of pent-up rage.

Styron began to back off from speaking engagements because the question period invariably brought forth, not tough questions and dialogue, but accusatory harangues from young men who showed no sign of having read the book. An especially sad moment marked one of Styron's last public appearances.

In 1968 he appeared on a panel before the Southern Historical Association with two friends, Robert Penn Warren and Ralph Ellison. When Styron's *Nat Turner* was brought up, and the usual harangues from the audience against Styron began, Ellison

stated that he had not read the novel. "Our house burned down so I didn't get to read it at first, and after the controversy I deliberately did not read it. One thing I know is that [Styron] isn't a bigot, he isn't a racist, and all of that." This strangely evasive, self-disqualifying defense was followed by an even more confusing, rambling statement, concluding with the vaguely accusatory statement that facts "mean something. That's why you're in trouble." This, regarding a novel Ellison "deliberately" did not read? Styron felt betrayed. He believed that Ellison must have read the book but wanted to avoid saying anything reasonable that might bring an attack down on himself. Ellison, like other prominent black elders, was having his own problems with Black Power separatists. (One of his friends reported seeing him burst into tears at a party where an unruly, ignorant young man called him an "Uncle Tom.")

Near the end of the discussion, Ellison said, " . . . *everybody* reads now .. . . and everybody is saying: Damn it, tell it like *I* think it is. And this is a real problem for the novelist." But this too was evasive. Actually the attack on Styron was far more serious and more destructive to literature. Some white critics might have been saying, "Tell it like blacks think it is." But black readers (and aspiring young black writers) weren't only saying "tell it like *I* think it is," (as Jews had responded to Arendt). They were saying, don't tell it at all unless you belong to the race, nationality, sex, religion—whatever—of the people you're portraying. Or, in the words of a statement released through the Black Anti-defamation Association: ". . . honkies such as William Styron do not have the right or authority from black people to speak for us or interpret our heroes."

Styron was obviously answering statements like this when, in 1970, he spoke to the American Academy of Arts and Letters upon being awarded the Howells Medal. "By recognizing *Nat Turner* this award really honors all of those of my contemporaries who have steadfastly refused to write propaganda or indulge in myth-making but have been impelled to search instead for those insights which, however raggedly and imperfectly, attempt to demonstrate the variety, the quirkiness, the fragility, the courage, the good humor, desperation, corruption, and mortality of all men. And finally it ratifies my own conviction that a writer jeopardizes his very freedom by insisting that he be bound or defined by his race, or by almost anything else. For one of the enduring marvels of art is its ability to soar through any barrier, to explore any territory of experience, and I say that only by venturing from time to time into strange territory shall artists, of whatever commitment, risk discovering and illuminating the human spirit that we all share."

Although Styron refused invitations to speak in public, he kept up a tough-guy stance in printed interviews like the one in the fall 1968 *Yale Literary Magazine*. "I think as this controversy wears off, that more and more black people are going to say, 'Oh, come off it; don't be so childish. Read the book, it doesn't put us down. Don't be upset because it's written by a white man.'" But by the end of the interview this veneer of relaxed assurance had worn thin. When asked about future possibilities for black/white dialogue, he revealed his anger. "I think that they're going to be very slim unless black people take hold of themselves and start using reason instead of irrational and childish logic. If they cannot, for instance, read a review like Genovese's in the *New York Review* and see the passionate appeal to reason in it, then they're going to be lost. They're going to remain, regrettably—I hate to say it—they're going to remain what white racists have always called them: children. And perhaps some of their distraught reaction is logical in terms of history, but the quicker they take hold of themselves and get out of it, the better

it's going to be. Other people have been victimized and put upon and they have survived to pull themselves out of their predicament without resorting to this infantile behavior."

Other people? Like Jews? At the time Styron gave that interview, Hannah Arendt was still under furious attack by a people with a long and proud history of "reason" and of intellectual accomplishment, people whose perception of her book had been swamped by waves of anger and grief expressed in "irrational and childish logic." The difference between Arendt's Jewish attackers and Styron's black attackers was that hers had achieved a wider audience—far beyond their own press network and religious communities. Arendt's attackers were, in fact, intellectual leaders at all levels of print and electronic media, and their intellect had only served to make their "childish logic" more credible.

