

# NAT TURNER REVISITED

ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL HISTORICAL NOVEL  
IN MEMORY, THE AUTHOR OF **THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER** SPEAKS OF A NOVELIST'S  
DUTY TO HISTORY AND FICTION'S STRANGE POWER NOT ONLY TO ASTONISH BUT TO ENRAGE



NAT TURNER

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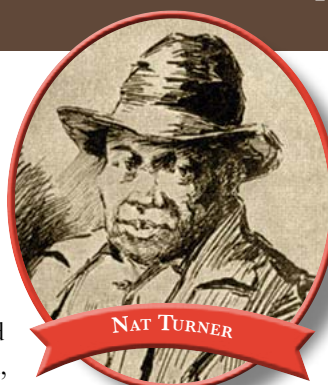
# NAT TURNER REVISITED

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BY WILLIAM STYRON

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**T**wenty-five years ago this November, I found myself in Ohio, where I was being awarded an honorary degree at Wilberforce University. The university, one of the few all-Negro institutions in the North, was named after William Wilberforce, the great British abolitionist of slavery, and so I marked the special appropriateness of this honor when I accepted the invitation a few weeks earlier. My novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, based on the Virginia slave revolt of 1831, had been published early in October to generally glowing reviews, had received a vast amount of publicity, and had quickly ascended to the top of the best-seller lists, where it would remain for many weeks. Only the most disingenuous of writers would, I think, fail to confess being pleased by such a reception.

I was also gratified to have the blessing of both the **Book-of-the-Month Club** and *The New York Review of Books*. There was a lavish movie contract from Twentieth Century-Fox and an admiring review in the **New Republic** from one of America's pre-eminent historians. I am stressing these outward signs of success only to point up the reversal of fortune the book would soon undergo. Like any writer who is honest with himself, I knew that Nat Turner had defects and vulnerabilities—Faulkner remarked that we novelists will be remembered for “the splendor of our failures”—but that it was hard not to feel

a **I** certain fulfillment that fall, more than five years after having sat down at my desk on Martha's Vineyard, determined to re-create, out of an extremely sketchy and mysterious historical record, the life of a man who led the only significant slave revolt in our history, and to try to fashion in the process an imagined microcosm of the baleful institution whose legacy has persisted in this century and become the nation's central obsession. In 1962, when I began writing the book, the civil rights movement still had the quality of conciliation; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s grand and impossible dream was dreamed in a spirit of amity, concord, and the hope of a mutual understanding. The following years demonstrated the harsher truths: Birmingham, the bombings, Selma, the death of Medgar Evers, the three youthful martyrs of that Mississippi summer, churches set on fire, unbounded terror. James Baldwin, who was a friend of

mine and who had made notes for his great essay **The Fire Next Time** while living in my house, had seen his prophecy come to pass in the smoke and flames of Watts and of Newark and Detroit. I've often been surprised, reflecting on this time, at

the naiveté or perhaps blindness that prevented my perceiving in that tumult a suggestion of the backlash that awaited

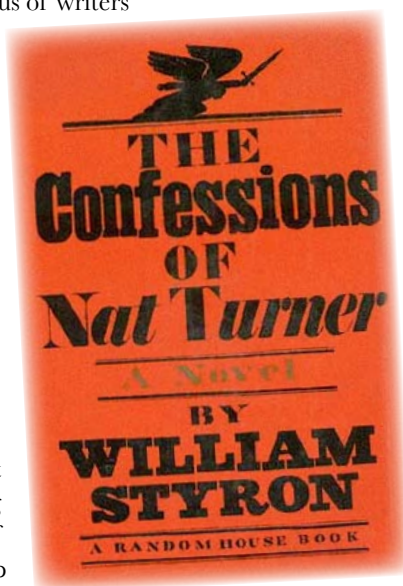
**Nat Turner.**

The principal item I had to deal with, and freely reject, was the character of

Nat himself. He was a person of conspicuous ghastliness.

But on the campus of Wilberforce University there was no hint of the gathering storm. The angry word had not yet gone out. In a sea of smiling black and brown people, I was greeted with good will, thanks, praise. During lunch the university's president publicly expressed his appreciation for my story, for the way I had illuminated some of slavery's darker corners. At the convocation ceremony I made a brief talk in which I expressed the hope that an increased awareness of the history of the Negro (I used this word, which, though moribund and about to be replaced within months by black, was still acceptable), especially of Negro slavery, would allow people of both races to come to terms with the often inexplicable turmoil of the present.

There was much applause. George Shirley, a Wilberforce alumnus who was a leading tenor with the Metropolitan Opera, gave a spine-chilling rendition of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” in which the audience joined together, singing with great emotion. Standing in that auditorium, I was moved by a feeling of oneness with these people. I felt gratitude at their acceptance of me and, somehow more important, at my acceptance of them, as if my literary labors and my plunge into history had helped dissolve many of





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my preconceptions about race that had been my birthright as a Southerner and allowed me to better understand the forces that had shaped our common destiny. For me it was a moment of intense warmth and brotherhood. It would have been inconceivable to me that within a short time I would experience almost total alienation from black people, be stung by their rage, and finally be cast as an archenemy of the race, having unwittingly created one of the first politically incorrect texts of our time.

The story of Nat Turner had been long gestating in my mind, ever since I was a boy—in fact, since before I actually knew I wanted to be a writer. I could scarcely remember a time when I was not haunted by the idea of slavery or was not profoundly conscious of the strange bifurcated world of whiteness and blackness in which I was born and reared. In the Virginia Tidewater region of my beginnings, heavily populated by blacks, society remained firmly in the grip of the Jim Crow laws and their ordinance of a separate and thoroughly unequal way of life. The evidence was blatant and embarrassing even to some white children, like myself, who were presumably brought up to be indifferent to such inequities as the ramshackle black school that stood on the route we traveled to our own up-to-date and well-equipped edifice, with its swank state-of-the-art public-address system, very advanced for the late 1930s. Many black schools in Virginia at that time had outside privies.

Despite our own fine local facilities, Virginia—in the era of the hidebound Harry Byrd political machine—ranked in public education among the lowest of the states, down there with Arkansas and Mississippi, and the quality of instruction in the black schools had to be even worse than what we white students were given, which (except for a few individually outstanding teachers) was desperately mediocre. I was

painfully sensitive to this disparity, just as I was conscious of the utter strangeness of this whole segregated world: the water fountains and rest rooms marked “White” and “Colored,” the buses in which black folk were required to sit in the rear, the theaters with blacks seated in the balconies (in the larger towns there were actually separate theaters); even the ferryboats crossing the rivers and bays enforced a nautical apartheid, with whites starboard and Negroes portside. I was perpetually bemused by this division and the ensuing isolation.

It was a system both ludicrous and dreadful, and I sensed its wrongness early, probably because of my parents, who, while hardly radical, were enlightened in

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racial matters, but also out of some innate sense of moral indignation. Although of course I was an outsider, I fell under the spell of **négritude**, fascinated by black people and their folkways, their labor and religion, and especially their music, their raunchy blues and ragtime and their spirituals that reached for, and often attained, the sublime. Like some young boys who are troubled by their “unnatural” sexual longings, I felt a similar anxiety about my secret passion for blackness; in my closet I was fearful lest any of my conventionally racist young friends

discover that I was an unabashed enthusiast of the despised Negro. I don’t claim a special innocence. Most white people were, and are, racist to some degree, but at least my racism was not conventional; I wanted to confront and understand blackness.

Then there was the incomparable example of my grandmother. In a direct linkage I still sometimes find remarkable, I am able to say that I remain separated from slavery by only two generations and that I was related to and was familiar with and spoke to someone who owned slaves. Born in 1850 on an eastern North Carolina plantation, my father’s mother was the proprietress of two slave girls who were her age, twelve or thereabouts, at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation. Many years later, when she was an old lady in her eighties and I was eleven or twelve, she told me at great length of her love for these children and of the horror and loss she felt when that same year, 1862, Union forces from an Ohio regiment under General Burnside swept down on the plantation, stripped the place bare, and left everyone to starve, including the little slave girls, who later disappeared. It was a story I heard more than once, since I avidly prompted her to repeat it and she, indulging her own fondness for its melodrama, told it again with relish, describing her hatred for the Yankees (which remained undiminished in 1937), the real pain of her starvation (she said they were reduced to eating “roots and rats”), and her anguish when she was separated forever from those little black girls, who were called, incidentally, Drusilla and Lucinda, just as in so many antebellum plantation novels. All of the deliciously described particulars of my grandmother’s chronicle held me spellbound, but I think that nothing so awed me as the fact that this frail and garrulous woman whom I beheld, and who was my own flesh and blood, had been the legal owner of two other human



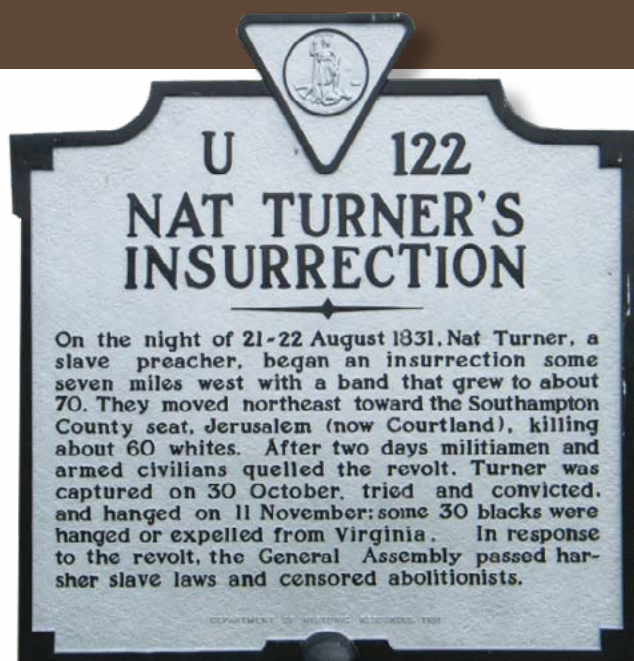
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beings. It may have determined, more than anything else, some as-yet-to-be-born resolve to write about slavery.

