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The Hollins Critic

Volume IV, No. 5

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William Styron and Human Bondage: *The Confessions of Nat Turner*



I.

"If this is true, from my soul I pity you . . ."

— Judge Cobb, sentencing Nat Turner.

This time Styron was off to a good start. "A wonderfully evocative portrait of a gifted, proud, long-suppressed human being . . ."—Alfred Kazin in *Book World*. "The most profound fictional treatment of slavery in our literature . . ."—C. Vann Woodward in *The New Republic*. "One of those novels that is an act of revelation to a whole society . . ."—Raymond A. Sokolov in *Newsweek*. "A first-rate novel,

The Hollins Critic

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the best that William Styron has produced and the best by an American writer that has appeared in some years . . .”—Philip Rahv in the *New York Review of Books*. There were a few dissents, to be sure, but it was clear that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was making its way from the outset.

In that respect it was in startling contrast to *Set This House On Fire*, which when it appeared in 1960 was jumped upon by almost everybody. That novel had the misfortune to be the long-awaited second novel by a man whose first book was a tremendous success. In the nine years that followed *Lie Down in Darkness* (a novella, *The Long March*, didn't really count), the critics grew tired of waiting. Almost everyone had predicted great things for William Styron, and the longer it took for him to produce a second big book, the more exasperated everyone became. So that when Styron finally managed to complete his second novel, its publication was almost certain to be anti-climactic. In addition, *Set This House On Fire* was very long, it was filled with much soul-torment, and there was no neat tragic pattern such as characterized Styron's first novel. Thus when *Set This House On Fire* finally appeared, all the journalistic reviewers began scolding at once. Supposedly the new book was windblown, self-indulgent, sentimental, bathetic, over-written, and so on—the chorus of castigation rose to an impressive decibel volume. Only a corporal's guard of reviewers dared to disagree, to insist that while *Set This House On Fire* wasn't a flawless novel, it was nevertheless a very impressive accomplishment, a moving work of fiction, in every way worthy of if not superior to *Lie Down In Darkness*, so that its author need in no way feel that he had failed to live up to his notices.

During the seven years between *Set This House On Fire* and Styron's new novel, however, critical opinion has pretty much come around to the viewpoint that Styron's second book was a quite respectable performance. Once the reviewers in the critical quarterlies, who are notably unswayed by journalistic reviews, began writing about the book, the initial verdict was reversed. Critical essays and chapters of books appeared which treated *Set This House On Fire* as a work which, though flawed in parts, contains some of the better writing of our time. For example, a good critic, Frederick J. Hoffman, has this to say about *Set This House On Fire* in his recent book *The Art of Southern Fiction*: "Styron's most recent novel sets the imagination agoing, in the expectation of an American literature of existentialism . . . But it is perhaps

best not to name it that, for fear of weighing it down with labels and classifications. The important fact is that Styron has used his talents mightily and to a good effect in this novel."

Set This House On Fire is the story of Cass Kinsolving, an artist unable to paint. A World War II veteran, married and living in Europe, he must undergo a terrifying stay in the lower depths before he can win his way back to sanity and creativity. The leading characters, very unlike most Southern fictional folk, engage in long, probing psychological analyses of their inner souls. There are no Negroes (though there is a memory of them), no First Families going to seed, no church services, no blood-guilt of generations, no oversexed Southern matrons. It is thoroughly, completely modern, even cosmopolitan. Cass Kinsolving is a man in bondage; in Paris, Rome and Sambuco he lives in an alcoholic daze, tortured by his inability to paint, drinking, wandering about, pitying himself, doing everything except confronting his talent. He had sought to find a form for his art outside of himself; he could not put up with his creative limitations, and he looked to the society and people surrounding him for what could only be found within himself: the remorseless requirement of discovering how to love and be loved, and so to create. Only through violence and tragedy could he win his way through to self-respect, and attain an equilibrium with the world that enables him to function effectively.