Styron's hope that his *Nat Turner* would be used in classrooms—where black/white dialogue was still supposed be possible—was destroyed. In fact, as black studies courses gained a toehold on campuses, *Ten Black Writers* was often a required text, while Styron's *Nat Turner* was not even on the recommended list. (As Styron said, this had all the logic of "Alice chatting with the March Hare".) Plans for the movie were canceled. (We have missed our chance to see James Earl Jones as Nat Turner.)

A great many people, white and black, accepted the condemnation of the book without bothering to read it. Well-intentioned white liberals, like me, who did read the novel, made the politically correct judgment that *Confessions* should be dismissed as a racist book. Knowing nothing whatever about the historical sources or the lack of them, I joined others who took the position that Styron had reduced a great revolutionary leader to a black man who wanted sex with white women, just another version of the stereotype of the black rapist despoiling pure white womanhood—the KKK myth justifying the lynching of black men.

Looking back over thirty years and trying to remember how I felt, I think the real reason I condemned the book was my eagerness to placate my increasingly distant black colleagues and my increasingly volatile black students. I placated no one, of course, and as imitations of angry Black Power rhetoric erupted in sudden, irrelevant bursts, I made the retreat many white teachers and many older black teachers did—into silence. As both Orwell and Arendt had noted, intellectuals, and teachers like me and my colleagues, of all colors, were the ones more likely to fail to meet a challenge with courage and honesty. Not that it would have mattered much in that climate. But that's no excuse. A teacher must empathize with all the historical reasons for inappropriate, misdirected hostility, but she should not endorse, let alone adopt the errors of her students.

Five years after *Nat Turner*, Styron was still getting threatening letters. Every interview began and ended with questions about the controversy. Even to think about writing—let alone start anything—became a struggle. He began what was to be another army novel, lost the manuscript, abandoned the project.

Arthur Miller told him writing a play was "easier" than a writing a novel. He ought to try it. In 1972 Styron wrote *In the Clap Shack,* a play based on his experience as a young marine in World War II, when a case of trench mouth resulted in a false-positive blood test for syphilis. He spent two frightening and humiliating pre-penicillin weeks in the military urological ward, tormented by a sadistic doctor who conducted interrogations into patients' sexual habits with prurient interest.

When Arthur Miller told Styron that play writing liberated the writer from the need to detail visual settings and psychological motivation, he forgot to add that this was true only for writers who could reveal character and move the plot with a few pages of compressed dialogue. Styron is not one of these writers. He needs space to develop a character or an idea. The result was pretty good for a first play, but it probably wouldn't have been produced if Styron had been an unknown. The patients on the ward are flattened into stereotypes, especially the one black man, who is eaten up by hatred as well as by his disease. Styron seems to have put all the blacks attacking him into the bitter, dying Clark, while putting conciliatory admonitions into the mouth of a Jewish marine who sounds like an uncharacteristically sanctimonious Styron. There are some good points, especially some potentially hysterical dark humor in Private Magruder's panic and in the pretensions of the sadistic and sex-obsessed doctor.

The play was performed at Yale Repertory Theatre, got one negative review, and died. That was another lesson Arthur Miller failed to tell Styron—a play exists only on a stage, and an initial negative review can blast it into oblivion. Styron went back to trying to resurrect his lost military novel but got nowhere. Obviously he was marking time, trying to recover, while still denying how shaken he was by the continuing reaction to *Nat Turner*.

Then in 1973—six years after the publication of *Nat Turner*—he awoke from a dream about a woman he had known briefly in New York in the late forties: Sophie, a beautiful Polish gentile with a death camp number tattooed on her arm. Styron had found another subject weighty enough for a big novel.

He read widely in what had become the considerable literature of the Holocaust: histories, memoirs, and trial documents as well as social, religious, and political analysis. He did not interview any death camp survivors, but he did visit Auschwitz. One of the books he read was Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. He was struck by an anecdote Arendt recorded about a Gypsy woman. On the unloading platform at Auschwitz, the woman had been forced by a sadistic doctor to choose which of her two children should be allowed to live. Styron thought this an example of evil unparalleled in its depth, implicating the victim irrevocably in the evil she suffered. He had found the key, the inspiration, the hook on which to hang the story of all of Sophie's helpless, horrifying choices.

Although the action of *Sophie's Choice* revolves around a victim of a central twentieth century horror, it contains Styron's funniest writing. Styron chose not to narrate Sophie's story from her point of view nor to try to directly relate the experience of Auschwitz. Instead, the narrator "William Styron" looks back on his days in Brooklyn in 1947, as a 22-year-old writer trying to write his first novel. Stingo is the naive young American, infatuated with both Sophie and her schizophrenic lover Nathan. Stingo's hilarious navigation through the minefield of sex in the forties is posed against the gradual unfolding of Sophie's unbearable experiences as she confides in him. The novel is really about the gradual introduction of some perception of true evil to Stingo, whose experience has not prepared him to write the "morbid" sort of fiction "I was so feverishly setting off to write about."

