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Unhealed Cultural Memories: Styron's Nat Turner

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William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner, a novel about the leader of a slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831, was highly praised after its publication in 1967. Then African American essayists in William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond took issue with the novel and rejected Styron's asserted right to reimagine Nat Turner's life and to assume his voice, claiming their rights of racial heritage and historical accuracy to castigate Styron for his offensive presumption. That distant argument of unshared assumptions and crossed purposes between high-minded and hypersensitive artists and intellectuals of another day may throw refracted light on the heated and principled divisions over racial issues expressed on campuses, on city streets, and in the media in our time.

In the late fall of 2015, while days darkened early and leaves swirled in the wind, discontent stirred on college campuses and on city streets across the land. African Americans protested racial insults and other expressions of perceived prejudice. "I have been called the N-word too many times to count," Cynthia Frisby, a professor at the University of Missouri, said.¹ As a result of such protests, the president of the University of Missouri system and the provost of the Columbia University campus resigned. Similar demonstrations took place at Yale University over the firing of a house master who questioned those who urged racial and gender sensitivity limits on Halloween costumes. At Amherst College students conducted a sit-in at the Robert Frost Library, protesting the college's "institutional legacy of white supremacy" and all associations, including their college sports teams' nickname the "Lord Jeffs," with Lord Jeffrey Amherst, who advocated germ warfare against Native Americans."² At Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson, former president of the university and of the nation, was held up as a racist. At the same time, in response to a series of police shootings of young African American men caught on video, street demonstrations developed in several cities under the banner "Black Lives Matter." The *New York Times* columnist Charles M. Blow suggested that "black bodies are a battlefield: black folks fight to defend them as external forces fight to destroy them."³

While outrage at the police shootings was general, the response to verbal and symbolic insults on campuses was more mixed and nuanced. In the words of another *Times* columnist, Nicholas Kristof, "we have two noble forces colliding with explosive force": the conflict between those who seek to censor or suppress verbal or other expressions of prejudice and those who defend these on the grounds of free speech.⁴ Divided over what to think about the campus conflicts of convictions, sympathetic to both sides, I remembered a similar cultural debate that flared nearly half a century ago after the publication of William Styron's 1967 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. That distant argument of unshared assumptions and crossed purposes between high-minded and hypersensitive artists and intellectuals of another day may throw

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refracted light on the heated and principled divisions over racial issues expressed on campuses, on city streets, and in the media in our time.

William Styron claimed the right of free artistic expression for his novelized portrayal of Nat Turner, the slave who led an August 1831 rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, that resulted in fifty-five white deaths; this was followed first by bloody, widespread, and indiscriminate retaliation by slave owners against their slaves, then by the capture and execution of Nat Turner. In his “Author’s Note” to *Confessions*, Styron declares his “intention to try to recreate a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an ‘historical novel’ in conventional terms than a meditation on history.”⁵ “Meditation” implies personal investment in the object of contemplation and Styron deeply invested himself in his portrayal of Nat Turner.⁶ After months of sustained praise for the novel, African American essayists in *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968) took issue with the novel and rejected Styron’s asserted right to reimagine Nat Turner’s life and to assume his voice, claiming their rights of racial heritage and historical accuracy to castigate Styron for his offensive presumption.⁷

When I was invited to review *The Confessions of Nat Turner* for *The Nation* in October 1967, I had no notion that Styron’s novel would be fought over these issues and become a battlefield over Nat Turner’s body and story. At the time I knew only the outline of the Nat Turner rebellion. Styron took his title from an account of the rebellion written by Thomas Gray, the lawyer who interviewed Turner after his trial and before his execution. Gray’s document is both informative in capturing some of Turner’s words and suspect in displaying its proslavery racism, yet invaluable since no other reliable source exists.⁸ Seventy years after the rising, William Sidney Drewry, a proslavery southern historian, interviewed several aged survivors and took pictures of houses owned by whites who were attacked by slaves. Drewry advanced the myth of Turner’s madness and the exceptionalism of his act.⁹ Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943) provides a broader context for the Nat Turner rising but exaggerates the extent of slave rebellions.¹⁰ It would take Styron’s novel and the protest around it to bring this horrific tale to wider awareness.

Though I had a lot to learn about Nat Turner, before I reviewed his novel I knew something about Styron, for I had written about his earlier works. Indeed I may have been invited to review *Confessions* for *The Nation* because I had published an essay on Styron’s previous fiction: *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), *The Long March* (1952), and *Set the House on Fire* (1960). In these works I found “a vision of life which is complex, formidable, and important as well as bleak and poignant.”¹¹ *Confessions* proved to be all of that and more.