Nat Turner entered my consciousness through brief references to his revolt in my text on Virginia history. But most memorably he appeared in the form of a historical highway marker adjoining a peanut field in Southampton County, where I traveled with our high school football team in the fall. This was a remote, down-and-out farm region, whose population was 60 percent black. I was transfixed by the information conveyed by that marker, paraphrased thus: Nearby, in August of 1831, a fanatical slave named Nat Turner led a bloody insurrection that caused the death of fifty-five white people. Captured after two months in hiding, Nat was brought to trial in the county seat of Jerusalem (now Courtland) and he and seventeen of his followers were hanged. I recall how this sign set off in my mind extraordinary resonances, which were clearly in conflict with my grandmother's story: What was the connection, if any, between her loving memories and this cryptic notation of terror and mayhem? Perhaps more important, I remember wondering whether that bygone moment of sudden disaster didn't reflect something sinister in the divided white and black world in which I lived, so outwardly peaceable yet, except to the blind, troubled and jumpy with signs of resentment, sullenness, covert hostility and anger. The Virginia of my boyhood, like virtually all the South, was a place where the amiable, if often edgy, relations between the races rose from an impulse that was mutually self-protective, keeping in abeyance much white fear and much black rage.

Daily life produced an unstated precariousness. There were strong, even passionate bonds of affection between individuals, black and white, but the social



arrangement was a different matter; in the vast rural areas a form of pseudoslavery prevailed, and the white man's whim was law. Urban existence, not much better, gave rise to ghettos where crimes by black against blacks went ignored and unrecorded. At its worst, the South was filled with intimidation and brutality on a terrifying scale; in the Deep South lynchings were still more than occasional. At its best, kindness and decency, along with genuine love spontaneously reciprocated, were the rule, but even so, the South suffered, in its Jim Crow shackles, from the sickness of alienation. It was a bizarre, culturally schizoid world with falsity at its core, not to speak of a glaring inhumanity. I'm sure that my early fascination with Nat Turner came from pondering the parallels between his time and my own society, whose genteel accommodations and endemic cruelties, large and small, were not really so different from the days of slavery. I think I must have wondered whether this tautly strained calmness might not someday be just as susceptible to violent retribution.

I wrote several works of fiction before I finally tackled **Nat Turner**. Then in the early 1960s I decided that the time was ripe; certainly I was never anything but intensely

aware of the way in which the theme of slave rebellion was finding echoes in the gathering tensions of the civil rights movement. Although it didn't dawn on me at the time, I later realized that one of the benefits for me in Nat Turner's story was not an abundance of historical material but, if anything, a scantiness. This was a drama that took place in a faraway backwater when information gathering was primitive. While it may be satisfying and advantageous for historians to feast on rich archival material, the writer of historical fiction is better off when past events have left him with short rations. A good example might

be the abolitionist John Brown, who made his prodigious mark on history only thirty years after Nat Turner but whose every word and move were recorded by enterprising journalists, producing documents enough to fill a boxcar.

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The novelist attempting John Brown's story is in conflict with the myriad known details of the chronicle, and his imagination cannot simply run off in a certain direction—which is what fiction writers need their imaginations to do—because he is fettered by already established circumstances. He is in danger of being overwhelmed by an avalanche of data. That is why the writing of novels about plentifully documented figures—Lincoln, say, or John F. Kennedy—is a risky matter, constricting for the writer himself who, while quite free to take liberties with the known facts (the shopworn but sound concept of artistic license), must still take care not to violate the larger historical record. (Although even here the convention has often been broken; history has taught us, for example, that Richard III was not an unmitigated villain, nor a hunchback, but only pedants carp at Shakespeare's nasty portrayal.)

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The single meaningful document having to do with the Turner revolt was a short (seven-thousand-word) transcript that gave the title to my own work. The original *Confessions of Nat Turner*, which comprised both Nat's account of his upbringing and a description of the events leading up to the revolt, as well as the details of the revolt itself, was put in writing by a court-appointed lawyer named Thomas R. Gray, who took down the words from Nat's lips as he sat chained

in his jail cell during the October days before his execution. From the first word this discourse poses serious questions of veracity. At a time when justice for slaves was at best a sham, and in the aftermath of a sensational trial where the state's absolute authority must have prevailed, how reliable or authentic was anything Nat said, when filtered through the mind of this minion of the state? Still, despite this problem, the bulk of the document appeared genuine—Nat himself had nothing to lose at this point by telling the truth, and while some of Gray's interpretation is doubtless suspect, he had little to gain by substantially altering Nat's statement—and so I was generally disposed to use it as a guideline, a loose guideline, for my own narrative.

Aside from Nat's own *Confessions* and a number of contemporary newspaper articles, most of which added little to Gray's account (except to emphasize the immediately devastating psychological effect the event had on Southern society), there was virtually no material of that period that was useful in shedding further light on Nat Turner as a person or on the uprising. Such a near-vacuum, as I say, seemed to me to be an advantage, placing me in the ideal position of knowing neither too much nor too little. A bad historical novel often leaves the impression of a hopelessly over-furnished



Nat Turner meeting with his lawyer, Thomas R. Gray, from *Nat Turner* by Kyle Baker.

house, cluttered with facts the author wishes to show off as fruits of his diligent research. Georg Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist critic whose monumental *The Historical Novel* should be read by all who attempt to write in the genre, views the disregard of facts as a state of grace; the creator of historical fiction, he argues convincingly, should have a thorough—perhaps even magisterial—command of the period with which he is dealing, but he should not permit his work to be governed by particular historical facts. Rather, his concern “is to reproduce the much more complex and ramifying totality with historical faithfulness.” At the time of writing *Nat Turner*, I felt that as an amateur historian I had absorbed a vast amount of reading on slavery in general, not only by way of a great number of antebellum books and essays but through much recent scholarship in the exploding field of the historiography of the slave period; thus, while my command may scarcely have been magisterial, I felt I reasonably fulfilled the first of Lukács's conditions. It was perhaps serendipitous that Lukács's other condition, regarding the relative unimportance of facts, made my task easier since I had chosen a man about whom so little was known.

Yet the facts can never be simply ignored, and the principal item I had to deal with, and freely reject, was that which involved

the character of Nat Turner himself. The fact; He was a person of conspicuous ghastliness. I eventually read the original *Confessions* countless times, trying to pick up useful clues about the man and his background, but early on I was struck by the impression that our hero was a madman. A singularly gifted and intelligent madman, but mad nonetheless. No attempts on my part of sympathetic reinterpretation could alter this conclusion: his apocalyptic and deranged visions, his

heavenly signs and signals, his belief in his own divinely ordained retributive mission, his obsessive fasting and prayer, his bloodthirsty megalomania and self-identification with the Deity (to a provocative question about himself by Gray, he replied, “Was not Christ crucified?”)—there was no shaking the fact that on the record Nat Turner was a dangerous religious lunatic. I didn't want to write about a psychopathic monster. While the institution of slavery was so horrible that it could readily produce psychopathology, 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. So, without sacrificing the essence of Old Testament vengeance that plainly animated Nat, I attempted to moderate this aspect of his character and in doing so give him dimensions of humanity that were almost totally absent in the documentary evidence. When stern piety replaced demonic fanaticism, the man could be better understood.

I took an enormous liberty with historical actuality when I began to deal with Nat's childhood and upbringing. I placed the boy in a milieu where he could not possibly have belonged. During the course of Nat's brief life, Southampton County, where he

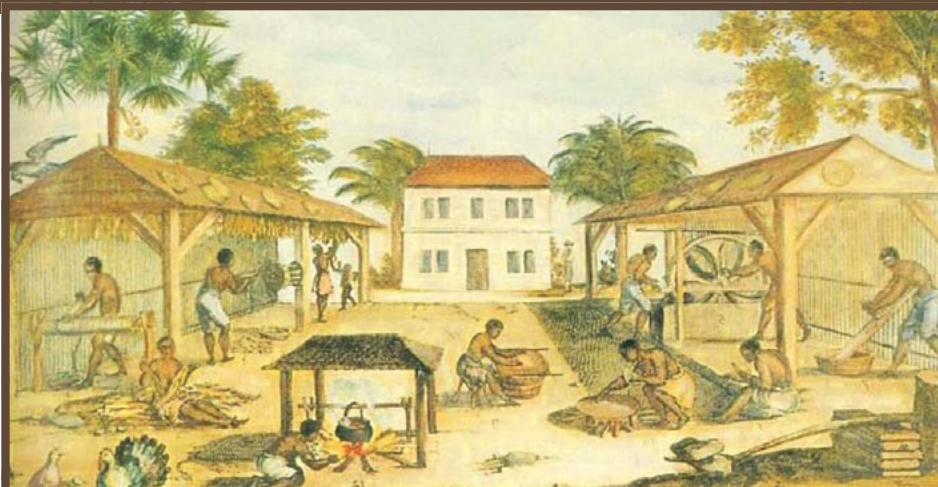


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was born and reared, had already suffered the impoverishment that had come to Virginia long before as the result of the over-cultivation of tobacco and other crops, leaving a surplus of slaves who were constantly in danger of being sold off to the thriving plantations of Alabama and Mississippi—the “Far South.” Virginia’s Southside, as the region below the James River is known, was in those days dotted with small farms and modest holdings, patches of cotton and corn for home use (peanuts had yet to come into their own), apples grown for cider and brandy, pigs in their wallows or rooting in the wild. This bore no resemblance to the romantic view of Old Dixie. The average farmer owned one or two deprived slaves. It was a forlorn, down-at-the-heel section of the Tidewater, where there never existed the celebrated plantations that gave the South its sheen and legendary glamour.