All very odd and strange, this sort of thing: Styron wasn't supposed to write that kind of a novel. What also perplexed many reviewers was that this process and this outcome were not presented ironically or obliquely; there wasn't the self-conscious distrust of high rhetoric and ultimate judgment that characterizes much "existential" fiction today. The language was unabashedly resounding and rhetorical. And because it was the kind of book it was, the form of the story was restless, groping, searching, and not at all neat and tidy.

The difficulties inherent in any attempt to use the high style to deal with contemporary life are of course obvious. Our sense of irony is too strong to permit it to function without severe qualification. Faulkner, for all his greatness, could never successfully handle an intelligent modern man learning how to cope with contemporary urban society: his Gavin Stevens is among his less convincing characterizations. Robert Penn Warren managed it in *All The King's Men*, but to do so he had to filter the rhetoric through a wisecracking, hard-boiled-type narrator who could protect his more sounding declarations from irony by getting there first himself. Few other contemporaries even dare to try it; they fear, and with reason, that they will come out of it talking like the later prose of Carl Sandburg.

Styron's attempt, in *Set This House On Fire*, was not completely successful either. There is a shift of character focus in the novel, to the effect that part of the true explanation for Cass Kinsolving's plight lies not in his own past experience but in that of his friend Peter Leverett. This isn't ultimately fatal; such is Styron's artistry that we accord Kinsolving the right to feel and think as he does, in defiance of the strict logic of plot. The main thing is that *Set This House On Fire* works; one way or another, it adds up. There are moments when Cass's believability seems to be in jeopardy, but each time Styron comes through.

Styron, Hoffman remarks, "moved away [in *Set This House On Fire*] from the special moral dimensions of the Southerner looking at portraits of colonels, or addressing himself to the landscape of his youth, or to the special qualities of feudal

vengeance or pride . . . he has assumed a larger risk, moved into a more competitive field, entered a tradition of psychological and moral analysis that has been occupied by Kierkegaard, Mann, Sartre, and Camus before him." So concluded many another critic after reading *Set This House On Fire*, though usually without Hoffman's ability to perceive that in so doing, Styron had written an excellent novel. Yet the implication, voiced by numerous other critics as well, that in *Set This House On Fire* Styron had ceased to be a "Southern writer," in the way that Faulkner, Warren, Wolfe, Welty, Lytle, and so forth had been Southern writers, was unwarranted, I think. For the so-called "Southern quality" in modern American fiction is not at bottom a matter of subject matter or theme, so much as of attitude: it is a way of looking at the nature of human experience, and it includes the assumption that to maintain order and stability the individual must be part of a social community, yet that the ultimate authority that underlies his conduct is not social but moral. It is, in short, a religious attitude, though most often it does not involve the dogmas of revealed religion. This attitude, not the presence of the particular institutions and events that customarily embody the attitude, is what has enabled the work of the better Southern novelists to seem so "meaningful" in our time. It is precisely this attitude, too, that has made possible and believable the use of the full, unstinted high rhetorical mode that so marks much of the work of Faulkner, Warren, Wolfe, and others. We will not buy rhetoric unless we believe in the absolutes that justify it, and the Southern writers do believe in them. In many ways Styron's second novel represents a kind of examination into the soundness of such a view, ending in a confirmation. Cass Kinsolving's emotions and ideals are examined and tested in the furnace experience of Paris and Sambuco, and are finally pronounced sound. Whereupon Cass may come home.

He comes back, however, not to the community in which he grew up, but to another place, where he is ready to install himself—another Southern community, but one without historical and social links with his own past. It had been necessary for him to leave the scene of his past behind him, to travel to another continent and there ratify the individual and social worth of those attitudes and ideals, independently of their institutions and for himself, in order to make them *his*, and not merely something automatically bequeathed to him.