In my review for *The Nation* I note Styron’s risk-taking in assuming Nat Turner’s voice through a first-person narrative but praise his courage for doing so. “Styron chances a daring, imaginative leap into a tormented black psyche to better understand himself and his country,” and he followed the urging of his friend James Baldwin to “find a way of living with the Negro to be able to live with himself.”¹² Baldwin and Styron had bonded, in part, because they each had a family history of slavery. As James L. West III, Styron’s biographer, notes, “Styron’s grandmother had been a slave owner; Baldwin’s grandfather and grandmother had both been slaves.”¹³ Seen by many as a model for Styron’s characterization of the slave rebel, Baldwin told an interviewer “Yes, I think there’s some of me in Nat Turner.” Baldwin appeared to grant Styron racial and novelistic sanction for his assumed voice and reconstructed narrative of Nat Turner’s rebellion. “He has begun the common history—ours.”¹⁴ Baldwin’s statement concludes *Newsweek*’s laudatory piece on *Confessions*, but this would prove to be far from the final word on Styron or on his novel from the wider African American community.

Styron, I would later learn from his letters, was also attempting a novelistic projection into a voice far removed from his consciousness and experience. As he wrote to Robert Penn Warren, a composer of less risky historical fictions, Styron “noticed that few if any books written by white men had ever been written from this black viewpoint and—come to think of it—maybe this very fact caused me to try it, caused me to risk it.”¹⁵ Styron’s description of Nat Turner’s killing of only one white person—Margaret Whitehead, an eighteen-year-old southern belle—climaxed the novel and raised the ambiguous issue of Nat Turner’s humanity, which could be seen as either lost or found through this act of violence. Styron, as I conclude in my review, showed Nat Turner to be both “sympathetic and right” when he led “a majestic black army of the Lord” against the white power structure that promised but then denied him human acceptance.¹⁶

Confessions was also well-received by more distinguished reviewers. Alfred Kazin praised the novel (“a wonderfully evocative portrait”) in *Book World*, as did Philip Rahv (“the best by an American writer that has appeared in some years”) in the *New York Review of Books*. *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and *Commentary* reviewers agreed. George Steiner in the *New Yorker* praised the novel’s artistic achievement and its contemporary relevance: “a fiction of the complex relationship between a present-day white man of deep southern roots and the Negro in today’s whirlwind.”¹⁷ Though a few reservations were registered, Styron had ample evidence to believe that his novel had been received as he intended—a “meditation” on “the common history” of black and white Americans. He was also, as he wrote to a friend in February 1967, “both flabbergasted and delighted” at the financial success of the novel before its publication: \$150,000 from the Book-of-the-Month Club plus discussions of movie deals.¹⁸ In November 1967 Styron was applauded and awarded an honorary degree at Wilberforce University, an all-black university in Ohio. He told his audience that “when all is done it is love that is still our last, our only hope.”¹⁹ That hope proved transient a few months later when Styron received unloving criticism.

Confessions won the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 1970 William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. But a backlash of criticism began to appear in 1968, particularly among black critics and readers. As Christopher Lehmann-Haupt summarizes this literary-historical tempest in his 1996 *New York Times* obituary for Styron, “in the furious debate that followed, several admirers of ‘Nat Turner’ recanted, and the question was raised whether white people could even understand black history—a position that to some seemed racist in itself.”²⁰

Professional historians joined the debate over the legitimacy of Styron’s representation of Turner and his rebellion. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. validated Styron’s fusion of history and fiction. C. Vann Woodward, finding the historical sources for information on Turner and his rising “miniscule,” wrote, “If there were ever a free hand for a novelist, this was it.”²¹ Martin Duberman framed the issue in one essay, asking, “Can a writer simultaneously be true to the past and to himself?” Then he answered his own question in another essay, which attacked Aptheker for his political slant and his exaggeration of black rebellions.²² In sum: many white historians believed Styron had set the Turner rebellion well within the bounds of legitimacy in history and fiction. But black historians saw the novel differently.

The Nation printed two responses to Styron’s novel, as the editor’s note explains: my review of “the fictional aspects of the novel” and Aptheker’s response to “questions of historical accuracy and interpretation.”²³ Aesthetic and historical evaluations, as it turned out, were not so easily separable in evaluating Styron’s hybrid narrative. Aptheker, a Marxist historian who sought examples of collective action by slaves, complained that Styron committed a

“consequential distortion” of Turner and his uprising, particularly by suggesting that Turner’s uprising was unique.²⁴ Though Aptheker did not concern himself with “fictional aspects of the novel,” later African American critics did. The complaints of Mike Thelwell were particularly telling. For him, Styron’s novel showed:

The truly astonishing persistence of white southern myths, racial stereotypes and derogatory literary clichés even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds. Its largely uncritical acceptance in literary circles shows us how far we still have to go and what a painfully little way we have come.²⁵

Thus had Styron’s novel become the central text in the assertion of 1960s African American literary and historical consciousness, concerns much larger than the work’s historical accuracy and literary excellence. Styron’s boldness of invention and his outrage in response to criticism served the purposes of black writers who were determined to take back their racial heritage.