But I felt I had to create a plantation anyway. The plantation was an integral and characteristic part of Southern life in slave times; it was the very metaphor for the capitalist exploitation of human labor, and the plantation owners often represented the best and worst of those whom history had cast as masters in the peculiar institution, carrying within themselves all the moral frights and tensions that slavery engendered. I needed to dramatize this turmoil, and so I contrived to have Nat Turner grow up on a prosperous plantation that might have existed fifty years before far up the James River but that could not have flourished in poverty-racked Southampton. In this way I was able to expose young Nat Turner (from whose point of view the story is told) to the intellectual tug-of-war between the two Turner brothers, owners of the plantation and men diametrically opposed in their views on the morality of slavery. Such a strategy, while disdainful of the facts, enabled me to demonstrate certain critical philosophical attitudes I couldn’t have



Slaves processing tobacco in 17th-century Virginia.

done otherwise, except didactically, yet still allowed me to remain, in the larger sense, historically faithful.

Two of the most carefully pondered decisions I made regarding Nat’s fictional character were ones that later provoked the greatest outrage from many of those people who became bitter enemies of the book. As is the case with disputes involving so many heroes, contemporary or departed, the bone to pick here was over the matter of sex.

Why, came the bitter demand, hadn’t

I linked Nat with a black woman?

First, in the process of using the **Confessions** as a rough guide,

I was struck by the fact that Nat referred to his relationship with quite a few people—grandmother, mother, father, master, disciples—but never to a woman in a romantic or conjugal sense; apparently he had neither a female companion nor a wife. This absence was quite significant, and I had to use my intuition to guess at its meaning. A wife or companion would have had important resonance, and his mention of such a woman would have forced me to create her counter-part. But since no other reliable source ever spoke of Nat’s being married (a pointless connection in the formal sense, slaves being legally forbidden to wed) or even being involved with a woman, it made it all the more plausible for me to portray a man

who was a bachelor, or at least womanless, a celibate with all the frustrations that celibacy entails. Further, such a portrayal was entirely compatible with both the real Nat Turner’s revolutionary passion and his religious zeal; chastity, combined with a single-minded devotion to a cause, has been the hallmark of religious rebels and reformers throughout history, and I saw a commanding reasonableness in having Nat share their condition, in which austerity clashed with feverish sexual temptation.

But by all odds my most crucial choice, as I picked my way through the facts and factoids of the original *Confessions*, was the one that also gave rise to the most furious misinterpretation later—and this was to invent a relationship between Nat Turner and a teenage white girl, the daughter of a small landowner. No decision I made shows so well the pitfalls waiting for the historical novelist who, however well intentioned, creates a situation or concept repugnant to ideologues; at the same time, nothing so deftly illustrates the invincible right of the novelist to manipulate historical fact and pursue his intuition concerning that fact to its artistically logical conclusion. Here are two intertwined facts, recounted by the perpetrator and recorded by Thomas Gray with the clinical dispassion of a modern-day homicide report: During most of the course of the revolt, in which fifty-five people were slaughtered, the leader of the



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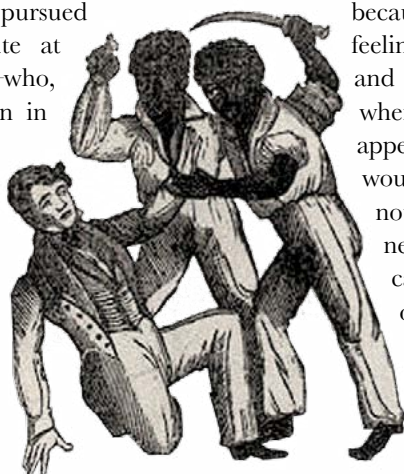
murderers could not kill or inflict a wound on any of the victims although he confesses that he tried more than once. This is the second fact: Toward the end of the bloody proceedings Nat is finally able to kill, and he kills—seemingly without qualm—a young woman named Margaret Whitehead, once described as “the belle of the county.” It is his only murder. And after that murder his insurrection seems to quickly run out of speed. Why?

These are two of those undecipherable facts so consequential that they can’t be sidestepped; indeed, for me they acquired such importance that my need to fathom their meaning became a dominant concern. And here it may be interesting to comment on the roles of the historian and the novelist, each of whom would be presented with different but overlapping opportunities to make sense of this terrible moment. Hewing more or less to the written record, both the historian and the novelist would be able to set the same scene, although the novelist would probably allow himself more descriptive breadth: the tranquility of a hot August day in the still countryside; the band of black marauders bursting out of the pinewoods and engulfing the simple whitewashed frame house where the sun-bonneted mother is swiftly decapitated by a muscular, screaming black man; the pretty young girl fleeing across the field, falteringly pursued by the Negro—irresolute at first, then determined—who, when she stumbles down in a heap, stabs her with his sword, then batters her head with a fence rail until she moves no more. Who was this Margaret Whitehead and what brought her together with Nat Turner? The facts tell us nothing else.

In the splenetic tone of the sixties, I was labeled “psychologically sick” and was accused of possessing “a vile racist imagination.”

For this reason the historian’s concern with Margaret Whitehead would most likely end here, and he would pass on to other matters. Let us pause for a moment. The killing of Margaret is near the climax of Nat Turner’s chronicle, and it might be a convenient place to reflect on the immense effect the uprising had on American history and how its violence may have helped churn up a larger violence undreamed of

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by even the most obdurate slaveholder in 1831. Throughout that year the Virginia legislature had been engaged in a debate concerning the abolition of slavery; because of strong antislavery feeling in the Piedmont region and the western counties, where slaves were few, it appeared likely that abolition would become a reality, if not immediately, then in the near-future. The Turner cataclysm caused a wave of fear to sweep through the state, as well as much of the rest of the South, and may have been the most important factor

in assuring the continuation of slavery in the Old Dominion. A legislator is reported to have said in public, “We’re going to lock the niggers in a cellar and throw away the key.” Had Virginia, with its great prestige among the states, abolished slavery during that critical time, the impact on the future (especially in terms of the possible avoidance of events leading to the Civil War) is awesome to contemplate.

But as a novelist I couldn’t abandon the relationship of Nat Turner and Margaret Whitehead to the vacuum into which it had been cast in the **Confessions**. It was nearly inconceivable that in the tiny bucolic cosmos of Southampton the two had not known each other, or had not been acquainted in some way. And if they had known each other, what was the nature of their affinity? Had she been cruel to him, slighted him, snubbed him, subjected him to some insult? Since she was his sole victim, could the entire rebellion have been conceived as his retribution against her? Farfetched perhaps, but history is full of catastrophes in which many have been sacrificed because of one person’s lethal wrath against another. Or was it something else entirely that bound them, something absurdly obvious, the very antithesis of hatred? Had they been lovers? This seemed unlikely, given one’s conviction about his basic asceticism. Perhaps, however, she had tempted him sexually, goaded him in some unknown way, and out of this situation had flowed his rage.

Perhaps nothing at all had occurred between them, and her death came merely as a needful act on the part of a man who, having been unable to kill, having failed to prove his manhood in front of his followers, desperately sought to destroy the nearest living body at hand. This I very much doubted, and rejected, though no one, of course, could ever know the truth. But it was my task—and my right—to allow my imagination to range over these questions

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and determine the nature of the mysterious bond between the black man and the young white woman. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* I strove to present a complex view of slavery, and Nat and Margaret's story would occupy a relatively small place in the larger scheme. But from the first page I was drawn irresistibly to that final scene of horror in the August heat, knowing that, to my own satisfaction at least, I had discovered a dramatic image for slavery's annihilating power, which crushed black and white alike, and in the end a whole society.

Several years after my novel appeared, two historians named Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender published a long essay entitled "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner." The essay was a carefully argued defense against the attacks on *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which were chiefly embodied in a polemical book called *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. Professors Gross and Bender made the interesting point that as a result of the extraordinary denunciation I had received, my book had been cast, as far as blacks were concerned, into the abyss. "Like the white schoolchildren in South Carolina at the turn of the century," they wrote, "who had to take an oath never to read Uncle Tom's Cabin because there was no truth in Mrs. Stowe, present-day blacks are being similarly assured that they can safely despise Mr. Styron's book without having to read it." There was a curious element of prophecy embedded in this statement, because much of the limbo status of *Nat Turner* (again insofar as black readers have been affected) has extended until the present day; as recently as the mid-1980s Paule Marshall, a fully grown black writer and a reputable one, was quoted in *The New York Times Book Review*—where she was playing a game in which writers were asked to name "Books I Never Finished Reading"—as saying that she never even started reading *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,

since she had been assured that the work was "racist."