The narrative voice is that of the mature, eloquent "Styron," and many of the memories touch on the real Styron's experience, like his brief, futile, and funny attempt to hold down a job at McGraw-Hill. Sandwiched skillfully between these funny scenes are

the accounts of the horror Sophie has suffered and the guilt which commits her to the parallel agony of her destructive relationship with Nathan. The glue that holds them together is Styron's meditations on his reading, weaving his sources—from Rudolph Höss to George Steiner—into the text. He also meditates on a recurring perception that the mind strains to grasp—that one human being (Stingo) can be living innocuous absurdities while another (Sophie), half a world away, suffers unimaginable horrors.

Styron also inserts letters and scenes that pay tribute to his beloved father, who died during the writing of the book. And for the first time, he uses a memory of his guilt-ridden grief at age fourteen when his mother was dying.

He even manages to thumb his nose at the attackers of his *Nat Turner*. Stingo is able to prolong his period of unemployed writing a bit longer by living on a cache of money found by his father. This fictional money was the profit hidden by his grandmother after she sold the fictional Artiste, a slave unjustly accused of sexually molesting a white woman. "Styron" writes

> Years later I thought that if I had tithed a good part of my proceeds of Artiste's sale to the N.A.A.C.P. instead of keeping it, I might have shriven myself of my own guilt, besides being able to offer evidence that even as a young man I had enough concern for the plight of the Negro as to make a sacrifice. But in the end I'm rather glad I kept it. For these many years afterward, as accusations from black people became more cranky and insistent that as a writer—a lying writer at that—I had turned to my own profit and advantage the miseries of slavery, I succumbed to a kind of masochistic resignation, and thinking of Artiste, said to myself: What the hell, once a racist exploiter always a racist exploiter. Besides, in 1947 I needed $485 as badly as any black man, or Negro, as we said in those days.

There are later mentions of Nat Turner sprinkled throughout the book, apparently to remind readers that Styron, far from taking a free ride on the Civil Rights movement, had been haunted by Nat Turner since childhood.

And what about the ending? Does Styron manage to inject the hope of transcendence of the evil that haunts Sophie? Partially. Sophie gives virgin Stingo the one night of glorious sex that all lusty young people dream of, and all older people wish had been theirs. Then she leaves, to die with Nathan. Love and death. Complete redemption is her gift to Stingo. His initiation into manhood and into full consciousness of the tragedy of human life sink him into a night of weeping and nightmares from which he awakens resurrected: "This was not judgment day—only morning. Morning: excellent and fair."

Sophie's Choice was published in 1979 and was an immediate success. Styron had some apprehension that Jews would object to his treating the subject, as blacks had objected to his using "their" hero and history, especially since Sophie's story was, by implication, a reminder that not only Jews had suffered in the Holocaust. But only a few objections were raised, and they were largely ignored. *Sophie's Choice* spent some weeks at the top of the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Not only a commercial success, it impressed many critics, like Paul Fussell, who wrote that it was worthy of a place "on

that small shelf reserved for American masterpieces." In 1980 *Sophie's Choice* won the National Book Award.

Styron tried to go back again to writing his military novel, but life had become hectic. Requests for interviews, articles, and speaking engagements came thick and fast. He was able to put together some of his previously published essays for a book that was published in 1982, under the title of his 1965 essay on Nat Turner, *This Quiet Dust*. But work on another novel dragged. A good film of *Sophie's Choice* was made, and Meryl Streep won an Academy Award for her performance as Sophie. For the next couple of years Styron juggled the rewards of fame while trying new approaches to the military novel. The problems he had were, of course, the envy of any writer. Fifteen years after the attacks on *Nat Turner* and on himself, Styron had not only recovered, he had triumphed.

And then he fell apart.

During the summer of 1985 he began a downward plunge into a paralyzing depression. Despite treatment with drugs and talk therapy, his illness worsened. By the end of the year, realizing that his thoughts of suicide had become definite plans, he had his wife commit him to a hospital, where he spent seven weeks, then emerged on the road to recovery. As soon as he had recovered enough to write, he began to write a story about the death of his mother, a memory of whom had marked the beginning of his recovery. It was published in *Esquire* in 1987.