Thelwell’s searching essay made me rethink my review of the novel, an evaluation based on the assumption that literary and cultural-historical evaluations could be treated separately. A version of Thelwell’s essay then appeared in *Ten Black Writers Respond*, a collection that contains broadsides from African American intellectuals against the novel and Styron. One writer registered passing criticism on my review. “O’Connell accepts all of Styron’s false psychological twistings and all of his invented ‘facts’ about Turner’s life as valid and sensible.”²⁶ Thus, in a small way I was drawn into to swirl of debate over the novel. I went on to learn much more about Nat Turner’s rising and the larger context of slave rebellions as they were evoked in several American works of fiction and history.²⁷

Styron came to Harvard on a mid-summer evening in 1968 and gave a talk titled “History and Fiction” before a large, responsive audience. More particularly, he was there to defend himself as a writer and to affirm the validity of his vision, but he did not get far before a dashiki-clad young black man stood and asked bitterly, “Where did you get your idea that Nat Turner lusted after white women?” Styron, obviously perturbed, said crisply, “I made it up” and turned away. The young man replied, “I’ll just bet you did.”²⁸ A few months later, Styron mounted another defense of his right as a novelist to make things up before a meeting of the Southern Historical Association in New Orleans. Styron appeared with Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, and C. Vann Woodward on a panel titled “The Use of Fiction in History.” Ellison dissolved the genre distinction by suggesting “both are forms of literature.” Styron cited distinguished writers of historical fiction, from Tolstoy to Warren, as models, but the discussion grew dramatically less high-minded during the question-and-answer period when two black young men challenged Styron. One of them, the same young man who had confronted him at Harvard, declared, “I met you in Massachusetts last summer and now all the way down in New Orleans I’m here to call you a liar again.” To which Styron replied, “Indeed you have haunted me. You’re my *bête noir*, I’m afraid. I recall you from Harvard Summer School with terror.”²⁹ Nat Turner, it seemed, was having his rhetorical revenge against the cultural and literary white power structure.

The controversy over *Confessions* became a nightmare from which Styron was slow to awake. I saw this first-hand some five years later when I visited Styron on Martha’s Vineyard for a piece in the *Boston Globe Magazine*. Styron and his wife, Rose, were gracious, considerate hosts, at ease in their lovely waterfront home overlooking Vineyard Haven, but he was clearly still rankled by the bitter responses to his novel; he couldn’t let it go. Late that night his talk

glowed, sometimes flamed in the refracted light of reminiscence and recrimination. It was not until the next day, over lunch, that Styron's remembrance of things past turned evocative. Styron told the story of an old black man he met as a boy growing up in Virginia. The old man was a former slave who had been sold and sent away. Now he was returning home to die. The grandson of the slave owner who sold him cared for the old man until he died. Telling this tale through the haze of cigar smoke, Styron shook his head with wonder at both the old black man and the descendant of the slave owner who took him in: a parable of reconciliation, just as he had hoped *Confessions* might be.³⁰

Twenty-five years after publishing *Confessions*, Styron was still thinking about this rebellious, unreconciled slave and still smarting from the critical response to his novel. In "Nat Turner Revisited" he explains his coming of age in the Tidewater region of Virginia, not far from the scenes of Nat Turner's brief and bloody life and death.³¹ There, growing up in the apartheid south of the Great Depression, Styron "fell under the spell of Negritude," developing a fascination that eventually led him to write about Nat Turner. Since little was known about this slave rebel, Styron invoked the authorial freedom to fill in his character and flesh out events in his life. Styron admits placing "the boy in a milieu where he could not possibly belong," in a plantation setting unlikely for that time and place; he did so to provide the young man with conflicts that establish the larger context of southern slavery. Styron defends ascribing to Nat Turner fraught feeling of love-hate toward Margaret Whitehead. "I strove to present a complex view of slavery, and Nat and Margaret's story" provided "a dramatic image for slavery's annihilating power, which crushed black and white alike, and in the end a whole society." In the end the bitter responses to his efforts crushed Styron as well, for he recalls that nothing he said a quarter of a century before had persuaded black readers to accept his version of Nat Turner, indeed even to read his novel. He still remembers being "stalked" from Boston to New Orleans by that "young dashiki-clad firebrand who unnerved me" with his shouted denunciations.