The racist tag was affixed to the novel soon after the publication of *Ten Black Writers*, which appeared the summer after I spoke at Wilberforce. The book was published by Beacon Press, under the auspices of the Unitarian Universalist Association, a high-minded group ostensibly dedicated to preserving the truth. This collection, which contained critical pieces by largely well-known black intellectuals from various disciplines (English, sociology, psychiatry, history), along with several critics and fiction writers, was an extraordinary book by any standard; a collective *cri de coeur* of throbbing pain and rage, its overall lament

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was that I had written a malicious work, deliberately falsifying history, that was an affront to black people everywhere. The volume received much attention: the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*, two consecutive reviews in the daily *Times*, and so forth. There was nothing restrained about the assault; in the splenetic tone of the sixties I was labeled "psychologically sick," "morally senile," and was accused of possessing "a vile racist imagination." The major complaint was apparent from the book's first sentence: How dare a white man write so intimately of the black experience, even presuming to *become* Nat Turner by speaking in the first person?

Following close upon this indictment were other charges: that (aside from the outrageous business about the young white woman) I had "missed the beauty of the Afro-American idiom," that I had created an indecisive and emasculate wimp rather than the stalwart figure of history, that the text reflected an approving view of the paternalism of slavery, that my description of a fleeting homoerotic episode in adolescence meant that I regarded Nat as a "raving homosexual," that I had failed to give him a wife, that the secret agenda of the entire work was to demonstrate how the black struggle for freedom was doomed to failure—the bill of particulars was interminable. Virtually nothing in my work, according to these inquisitors, had merit; the most innocuous and tangential aspects of the novel received scathing treatment.

A couple of the essays, a bit less irate than the others, were at least well considered; they had in common the conviction that I had somehow missed the religious and emotional center of the black experience—and they may have been right. I knew from the beginning the hazards of setting foot in exotic territory and was aware that even though I was dealing with long-ago Virginia, instead of, say, Harlem or Watts (about which I would never have been able to write with authority), my stranger's perspective might not always ring true to black people. One of these more rational critics, who called *Nat Turner* a "tragedy" (in the noncomplimentary sense) and my figure of Nat "a caricature," expressed the general hurt and frustration he shared with his fellows by saying that "[Styron] has done nothing less...than create another chapter in our long and common agony. He has done it because we have allowed it, and we who are black must be men enough to admit that bitter fact. There can be no common history until we have first fleshed out the lineaments of our own, for no one else can speak out of the



# NAT TURNER REVISITED

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bittersweet bowels of our blackness.” Right or wrong, this was a civilized sentiment that I could take seriously.

But the prevailing tone was strident and crude, sounding very much like the agitprop flatulence of the 1930s. Over the entire enterprise hovered the spirit of the historian Herbert Aptheker, the official United States Communist party “theoretician,” who had done pioneering work on Nat Turner and American slave revolts in the 1930s and 1940s. A militant quotation from Aptheker set the tone of the book. Aptheker’s work had been ground-breaking and useful at a time when Negro history was almost totally neglected, but it was badly skewed by party dogma; his thesis that the institution of slavery was threatened by constant rebellion simply did not, and does not, hold up under scrutiny. He underestimated slavery’s suffocating might. My own view, shared by many students of the history of slavery, was that the institution in the United States was almost uniquely despotic, a closed system so powerful and totalitarian that organized insurrection was almost entirely precluded, though, of course, rebelliousness on an individual level was always present.

This overview necessarily dominated my *Nat Turner*. Aptheker, upon whose preserve I had so seriously poached, was incensed by my book and for a while trudged around the university circuit preaching a gospel in which I was cast as one of the supreme liars ever to write about American history. (He never seemed to grasp the fundamental fact that I had written a novel.) It was unfortunate that in *Ten Black Writers Respond* so many recklessly unprovable allegations were made; they were also written in shabby and slipshod rhetoric that even permeated the essays of well-thought-of black figures like the political scientist Charles V. Hamilton and the psychiatrist Alvin F. Poussaint; the impression left upon many people (including myself and those sympathetic to the black

cause) was of intellectual squalor. For me the most frustrating aspect of *Ten Black Writers Respond* was that writing filled with so much overheated absurdity should have acquired real authority in black America, causing my work to be lodged in a kind of black Index Expurgatorius from that point on, along with such overtly racist novels as *The Clansman* and *Mandingo*. Lest such a notation appear overstated, I would point out ample evidence of *Nat Turner*’s, being not only unread by blacks but in perpetual quarantine. This came from reports filtering back to me from black studies programs in the years up to the present. Several times I learned the dismal news that in specific courses *Ten Black Writers Respond* would be required reading, while *The Confessions of*

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*Nat Turner* was not listed. This has echoes of Alice chatting with the March Hare. I have often felt perversely gratified that my work could inspire such fear, though scarcely such stunning mindlessness.

Baldwin encouraged me to do what at first caused me hesitation: to take on the persona of Nat Turner and write as if from within this black man’s skin.

In my few ill-considered public appearances that year, when I was unwise enough to accept invitations to defend my fictional choices in front of predominantly young black audiences and tried to show the inner logic that dictated my interpretation of Nat Turner and some of his relationships, the result was disastrous. Writers of novels

should never defend themselves, but this was a somewhat special case. In these often raucous sessions, where the gathering was drenched with hostility, I would attempt to explain why I had made certain decisions. I observed, for example, that in the matter of one of the most inflammatory issues—that of Nat’s wife—the ten black writers had simply got it wrong. There was no documentary evidence of a wife, or the equivalent, and if there had been, my conscience would have compelled me to give him one, even though as a novelist I had no such strict obligation. Likewise Margaret Whitehead. A careful reading, I insisted, would show that Nat’s motivation was complex, flowing from a relationship containing hatred as well as love, but not the simpleminded lust claimed by the critics. This made little impression, the response was pitched between sneering disbelief and incomprehension, and for the first time in my life I began to share the clammy chagrin of those writers and artists who have stood before whatever intimidating tribunal, hopelessly defending their work to cold-eyed political regulators. By this time I was being stalked from Boston to New Orleans by a young dashiki-clad firebrand, who unnerved me. Somewhat belatedly, I realized

that *Nat Turner* was not, in this case, an aesthetic object but a political whipping boy—the most prominent one that the black activists possessed at the moment—and I quickly backed off from public view, letting others act as counsel for the defense.

I received as strong and vigorous a defense as a beleaguered writer could expect. I was especially well served by Eugene D. Genovese—who was then on his way to becoming the preeminent historian of American slavery and whose devotion to the black cause could scarcely be questioned—when he issued a massive rebuttal to the black essayists in *The New York Review of Books*; clearly as much dismayed as angered by the

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book's irrationality and philistinism, Genovese took up its main arguments one by one and effectively demolished them. This inflamed the black critics and their colleagues even more, and in counter-rebuttals that filled the back pages of the *The New York Review* the ugly debate raged on. Inevitably the storm died down, but the controversy has remained at a slow simmer until this day. Literally hundreds of articles have been written about the dispute, and at least four full-length books have appeared, including a ponderously comprehensive study of the entire affair that appeared only this year. Amid this vast scholarly debris it is possible to salvage at least a few commentaries whose insight and wisdom are worth preservation, and one of these is the Gross-Bender essay. Like Genovese, the historians deal harshly with the ten black writers and briskly dispose of their charges, but they have further illuminating things to say about the perennially enigmatic figure of Nat Turner and his place in our history.

They make the point that while Nat Turner was relatively obscure until my book appeared, he had "always belonged to those who used him—as a myth, as an imagined configuration of convictions, dreams, hopes and fears." What has helped make the man such a fascinating subject for speculation is his very inaccessibility. Neither historians nor writers of fiction have ever been able really to make much sense of the original document or to draw from it an identity with which everyone can agree by concluding: This is the historical truth. No firm truth can be established from such an incoherent text, or from the silhouette of the man, and, therefore, Nat has been the subject of wildly varying interpretation. One of the most prominent black historians of the nineteenth century, William Wells Brown, sallied forth on an ostensibly historical account but ended up drawing an elaborate imaginative portrait that resembled fiction; like me, he was

repelled by Nat's religious mania, and like me, he minimized or softened his biblical bloodthirstiness. In most other respects this chronicle by a historian plainly baffled by the obscurities and paradoxes of the record is as novelistic as mine. And Brown makes no mention of a Mrs. Nat Turner.

On the other hand, the illustrious Thomas Wentworth Higginson, ardent champion of black rights, was fascinated by Nat Turner and did supply the hero with a spouse in his account, which was quasi-historical or semifictional, depending on the reader's definition of this blurred region, but in any case almost totally fanciful. Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Washington Williams, and numerous other writers of the last century, both black and white, tried to pin Nat down,

MY PROBLEM WAS LESS  
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but this "black Spartacus," as he was termed by one commentator, utterly evaded a consistent portrayal; the fabled insurrectionist, mad or sane or simply beyond comprehension, was truly a chameleon. As recently as this year, in an off-Broadway play about the insurrection by a black playwright, Nat Turner's ultimate motivation for violence is the rape of his "wife" by slaveholder—acceptable enough if one subscribes to the principle of artistic license, but a far more flagrant deviation from prima facie evidence than anything in my own work. Gross and Bender conclude that my own attempt was "very much part of a tradition. Styron has 'used' Nat Turner as Gray, Higginson, Wells Brown,

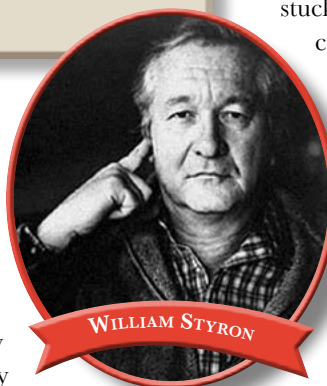
and, indeed, the accusing critics themselves have used him—reading into him, and out of him, those usable truths which seemed to him to coalesce about the image he was contemplating."