Thus for Styron, *Set This House On Fire* represented a clearing away as it were of the debris of the Southern fictional texture—all the accustomed artifacts of setting, history, community that have for several generations provided the experience out of which Southern fiction has been created. But the underlying attitude toward the nature of human experience in time remains, and far from representing any kind of abdication of what has come to be recognized as the Southern literary mode, *Set This House On Fire* is an extension, perhaps the only possible extension, of that mode into a new day and a different kind of experience.

Toward the close of the novel Cass Kinsolving hears his family stirring about the house in the morning light, and thinks as follows: "I didn't know what it was but there they were sort of strutting face to face and soundlessly clapping their hands together, like Papageno and Papagena, or something even more sweet, paradisiac, as if they were children not really of this earth but of some other, delectable morning before time and history." As if there could be any possible doubt of the literary mode out of which that style of rhetoric comes!

William Styron

William Styron grew up in the tidewater Virginia he has written about in *Lie Down in Darkness* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Born in Newport News, June 11, 1925, he attended Davidson College in North Carolina and graduated from Duke University. By 1947 he had settled in New York City, determined to be a writer. *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), his first novel, won him wide critical acclaim and a Prix de Rome. A novella, *The Long March* (1951), was begun in Europe, where he became associated with *The Paris Review*. In 1953 in Rome he met and married Rose Burgunder, a Baltimorean and an accomplished poet. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was completed in January, 1967, after over four years of work. The Styrons and their four children live in Roxbury, Connecticut.

—E.T.C.

II.

"It might offend Negroes that I as a white man have presumed to intrude on the consciousness of a Negro."—

William Styron, Interview in *Book World*.

Which brings us, seven years later, to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. This time the scene is again the South—the Commonwealth of Virginia, scarcely more than an hour's ride by automobile from the very city in which Peyton Loftis, Peter Leverett, and William Styron were born and grew up. Furthermore, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is an historical novel, based squarely on the single most complex and pervasive theme of all Southern history, the presence and role of the Negro. The central character and narrator is a preacher, whose thoughts and deeds are based on Biblical admonition and whose language is charged with Scriptural rhetoric. So that Styron would seem to have come full circle—starting out with Peyton Loftis from Port Warwick in Tidewater Virginia, then north to New York City; then eastward across the ocean to Paris and Italy with Cass Kinsolving, and at length back home to the South. Now it is Tidewater Virginia once more, the year is 1831, and there is the selfsame Black Shadow that has darkened the pages of Southern literature from the romances of William Gilmore Simms on through to Mark Twain, George Washington Cable and Thomas Nelson Page, and more recently William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and every other Southern writer of the Twentieth Century so far.

But there is a difference. The story is told both by and about a Negro. Styron has sought to put himself into the mind and heart of a slave preacher who in August of 1831 led a bloody insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia. No Southern writer has ever really done this sort of thing before with much success. The faithful Negro retainers who relate in such ornate dialect Thomas Nelson Page's idylls of Virginia plantation life *Befo' De War* were stereotypes, designed to exhibit the graciousness and romance of ante-bellum society. Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* was also a delightful old darky, but he knew his place, and his creator was careful most of the time to keep to the surface of things. Even Faulkner, who Ralph Ellison

says has written more accurately and truly about the Negro than any other writer living or dead, black or white, shows us not the Negro so much as the white man learning to see the Negro—learning to see him more sharply and honestly than ever before.