Somewhat belatedly, I realized that *Nat Turner* was not, in this case was not 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.³²

In 1992 Styron noted that not much had changed for African Americans since his notorious novel was published in 1967. "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."³³ Styron had begun writing *Confessions* in 1962, during the heady days of interracial optimism, symbolized by the exemplary presence and vaunting rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr., but the publication of Styron's novel five years later and the conflicts that followed it took place during an era of racial and partisan strife rising from Vietnam War demonstrations and protests over racial injustices. In the early spring of 1968 President Lyndon Johnson announced he would not run for reelection, Dr. King was assassinated, and student protesters occupied buildings in one campus after another. Styron was named as a delegate challenger for Eugene McCarthy at the upcoming Democratic National Convention. In June Robert Kennedy, the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination, was shot and killed minutes after he won the California primary. Styron was an honorary pallbearer and stood vigil at Saint Patrick's Cathedral. Amid that cultural turmoil, *Ten Black Writers* was published. Styron argued the case for McCarthy's nomination at the Chicago Democratic Convention, but Hubert Humphrey was nominated.

Styron was present when Chicago police attacked demonstrators in Grant Park. His historical novel of rebellion and reprisal had bloody contemporary relevance.³⁴

Now, nearly a half century after *Confessions* was published, all has not changed utterly. The nation is still in crisis. Despite the steady presence and efforts of a two-term African American president, the republic remains divided and dysfunctional, from its paralyzed Congress to its poisonous political positions articulated by Republican presidential primary candidates who propose the exclusion of immigrants and foreign visitors on religious ground, the erection of walls to exclude outsiders, the repeal of the Affordable Health Care Act shaped by President Barak Obama, opposition to climate control, and resistance to any restriction on guns, despite a horrific rash of shootings in schools, health clinics, shopping malls, and mosques. In the Thanksgiving–Christmas season of 2015, terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists in Paris and in San Bernardino, California, seized Americans with dread.³⁵ In the midst of this wider crisis, concern for black lives—from threats of police shootings to their representation in the press and on campus—continues to be a national issue.

There are, of course, marked differences between the state of the nation in 1967–68—when many African Americans affirmed a cultural version of “Black Power” by focusing on Styron and his novel—and 2015–16, when “Black Lives Matter” became a rallying cry against racial insult and misrepresentation. Still, as William Faulkner reminds us, “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.”³⁶ Now as then African Americans experience threats, insult, and marginalization that many white American cannot imagine. Now as then African Americans demand control over their own narrative and recognition of their proper place in American history. Cultural wrongs reach deep in American memory. In our time black students and intellectuals protest racial insults on and off campuses. Examples of American racism keep surfacing—Confederate flags, revered and racist forefathers, caricatures, cartoon college mascots, even misconceived Halloween costumes—as do efforts to remove them. The *New York Times* columnist David Brooks writes:

Many of the issues we have been dealing with in 2015 revolve around unhealed cultural memories: how to acknowledge past wrongs and move forward into the light. . . . Many of the protests on campus and other places have been about unearthing memory or asserting a narrative, or, at their worst, coercing other narrative into silence.³⁷

Cultural expressions and denunciation have not been silent, then or now. The debates have been at once polarizing and clarifying: “two noble forces colliding with explosive force.”

William Styron did his creative best to exhume and make coherent a plausible version of Nat Turner as a man divided between love and vengeance; black writers of his time took exception to his vision and posited an alternative Nat Turner as a man of racial pride and righteous wrath. Styron set out to write a historical novel that surpassed those by Robert Penn Warren and William Faulkner; in that effort he clearly failed, perhaps in part because he, a twentieth-century white southerner, presumed to speak in the voice of a nineteenth-century slave. But Styron gave Nat Turner renewed life in the American mind, revealing a truth best articulated by Quentin Compson, the central consciousness in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*: “*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished.*”³⁸

Styron revered Faulkner and traveled to Oxford, Mississippi, to attend the funeral of his “antecedent” in July 1962. In a commemorative essay published in *Life*, Styron writes that he was seized by grief, “stricken by the realization that Faulkner is really gone.” Memory of

Faulkner's characters rushed to Styron's mind, "along with the tumultuous landscape and the fierce and tender weather, and the whole maddened, miraculous vision of life wrested, as all art is wrested, out of nothingness."³⁹ That effort to recapture and give fictional shape to the history of race in the United States America motivated Styron to write, as it drove Warren and Faulkner. William Styron's achievements and failures in shaping a novel around the brief and bloody life of Nat Turner is worth remembering as we live through yet another era of painful remembrance and recrimination over our national sin. As we again address unhealed cultural memories.

Notes

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