When I mentioned James Baldwin earlier, it was with the memory of our friendship and of the time when he was encouraging me to do what at first caused me hesitation, and that was to take on the persona of Nat Turner and write as if from within this black man's skin. Baldwin was wrestling with his novel *Another Country*, which deals intimately with white characters, and we both ultimately shared the conviction that nothing should inhibit the impulse that causes a writer to render experience that may be essentially foreign to his own world; it is a formidable challenge and among an artist's most valuable privileges. Baldwin's determination to pursue this course aroused the ire of many militant blacks, who saw such a preoccupation as frivolous and a betrayal of a commitment to the black cause. He stuck to his belief though his

conscience and his persistence brought him rebuke and bitter alienation. My attempt, of course, was an even greater effrontery, and after *Nat Turner* was published, Baldwin told an interviewer most accurately, "Bill's going to catch it from black and white." Some months later, when I saw him, he offered

me congratulations on the book's success and commiseration on the uproar, adding with the voracious full-throated Baldwin laughter that was one of his trademarks, "If you were just darker, it would be you, not me, who was the most famous black writer in America." It was at least partly true: my problem was less that of my work than that of my color.

Color and its tragedy, in this troubled year of 1992—which so resembles the troubled



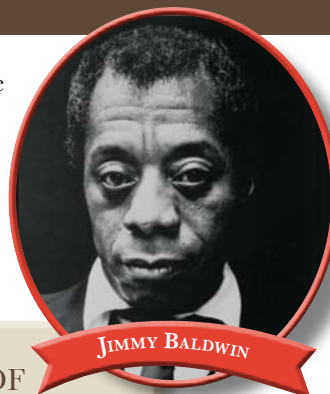
# NAT TURNER REVISITED

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year of 1967—has made me think often of James Baldwin and the stormy career of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Naturally I didn't create the book with a political or social agenda in view, but as Georg Lukács points out, historical novels that have no resonance in the present are bound to prove of only "antiquarian" interest; certainly in the back of my mind I had hoped that whatever light my work might shed on the dungeon of American slavery, and its abyssal 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—for despite what I've just said, I am far from believing that my book, or any novel, has any real relevance to the contemporary crisis—than the way in which it represents a continuation of that grim

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apartness that has defined racial relations in this country and that seems, from all signs and portents, to have worsened over the twenty-five years since *The Confessions of Nat Turner* appeared. That year much of Newark and Detroit burned down; this year

the fires of Los Angeles seem anniversary fires too cruelly symbolic to accept or believe.

It was typical of Jimmy Baldwin's intransigent spirit that he never truly abandoned hope. I doubt that he would give up hope, even today. A recent essay on Baldwin quoted some brave and lovely words of Jimmy's that reminded me of the time when he and I, with our boundless and defiant ambitions, were both setting out to break through the imprisoning walls of color and into the alluring challenge of alien worlds: "Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black, and black in white. We are part of each other." ♦



# NAT TURNER REVISTED

## THE REAL NAT TURNER

BY DR. MOLEFI KETE ASANTE

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<http://www.asante.net/articles/8/the-real-nat-turner/>

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There are those who say that history is indifferent, though enough has been written to distort African American history to suggest that someone is playing a game with us. This is quite clear in the case of Nat Turner, born 200 years ago. It is as if he could be sheathed in an interpretative garment with so many layers that you could never really know him. Yet there are some interesting developments around Turner's bicentennial. Symposia and seminars are planned and even a conference at Temple University on "The Meaning of Nat Turner" is scheduled for the Spring, 2000. There is even talk of Spike Lee making a movie of Nat Turner based on the discredited William Styron novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Although this novel won a Pulitzer Prize it was roundly attacked and severely criticized by some of the major African American writers and historians of the day. Thus, it is clear that the African American people have both a historical and emotional investment in Nat Turner and this interest in Nat Turner is not a new discovery, it is a permanent condition. Nat Turner's image in our consciousness does not come and go; it is a historical presence.

A recent article "Untrue Confessions" by Tony Horwitz reminded me that it is as true today as it was thirty years ago that "everybody talking bout Nat Turner don't know Nat Turner." Horwitz asks "Is most of what we know about Nat Turner wrong?" Because he asked the wrong question, he was never able to find the answer. The real question is, was Nat Turner right?

Speculative history written with hindsight often seeks to prove a point that could not be proved at the time of an event. Unfortunately this is not Horwitz's aim, rather he seeks to render the work of white southern novelist William Styron (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*) useful in understanding Nat Turner. To do this, Horwitz relies on Henry Louis Gates

and Cornel West; two Harvard professors, as well as Spike Lee to help resurrect a dead vision of Nat Turner. The fact that Styron was born in 1925 only a few miles away from the scene of Turner's revolt may have given him historical interest in Nat Turner, but Styron's novel robbed the meaning of a man's life. In fact, Styron's version of Nat Turner stole a people's collective response to oppression by trying to portray a maniacal Nat Turner.

Not long ago, after lecturing at the Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina, I drove a few miles north just over the state line to Southampton County Virginia where in 1800 Nat Turner was born as a precocious child. I have made a habit of visiting sacred sites of African deeds. I have meditated on the farm where Harriet Tubman

was born, walked among the oaks at night on Tuskegee's campus, slept in Amy Garvey's house in Kingston, and so forth. In some ways, religion is the deification of ancestors and my religion is African. It was not different when I walked along the roads of history in Virginia. On this land, I thought, as I walked near the historical marker indicating the revolt of Nat Turner, we, the people of a million births, were born once more during that slave revolt in August 1831.

Since Nat Turner's proactive strike against slavery, white authors beginning with Thomas Gray, who took his "confessions" have tried to mold a Nat Turner that they could put on an American stamp or stamp with the white American imagination. They are baffled by the fact that a black man rose up so provocatively against his oppression. What's wrong with Nat Turner, they seemed to ask? What is a slave revolt about if it is not about despoiling slavery?

Enriched by the memories of Africans, because we were not citizens until after



*Slave with club standing over body of white man holding whip.*

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, CENTER.

# NAT TURNER REVISITED

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the Civil War, whose vivid and conscientious impressions of Nat Turner were painted in a historical gallery of greatness, the children of Nat Turner knew as the late John Henrik Clarke knew, that “Nat Turner alone was sufficient to prove “that black people were worthy of being free people.” Like the ankh, the scarab beetle, the crucifix, Shango’s axe, and prayer beads, the iconic Nat Turner stirs in our hearts the desire for the sacred.

Soon after the publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Lerone Bennett, Vincent Harding, John O. Killens, John A. Williams, Alvin Pouissant, Mike Thelwell, and others wrote a thunderous response to what they saw as the betrayal of Nat Turner’s history in Styron’s work. Black Classic Press has recently re-issued the volume as *The Second Crucifixion of Nat Turner*. It was the last work edited by John Henrik Clarke.

Can the real Nat Turner stand up? Vincent Harding, author of *There is A River*, says William Styron “speaks and writes without comprehension of either the meaning of the drama, or the profound and bitter depths through which America continually moves towards the creation of a thousand Nat Turners, more real than (Styron’s) can ever be. When Thomas Gray gave his peroration on Nat Turner’s “Confessions” he wrote “I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins.” I do not know whether Thomas Gray was being melodramatic or not, but I do know that African men and women took heart in the fact that a black man could bring fear to whites. However, when Styron finished with Nat Turner

you wanted to have pity on a poor misdirected, distorted, twisted, fanatic, who did not know what he was doing. So we are still asking, can the real Nat Turner stand up? The novelist John O. Killens was perceptive when he said “there are thousands of Nat Turners in the city streets today.” In effect, Turner is standing up every day in the lives of black people dealing with the vicissitudes of racism.

The real Nat Turner was a revolutionary who believed in liberty. “Give me liberty or give me death” had reverberated from the Virginia Assembly nearly twenty-five years before Turner was born. Patrick Henry would be considered a saint for his commitment to liberty and Nat Turner would be reinvented as a fanatic for his determination for liberation. Such is the alchemy of racism. What could create such different orientations to men striking for freedom? Simply put, Nat Turner saw the white slaveholder as the enemy of justice, peace, and humanity and his struggle was for integrity. What drives the illusions of Turner periodically sent our way by white authors? I believe that they are trying to find an acceptable, non-heroic, and less-threatening Turner. But this cannot be done without re-writing large parts of the history of our enslavement,

omitting the fundamental deprivation of liberty and constructing an alternative explanation for the attempt to dehumanize us. I see in these whiten versions of Nat Turner an attempt to silence the voice of protest, militancy, anger, and righteous indignation. This is why Tony Horwitz must drag out a chorus of black post-modern problematizers so that when you see Nat Turner you will not know him. The idea is to dissect his mind and motives like the white surgeons dissected his body after execution.

In the *The Second Crucifixion of Nat Turner*, Lerone Bennett, the eminent historian of African American culture, wrote that in William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner*, we do not get the voice of Nat Turner. He says, “the voice in this confession is the voice of William Styron. The images are the images of William Styron. The confession is the confession of William Styron.”