He thought of writing a novel about his emotional illness but gave that up and instead wrote a direct account of his experience. This brief memoir (originally commissioned by *Vanity Fair* as an article), was expanded a bit into *Darkness Visible* (1990). This short book became a bestseller in its own way, speaking to and for many people who had suffered from or had lost loved ones to this sometimes fatal illness. "Never has Styron used so few words so effectively," said *Newsweek*.

In this very personal account, he considers every possible combination of causes for his becoming afflicted with this mysterious "howling tempest in the brain" so inadequately named depression. At age sixty, his forty years of hard drinking had suddenly caught up with him—even a taste of wine made him violently ill. Did this sudden forced withdrawal of alcohol throw everything out of whack? Was it also a withdrawal of self-medication for a genetic tendency? There was some history of depression in his family; his father had once been hospitalized. For the first time, Styron made a connection between his frequent use of suicide in his novels with the morbid moods he had held at bay by drinking. Some research showed him that he also fit into one of the theories of a cause of depression—loss of a parent in childhood.

He goes on to discuss conditions that make a sufferer worse instead of better. Here, he indicts the drug Halcion, prescribed in huge doses by his psychiatrist. He mentions the role of some immediate traumatic incident or loss that exacerbates an existing tendency toward depression. He cites examples like that of Romain Gary's suicide following the suicide of his ex-wife, Jean Seberg.

But he never offers the example of the trauma he had suffered and continued to suffer—the attacks on his *Nat Turner*, and the ongoing equating of his name with racism, by blacks and by many whites. It seems not farfetched to add this trauma to his list. A breakdown often occurs, not during the period of stress or immediately afterward, but later, sometimes much later, when everything has taken a turn for the better and the

tension is relaxed. Styron had confronted the controversy with a sort of macho defiance and had lived with it, undiminished for seventeen years, denying that such "intellectual squalor" was worth thinking about. Psychic pain denied gains weight. The pain of this controversy may have contributed to Styron's illness as much as any of the other things he named.

In the twenty years since the publication of *Sophie's Choice* Styron has continued writing, but the only fiction he has published is *A Tidewater Morning,* a brief 142 pages comprised of the reminiscence of his mother and two other "Tales of Youth" written before 1985.

In the thirty years since the publication of *Confessions of Nat Turner*, the conviction that it is a racist defense of slavery has rarely been questioned among black and liberal white readers. In 1995 Styron scholar Gavin Cologne-Brookes wrote that Toni Morrison told him in 1988, "I was very pleased with [Styron's] attempt." But her remark couldn't have gone far. At least, I never heard or read anything that questioned my reaction to Styron's novel until 1996, when a friend suggested I reconsider it for this book.

So I reread *Confessions of Nat Turner* (along with some of the sources). In 1968 I was one of those people who could accept Eldridge Cleaver, a black convict, writing that he had raped white women as a protest against the racist white power structure—then dedicating his book to his lover, the white woman lawyer who had won his parole. But I refused to accept William Styron, a white man, writing that a black man could lust for a white woman while rebelling against the white power structure that enslaved him.

On my second reading, thirty years later, I had to abandon my politically correct judgment of Styron's racism. In fact, I had to abandon a whole book, or, as Hannah Arendt put it, my "image of a book that was never written." This time, I saw Nat's lust for a white woman as a valid, if disturbing picture of the furious, lustful, fearful forces at war within us—and as only one part of the novel Styron wrote. I still saw flaws in the book, but they are Styron's literary flaws, not flaws of racisim or intent to demean blacks, quite the opposite. I was able to appreciate Styron's effort to create a complex, archetypally American hero whose struggle illuminates a central tragedy of our common history.

In 1993 Styron wrote an afterword for the 25th anniversary Vintage reprint of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. It concluded, "I had hoped that whatever light my work might shed on the dungeon of America slavery, and its abysmal night of the body and spirit, might also cast light on our modern condition, and be understood by black people , as well as white, as part of a plausible interpretation of the agony that has bound the present to the past. But while the book remains alive and well and widely read by white people, it is, as I say, largely shunned by blacks, sometimes with amazing hostility neither articulated nor explained, as if the admonitions of those ten black writers a generation ago still provided a stony taboo. I am less bothered by this boycott in itself . . . than the way in which it represents a continuation of that grim apartness that has defined racial relations in this country and which seems, from all signs and portents, to have worsened over the years since the *Confessions of Nat Turner* appeared."