Tony Horwitz, with the collaboration of African Americans who wish to problematize Nat Turner and any other black heroic figure, has tried to make Styron’s voice the voice of Nat Turner. William Styron was wrong in 1967 when he wrote *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and his Nat Turner remains silent today. It is the

voice of the white southerner that we hear in Styron’s novel. No amount of revivalism by vindicationists can rehabilitate Styron’s assault on the character of Nat Turner. I call the Africans who are called upon by whites to confirm their opinions of African actions, vindicationists of white fears. If Cornel West could be quoted by Horwitz as saying that Styron had struggled to understand the common

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history of whites and blacks Cornel West was wrong. Nat Turner did not come out of any common history of whites and blacks and William Styron knew that fact in 1967 and we all know that now.

Turner’s vision meant death to the racist. His interpretation of his situation was more Favonian than Freudian in the sense that he understood that violence against the slaveholders would show his humanity because it was human to have rage at evil and seek to overcome it. No, there was no commonality between what Turner wanted and what his slave-owners wanted. These two views were polar opposites. They were as different as valleys and mountains. No amount of gainsaying can make Nat Turner and the slave-owners brothers in a common quest. Their heavens were as different as their hells.

Henry Louis Gates told Horwitz that the assault on Styron by “black intellectuals came at the height of Black Power, of the super-macho, super-stud Black Panthers, with their guns, leather, and berets. Styron’s version of Nat Turner was simply unreadable to these people, and they didn’t want a white to write about it, particularly in that way.” Once again Henry Gates has

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misunderstood the essence of the African American community's massive response to Styron's **The Confessions of Nat Turner**. If Styron had written his twisted interpretation of Nat Turner today it would have generated the same heat and same criticism. Styron raped the image of Nat Turner and presented a disemboweled version of an African hero.

How could a white Virginia writer choose to place himself in the mind of the most iconic of African heroes and expect to go unchallenged? Styron puts himself in the first person as Nat Turner. Wasn't this the same presumption that whites had taken during the enslavement and afterwards? To take one of the greatest African American icons and reduce his revolt against the racist institution to religious and sexual fanaticism remains, even now, sacrilegious. What would a Native American say if a white person chose to write of Geronimo or Cochise in the first person and make their campaign against white settlers turn on some imagined idea of sex with a white woman? Is there no other reality to the life of a person enslaved, dehumanized, and brutalized? Are the daily visitations of abuse against one's fellows not enough to create in a person a strong desire for freedom? Nat Turner's victory over enslavement can be found in his challenge of the system and his strike against our debasement.

Clearly, his image as an African American revolutionary retains its potency because we are confronted by racial subtleties fossilized in American institutions. If the times do not demand a messianic force, a heroic persona, then truly the times always require a thousand Harriets and Nats who can discern the numerous ways we are victimized and show the way to victory. In the pursuit of freedom one is either a collaborator with the enemy or an aggressive proponent of justice.

One wonders why Horwitz, writing in the **New Yorker** could even try to resurrect Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner as a tortured, tormented fanatic lusting after a white woman? Nat Turner's deliberate revolt against the white slaveholders had more to do with his hatred of slavery than with anything else. There is nothing in Turner's history that demonstrates this idea of revolution based on sexual fantasy. His was not some projection of whiteness as purity or saintliness; what he saw was what David Walker had seen: a corrupt, rotten, brutal system of degradation. He became in his own mind the Lion of Virginia conquering evil in the name of God. He was the first breeze of the whirlwind that was to be in Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X.

I believe that Styron's **Nat Turner** came from the imagination of a writer bent on showing that Nat Turner had more love for white people than the radicals of the 1960s. In fact Nat Turner and the

revolutionary activists of the Sixties were interested in the defeat of racism, oppression, and white supremacy. Both recognized that white supremacy was an abnormal, anti-God, unholy, and unfair system. They both tapped the abundant spring of American hypocrisy. They knew the white racial ideology of dominance, having felt its sting. But the idolatry of whiteness lost its power in the confrontation with black visions of freedom.

The American society has always feared rebellion from black folk.

It is quite metaphysical, like the national conscience recognizes that something is wrong with the way we have been treated. Consequently, if whites could find someone to throw white paint on our black faces, to disfigure us, to distort our reality, to main our history, then they would feel more comfortable with us. Therefore, if a white writer, with black assistants, could blunt the edge of our rage, if he could problematize our heroes or add layers of complexity to our heroes' motives, he could thwart our anger, eradicate our demands for justice, and eliminate the need for reparations.

Why is it that Alexander Crummell, Marcus Garvey, Nat Turner, and Malcolm X have drawn such drastic postmodern attempts at redefinition? Is it not possible for an African person to be clear about anything, but particularly clear about racism in America? David Walker will be the next individual to be problematized, after all, he thought "white Christian Americans" were the most hypocritical and degenerate people on the face of the earth. Shall we now await a white author and black

assistants to tell us that David Walker was crazy?

Of course I am perhaps over-stretching the case in order to demonstrate that when our history is not in our own hands we are in danger of transmitting a jaundiced view of ourselves to posterity.

The governor of Virginia, John Floyd, knew the power of Nat Turner's rebellion. Floyd spoke to the Virginia Assembly on December 6, 1831, and he said "I am fully persuaded the spirit of insubordination which has and still manifests itself in Virginia, had its origin among the Yankee population, upon their first arrival amongst us, but most especially the Yankee pedlars and traders. The course has been by no means a direct one. They began first by making them religious in their conversations which were of the character of telling the blacks, God was no respecter of persons, the black man was as good as the white, that all men were born free and equal, that they cannot serve two masters."

John Floyd believed that the slaves who learned to read also read David Walker. The appearance of David Walker's "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World" provoked much discussion and

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concern among whites. Furthermore, it was the most passionately logical African treatise in support of revolt against slavery of its time and perhaps of all time. Even if it is true as some claim that we do not know if Walker inspired Nat Turner, it is true that the conditions both responded to were universal in North America.

I asked myself why Nat Turner has inspired generations of Africans and created great fear in the white population, a fear that comes out even in statements as contemporary as Horwitz's notion of Nat Turner as someone on a "rampage" with the idea of "massacring" white people. Why couldn't Nat Turner be at war with the enemies of justice and fair-play, the bearers of evil, and the sustainers of degradation? In fact, if anything, whites had systematically massacred black and Native Americans and "rampaged" across the continent killing and looting. We had been looted from Africa. Didn't white people have the freedom and the "right" to kill any Africans, to wantonly shoot down an enslaved person, to rape any black woman at will, to sell parents' children to another plantation against their will, to act like God on earth?

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Had not thousands of blacks been murdered for trivial reasons? Wouldn't the havoc and macabre killing of black women and children after the revolt be enough to suggest that the revolt had been justified? Hadn't whites killed the innocent without remorse? Wasn't Nat Turner responding to centuries of indignities and malicious actions?

Nat Turner's emergence as a revolutionary in 1831 came on the heels of the 1825 emigration to Haiti of thousands of Africans from the United States, and David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World in 1829. Fired up with indignation, David Walker had written like this: "the whites have always been an unjust, jealous, unmerciful and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority." Walker was convinced that no people had ever suffered such "barbarous cruelties" as Africans at the hands of white Christian Americans. The events of Southampton County occurred during the same period as the United States was removing Native Americans to Oklahoma in the Trail of Death.

Turner grew organically out of the soil of the African people. He felt what the masses felt and experienced what they experienced. He lived in one of the most repressive regimes in the history of the world during its most oppressive time. To speak of the enslavement

as if it were a genteel world is to debase the memory of the ancestor who struggled against the vilest form of degradation.

### WHAT WERE THE FACTS OF THE REBELLION AS THEY HAVE COME TO US THROUGH HISTORY?

**October 2, 1800** Nat Turner born

**1822** Nat Turner was sold to Thomas Moore after Samuel Turner, his owner died.

**1825** Nat Turner had his first vision about freedom

**August 13, 1831** Signs in the sky appeared that suggested to Nat Turner that he should prepare for the rebellion

**August 20, 1831** Nat Turner asks Henry Porter and Hark Travis to help plan the revolt

**August 21, 1831** Hark Travis, Henry Porter, Samuel Francis, Will Francis, Nelson Williams meet at a pond and cook a pig. They are joined by Nat Turner at 3 PM. They are prepared for war by Nat Turner. He assumes the title of General Cargill. Henry Porter becomes paymaster.

**August 22, 1831** They leave around 2 AM to begin their attacks. They ride their horses at breakneck speed to create terror and to prevent escape from the slave owners' homes.

**August 22, 1831** By noon, Nat Turner had sixty mounted men, ready to march on the village of Jerusalem. They killed 61 whites. They met first resistance from armed whites.

**August 23, 1831** 7AM Turner's forces met armed slaveholders, more than 100 white men.

**August 23, 1831** By 9 AM men are leaving Nat to return to the plantations. Many of them would later be killed.

**October 30, 1831** Nat Turner was captured

**November 5, 1831** Nat Turner was tried and found guilty.

**November 11, 1831** He was executed and his body mutilated. More than 200 people were killed by whites in the aftermath.

Nat Turner was not a freak. He was a self-determining African who could not live as a slave. We know enough about him to know that he loved African people and saw his history as intimately connected with that of his fellows. Scot French of the University of Virginia is quoted as saying, "About all we know for sure is that fifty-seven whites died. We have the bodies." However, we also know that more than two hundred men, women, children, were killed by whites. They must not remain unmentioned upon nor silent in history.

In the end, Styron's novel cannot be the basis of a depiction of Nat Turner. Listen to Styron's Nat Turner as he is about to go to the gallows:

"...I feel the warmth flow into my loins and my legs tingle with desire, I tremble and I search for her face in my mind, seek the young body, yearning for her suddenly, with a craving beyond pain; with tender stroking motions I **our** out my love within her; pulsing

# NAT TURNER REVISITED

## THE REAL NAT TURNER

— CONTINUED —

flood; she arches against me, cries out, and the twain—black and white—are one.”

If you accept this you believe that Nat Turner did not want to kill the slave-owner he wanted to sleep with the slave owner’s wife. John O. Killens writes that “there is nothing that suggests that Nat had no love whatever for black women, which is how Styron depicts him. As a matter of fact, he was married to one, but you wouldn’t know this from the novel.” Was the lust after a white woman the only reason Styron’s *Nat Turner* had a voice against enslavement? Can only black men married to or lusting after white women have voice because it will be a voice of confusion, a freak show of Hollywood proportions? Is this the Turner of Spike Lee’s interest? Vincent Harding is right, they done “took my Nat and gone.”

Was Turner crazy? Was Patrick Henry? Is the real Nat Turner dead? Is God dead? By all accounts Nat Turner was not insane, despite the drawing accompanying Tony Horwitz’ piece in the New Yorker, depicting a brooding madman. Furthermore,

Turner remains close to the surface of every African American who thinks about the historical conditions that are derived from the enslavement. He is neither dead nor dying in our imagination and history.

The plan carried out by Nat Turner and his cohorts shows

him as a rather reflective and mature thinker and his activities were consistent with the best examples of leadership. He demonstrated both gravitas and charisma. There is no question that he was passionate, energetic, committed, and dedicated to the eradication of slavery and this is the generator for our continuing struggle. He has earned his place in the panoply of revolutionary icons such as Boukman,

Dessalines, Zumbi, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Delgres, Yanga, Harriet Tubman, Nanny, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and John Cavallo. Therefore, at the dawn of a new century, the second since his birth, Nat Turner remains elegantly and elaborately wrapped in the fabric of resistance to domination and it is this Turner, above all, that African Americans know and hold dear. ♦

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# NAT TURNER REVISTED

## ABOLITION/SLAVERY TIMELINE

BY KIMBERLY HASE GALEK

DIRECTOR—EDUCATIONAL SERVICES | [www.4score.org](http://www.4score.org)

**1775**

Pennsylvania Abolition Society formed in Philadelphia, the first abolition society in America.

**1777**

Constitution of the Vermont Republic bans slavery.

**1780**

Pennsylvania passes An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, freeing future children of slaves. Those born prior to the Act remain enslaved for life. The Act becomes a model for other Northern states. Last slaves freed 1847.

**1783**

Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court rules slavery illegal based on 1780 state constitution. All slaves are immediately freed.

**1783**

New Hampshire begins a gradual abolition of slavery.

**1784**

Connecticut begins a gradual abolition of slavery, freeing future children of slaves, and later all slaves.

**1784**

Rhode Island begins a gradual abolition of slavery.

**1787**

The United States in Congress Assembled passed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 outlawing any new slavery in the Northwest Territories.

**1804**

New Jersey begins a gradual abolition of slavery, freeing future children of slaves. Those born prior to the Act remain enslaved for life.

**1808**

In United States, Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves takes effect 1 Jan.

**1817**

New York State sets a date of July 4, 1827 to free all its slaves.

**1820**

Missouri Compromise 1820 in U.S. prohibits slavery north of a line (36°30') except in Missouri.



*An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, March 1, 1780, above. Two slave children who were recently emancipated., right.*



# NAT TURNER REVISITED

## ABOLITION/SLAVERY TIMELINE

— CONTINUED —

**1828**

New York State abolishes slavery. Children born between 1799 and 1827 are indentured until age 25 (females) or age 28 (males).

**1831**

The **Liberator**, an abolitionist newspaper, begins publication

**1831**

Nat Turner's Rebellion

**1833**

William Lloyd Garrison establishes the American Antislavery Society in Philadelphia. Within five years, the organization has more than 1300 chapters and an estimated 250,000 members

**1850**

Compromise of 1850 admits California as a free state and allows New Mexico Territory to vote on slavery.

**1850**

In the United States, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 requires return of escaped slaves

**1854**

The Kansas-Nebraska Act opened the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, allowing residents to vote on slavery

**1857**

Dred Scott Case: US Supreme Court Rules that Scott is **able** to sue for freedom because as a slave he is not a citizen or a person.

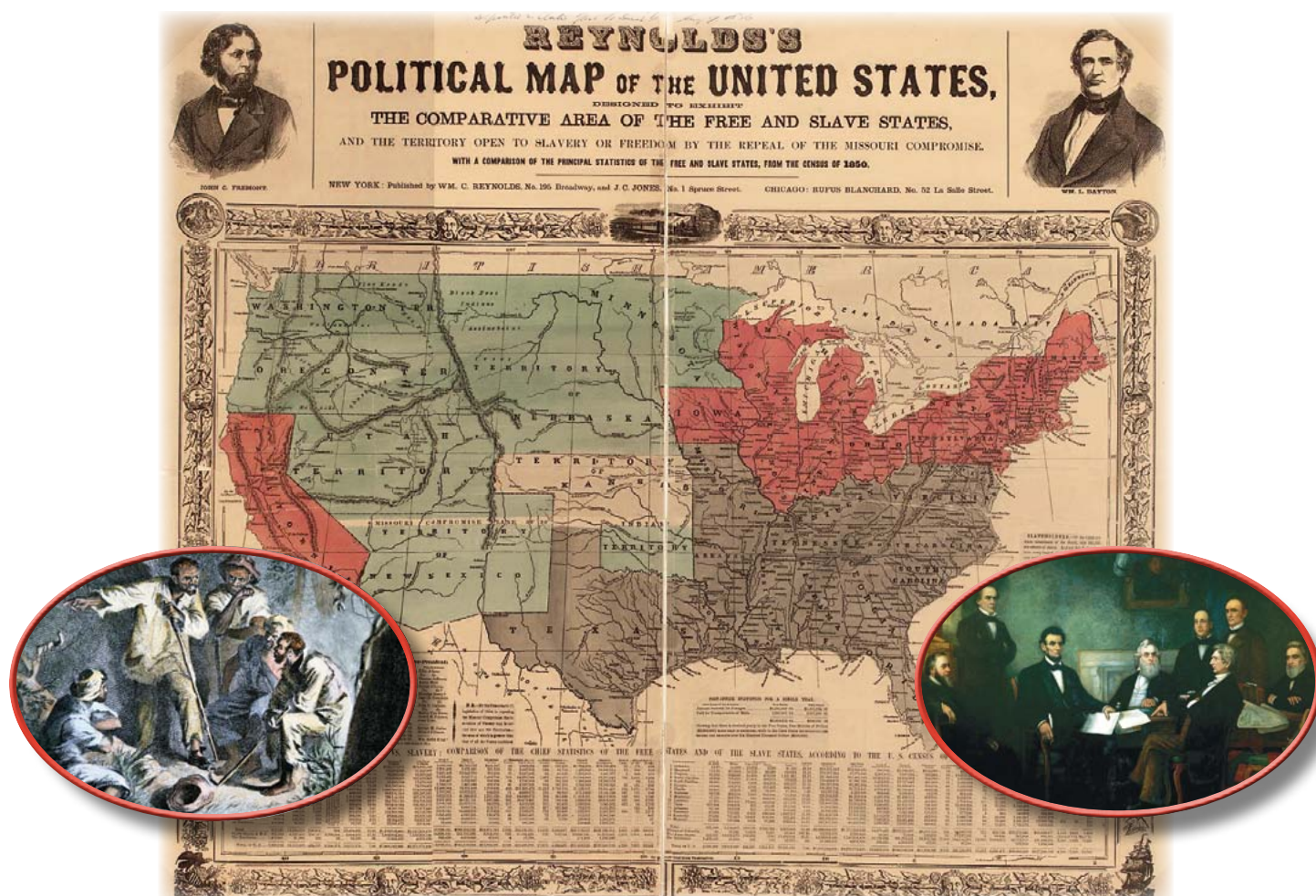
**1863**

In the United States, Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation which declared slaves in Confederate-controlled areas to be freed. Most slaves in "border states" are freed by state action; separate law freed the slaves in Washington, DC.

**1865**

December: US abolishes slavery with the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution; about 40,000 remaining slaves are affected.

*Nat Turner's Rebellion in the planning, bottom left. A map of the Comparative area of the Free and Slave States, center. The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, bottom right.*





# NAT TURNER REVISTED

## THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

TO THE PUBLIC (Transcribed)

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=ody\\_rbcmisc&fileName=ody/ody0108/ody0108page.db&recNum=2&itemLink=r?ammem/aaodyyssey:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(rbcmisc+ody0108\)\)&linkText=0](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=ody_rbcmisc&fileName=ody/ody0108/ody0108page.db&recNum=2&itemLink=r?ammem/aaodyyssey:@field(NUMBER+@band(rbcmisc+ody0108))&linkText=0)

### TO THE PUBLIC.

The late insurrection in Southampton has greatly excited the public mind, and led to a thousand idle, exaggerated and mischievous reports. It is the first instance in our history of an open rebellion of the slaves, and attended with such atrocious circumstances of cruelty and destruction, as could not fail to leave a deep impression, not only upon the minds of the community where this fearful tragedy was wrought, but throughout every portion of our country, in which this population is to be found. Public curiosity has been on the stretch to understand the origin and progress of this dreadful conspiracy, and the motives which influence its diabolical actors. The insurgent slaves had all been destroyed, or apprehended, tried and executed, (with the exception of the leader,) without revealing any thing at all satisfactory, as to the motives which governed them, or the means by which they expected to accomplish their object. Every thing connected with this sad affair was wrapt in mystery, until NAT TURNER, the leader of this ferocious band whose name has resounded throughout our widely extended empire, was captured. This "great Bandit" was taken by a single individual, in a cave near the residence of his late owner, on Sunday, the thirtieth of October, without attempting to make the slightest resistance; and on the following day, safely lodged in the jail of the County. His captor was Benjamin Phipps, armed with a shot gun well charged. Nat's only weapon was a small light sword which he immediately surrendered, and begged that his life might be spared. Since his confinement, by permission of the Jailor, I have had ready access to him, and finding that he was willing to make a full and free confession of the origin, progress and consummation of the insurrectory movements of the slaves of which he was the contriver and head; I determined for the gratification of public curiosity to commit his statements to writing, and publish them, with little or no variation, from his own words. That this is a faithful record of his confessions, the annexed certificate of the County Court of Southampton, will attest. They certainly bear one stamp of truth and sincerity. He makes no attempt (as all the other insurgents who were examined did,) to exculpate himself, but frankly acknowledges his full participation in all the guilt of the transaction. He was not only the contriver of the conspiracy, but gave the first blow towards its execution.