Five years later that "amazing hostility" seemed as strong as ever. In November of 1998, Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* was the chosen book for the monthly "Book Club of the Air" of *Talk of the Nation* on National Public Radio. On this program then-host Ray Suarez invited listeners to call in and discuss a book with two or three

"authorities." The authorities chosen in this case were John A. Williams, one of the contributors to *Ten Black Writers* thirty years before, and historian Scot French, assistant director of the Carter G. Woodson Institute of Afro-American Studies at the University of Virginia.

The program began strangely, with a dramatic reading by an actor, but not from the novel. He read from Gray's purportedly as-told-to *Confessions,* as if Gray's pamphlet were the verified, actual voice of Nat Turner, the historic person. Following this reading, Williams and French alternately took swipes at Styron, mostly on the grounds of his having violated some definitely verifiable "facts." Then the phone lines were opened.

Callers began with some attempts to discuss the elements of the novel. One of them criticized a scene in which Nat's mother is forced to have sex with a vulgar, low-class white man. As a critique of slavery, the caller pointed out, omitting the high-class slave master as a frequent rapist was a serious flaw. So far so good. Unfortunately, that was almost the last point made specifically about the book.

Callers moved quickly to generalized attacks on Styron's novel, voiced in the same terms as those used in 1968: "a fig leaf for continued oppression of black people," "propaganda" written to "pacify white people" and prove that the "slave was happy," "continual oppression of the black male," written to prove "the superiority of white women over black women." One man sounded like a reincarnation of the hecklers who discouraged Styron from joining in public discussion. He stayed on the line with repeated generalities about racism, while showing no signs of having read the book. John A. Williams had not budged an inch from his position of thirty years before. In fact, he seemed even more determined to invent a book that Styron never wrote: "Styron and others . . . make us feel that it was absolutely wrong for a person to try to gain his or her freedom."

Two callers tried to urge the others to drop political rhetoric and discuss the book on its own terms, as a novel with literary and historical virtues and faults. Their pleas were ignored. So were Suarez's attempts to return the discussion to Styron's novel. By the end of the program he was reduced to defending himself for having scheduled the book for discussion.

But there is light at the end of this tunnel.

Only a year later Scot French had revised his view of the "facts" about Nat Turner. He told *New Yorker* writer Tony Hurwitz that in his considerable research for a forthcoming book he had found no proof that Nat Turner truly dictated much of the *Confessions* Gray wrote, nor even that the revolt had been led by Nat Turner. According to French, except for the fact of sixty-odd white people killed, everything about the 1831 revolt is up for grabs.

After summarizing French's doubts, Hurwitz went on to Styron's novel, quoting comments from the new generation of black intellectuals and artists. Cornell West, for one, had spoken at a public gathering with respect for Styron's "struggle" to understand our history. (Styron, sitting in the audience, said, with little originality, but much delight, "You could have knocked me over with a feather. I was tickled pink.") The possibility of making a film using the novel has been broached to Styron by black film maker Spike Lee. "This is volatile stuff. The black man and the white woman, the violence and the sex." The person who brought Lee and Styron together was Henry Louis Gates, Jr., chair

of African American Studies at Harvard, quoted as follows: "Censorship is to art as lynching is to justice, and it's just as disgusting when blacks do it as whites."

Styron must have been "tickled" again if he happened to read a letter from Gates to the *New Yorker,* 3/4/02. In the previous issue, ("The Fugitive" *New Yorker* 2/18-24) Gates had written about his acquisition at auction of a manuscript *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts. After painstaking research and consultation with experts on everything from writing paper to genealogy and history, Gates had concluded that the manuscript was an autobiographical novel written between 1853 and 1861, possibly "our first pristine encounter with the unadulterated 'voice' of a fugitive slave, exactly as she wrote and edited it," untouched by well-meaning abolitionists who usually "corrected" slave narratives before publishing them. Gates quoted a couple of paragraphs as examples of "language that is unusually potent."

Instant feedback from many readers identified those paragraphs as lifted, almost word for word, from *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. Gates' unabashed letter followed, thanking all the readers who had spotted something he missed, and pointing out that Crafts' "borrowing" from books available to her in her white master's library in no way invalidated the authenticity of the manuscript, but only added to its interest. Crafts' appropriating of a great English writer's description of misery, seeing a similarity to her own experience of slavery, teaches us, Gates wrote, "at least one lesson: that the republic of letters has always transcended the bounds of Identity." Amen.

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