It will thus appear, that whilst every thing upon the surface of society wore a calm and peaceful aspect; whilst not one note of preparation was heard to warn the devoted inhabitants of woe and death, a gloomy fanatic was revolving in the recesses of his own dark, bewildered and overwrought mind, schemes of indiscriminate massacre to the whites. Schemes too fearfully executed as far as his fiendish band proceeded in their desolating march. No cry for mercy penetrated their flinty bosoms. No acts of remembered kindness made the least impression upon these remorseless murderers. Men, women and children, from hoary age to helpless infancy were involved in the same cruel fate. Never did a band of savages do their work of death more unsparingly. Apprehension for their own personal safety seems to have been the only principle of restraint in the whole course of their bloody proceedings. And it is not the least remarkable feature in this horrid transaction, that a band actuated by such hellish purposes, should have resisted so feebly, when met by the whites in arms. Desperation alone, one would think, might have led to greater efforts. More than twenty of them attacked Dr. Blunt's house on Tuesday morning, a little before day-break, defended by two men and three boys. They fled precipitately at the first fire; and their future plans of mischief, were entirely disconcerted and broken up. Escaping thence, each individual sought his own safety either in conceal-

### TRANSCRIPTION:

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# NAT TURNER REVISTED

## MY FAVORITE HISTORICAL NOVEL

BY JOHN DEMOS

<http://www.americanheritage.com/content/my-favorite-historical-novel?page=show>



“I am an eager reader of such works, leaving aside the matter of “professional interest.” I’ve almost come to think that good novelists do better with at least some aspects of historical re-creation than “good” historians do. Two books come immediately to mind. William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* seems to me to convey the inner feel (for lack of a better term) of slavery better than any scholarly work I can think of. (And that is going some, since slavery has been a particularly lustrous area of scholarship in recent years.) I have a similar response to Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*, which I frequently recommend to my students as the best single book on family history. Again, my criterion is “inner feel”—the specific textures of experience, the subjective alongside the objective dimension. Why, I find myself asking, can’t we historians do as well? The answer may be that we know more than we customarily allow ourselves to say.”

—John Demos, *Professor of History, Yale University*



# NAT TURNER REVISTED

## THE CONFESSIONS OF WILLIAM STYRON

BY YVONNE FRENCH

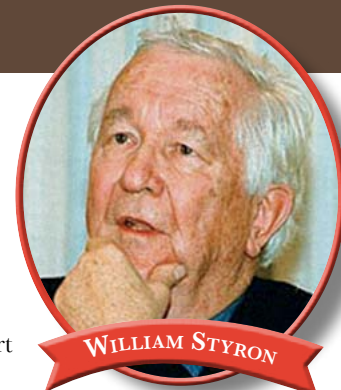
RENOWNED AUTHOR SPEAKS AT LIBRARY WITH BIOGRAPHER

<http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9812/styron.html>



YVONNE FRENCH

**William Styron, 73, made a rare public appearance at the Library of Congress, where he defended *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which was labeled racist in the 1960s, and announced that Spike Lee may make a movie about it.**



WILLIAM STYRON

Room audience during the Nov. 4 Center for the Book “Books & Beyond” lecture. He was accompanied by his biographer, James L.W. West III, who made use of the Styron papers at the Library to write *William Styron: A Life* (Random House, 1998).

The event also included a special screening of “Shadrach,” a first-run film by Mr. Styron’s daughter, Susanna Styron. It is based on Mr. Styron’s short story of the same name.

Ten of Mr. Styron’s original manuscripts, typescripts and galleys were on display at the reading. American Literature Manuscript Historian Alice L. Birney brought a magnifying glass so people could see Mr. Styron’s tiny handwriting in the manuscript of *Set This House on Fire*. She learned that he still writes in pencil on legal paper and has a typist transcribe it. “Handwritten manuscripts reveal questions about the author’s creative process,” said Ms. Birney, who also displayed the handwritten manuscript and original printer’s typescript of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

*Nat Turner* was published in 1967 to wide acclaim and criticism. It is based on the true story of Nat Turner, who led a slave revolt in southeastern Virginia in 1831.

“When I began *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in the summer of 1962 ... Martin Luther King was offering the hand of fellowship to the American community, preaching reconciliation, amity and antiracism. In the evolution of a revolution, 1967, when it was published, was a time of cataclysmic change in the United States. ‘Black power’ reared its head, and when it pounced, it pounced partially on my book. I was especially lacerated and hurt that it was labeled racist. That was hard to take for a writer who attempted to expose the horrors and evils of slavery.” He spoke of trying to figure out Turner’s motivation. “It was a powerful book that satisfied my ideal for a novel.”

His voice wavering audibly for the only time during the discussion, he added: “Basically it is a very politically incorrect book written by a white man trying to seize his own interpretation

and put it into the soul and heart of a black man.”

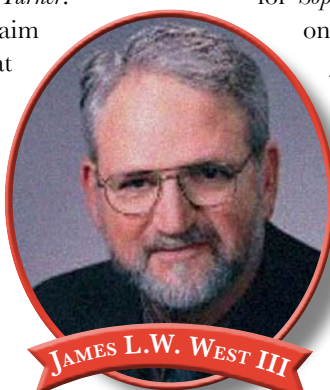
Yet later, in answer to a question from the audience about the outcry that his book *Sophie’s Choice* had “poached on someone else’s turf,” as Mr. Styron rephrased the question, the author defended the right of an artist to portray what he wants. “There will always be a complaint from people who see writing as a province where one should remain rooted in one’s own experience. My view is that one of the glories of artistic creation is to transcend the barriers of race and gender and exploit talent to its fullest and to hell with barriers of race, gender, etcetera.”

Susanna Styron said she knew when she first read “Shadrach,” in 1973, that she wanted to make a movie of it. “The characters were vivid and full; the themes were clear and rich.” She quipped that it took her 90 minutes to tell in film what her father told in 28 pages.

Mr. Styron prefaced the screening by telling his inspiration for the short story. He had been in Auschwitz, Poland, doing research for *Sophie’s Choice* and had just arrived home in Virginia, only to run in to an old high school friend at a “joke joint.” The friend told him of an aged former slave who had walked from Alabama to his father’s place in town and asked to be buried on the farm where he had grown up. The story is about how the friend’s family looked after Shadrach in his last days. In the film, Harvey Keitel portrays the father, a prototype of a moonshine-brewing, hard-drinking Southern man who uses his jealousy to drive Shadrach back to the former plantation in King and Queen County on Virginia’s Eastern Shore and obliging his last wishes despite some interference from the law.

The film is rich in visual and aural texture. Weathered houses have bowed-out screen doors that slam amid the thick incidental sound of summer crickets singing in nighttime fields.

This was the very milieu that Mr. West had begun to investigate in Newport News, Va., in 1985, ostensibly for a study of Mr. Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness*. Later, when he saw Mr. Styron at Martha’s Vineyard, he told him: “I seem to be working on a biography.”



JAMES L.W. WEST III

# NAT TURNER REVISITED

## THE CONFESSIONS OF WILLIAM STYRON

— CONTINUED —

“Why don’t you go on and see what happens,” Mr. Styron graciously replied.

Mr. West said that as Mr. Styron’s first biographer he wanted to establish the discourse as “high and serious.” To do so, he used the Styron papers at both the Library and Duke University, interviewed friends and relatives and talked with Mr. Styron himself. Mr. Styron was generally helpful, but one question Mr. West asked of him in 1987 was not answered until 1993, Mr. West said. “Finally [Mr. Styron] said, ‘You and I are working on the same territory.’ He didn’t want my vision to interfere with his.”

Mr. Styron and his wife, Rose, who attended the discussion, read the book before publication and made a few suggestions when things weren’t exactly as they remembered. ♦

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*Mr. West has studied Mr. Styron’s life and career for more than 20 years, chronicling not just the literary career but his family background and political activism, including his presence at the 1968 Democratic national convention in Chicago, and his long-term opposition to the death penalty. Mr. West is Distinguished Professor of English at Pennsylvania State University and general editor of the Cambridge edition of the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald.*

*During a question and answer period, Mr. West said Set This House on Fire is central to the Styron canon. “It gives you a blueprint for the intellectual concerns and approach to life of all the books that would follow.” All, that is, except perhaps for Mr. Styron’s widely read nonfiction book, Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness (1990), which helped destigmatize the clinical depression from which he at one time suffered.*