Styron goes further. He is satisfied with nothing else than to try to become Nat Turner. Now it seems to me that, from the standpoint of the developing cultural history of the South, this very attempt is important of itself. In the years after 1865, writers such as Page and Harris created Negro narrators to tell their stories under the naive belief that this was a comparatively easy thing to do, since their notion of what it was like to be a Negro was itself something quite simple. Their Negro was the "Old Time Ducky," faithful, true, obedient, whose every thought and allegiance was for Massa (sometimes spelled Marster, sometimes Mars', occasionally Maussa). A Thomas Nelson Page was confident that he understood the Negro; it never occurred to him that he might not. The great Southern novelists of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s—Faulkner, Warren, Wolfe, the others—made no such easy assumptions; rather, they focussed upon the difficulty, the impossibility even, of the white man knowing what Negroes really thought and felt. This recognition that the complaisant pastoral figure that a Thomas Nelson Page could so naively accept as a "true" representation of the Negro was in fact a vast oversimplification, symbolized a long step forward in the white South's willingness to accord the Negro full human status. Now comes a fine novel by a leading Southern writer of the post-World War II generation, essaying to portray the innermost thoughts of a Negro, and doing so without very much self-consciousness. One cannot help but see this as emblematic of an important social breakthrough. For the point about Styron's characterization of Nat Turner is that Nat's existence as a Negro is not seen as making him in any recognizable way importantly "different" from what a white man might be in similar circumstances. Nat Turner comes eventually to hate all white men; but this emotion is not portrayed as an inherent racial characteristic. Rather, it is a response, a desperate and tragic one, to the social inhumanity of human slavery. A Negro as seen by William Styron is in no important or essential way different from a white man. Social conditions, not heredity and biology, set him apart. The walls of separateness are man-made.

Nobody, of course, knows "who" the real Nat Turner was. Except for a twenty-page "confession" dictated to a white lawyer and read before the trial court as evidence, there is little to go on. Not much additional information is to be found in the only book written about the Nat Turner Insurrection, William Sidney Drewry's *The Southampton Insurrection*, published in 1900 by a long-since defunct publishing house dedicated to defending the Confederate Heritage and racial segregation.

That Styron's Nat Turner is surely not the "real" Nat Turner is indisputable—in the sense that every human being is a unique personality, so that nobody could possibly reconstruct anything resembling the real Nat Turner without abundant evidence. In any event, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, as the Southern historian C. Vann Woodward says, is "not inconsistent with anything historians know" and is "informed by a respect for history, a sure feeling for the period, and a deep and precise sense of place and time." This seems to me likewise indisputable.

Yet at least one other Southern historian, and a good one, has told me that he felt that Styron had committed a grievous historical mistake, in that he makes Nat Turner, a slave preacher on a Southside Virginia plantation thirty years before the

Books by William Styron

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS

- New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951. \$3.50
 London: Hamish Hamilton, 1952. 15/
 Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1952. \$4.00
 New York: New American Library, 1952. \$.75 (pa.)
 New York: Compass Books, 1957. \$1.65 (pa.)
 New York: Modern Library, 1964. \$2.45

THE LONG MARCH

- New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951. \$3.50
 New York: Modern Library, 1956. \$.95 (pa.)
 New York: Vintage Books, 1962. \$1.25 (pa.)
 London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962. 9/6

SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE

- New York: Random House, 1960. \$5.95
 New York: New American Library, 1961. \$.95 (pa.)
 London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961. 21/

CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

- New York: Random House, 1967. \$6.95

Civil War, think and talk exactly like a modern Black Power advocate; Styron's Nat Turner, he believes, sounds not like a slave, but like Stokely Carmichael. This is a severe criticism. Though I think it is not true, I confess that there are certain moments in Styron's novel in which one gets something of this feeling. Nat's reiterated insistence on the need of all Negroes to strike the Happy Ducky pose when dealing with whites—"I replied in tones ingratiating, ministerial—the accommodating comic nigger"—tends to make the reader uncomfortably aware on such occasions of the author laboring to present the "Negro point of view." Doubtless Virginia slaves learned to do exactly what Nat says, but Nat's self-conscious theorizing about it would seem somewhat anachronistic. Similarly there are several passages in which Nat and other slaves talk at some length about the "smell" of white people—we glimpse the author waxing ironic about certain often-echoed white shibboleths. (Cf. Thomas Jefferson, in the *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the body, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odor"—as if there were bathrooms available for the slaves at Monticello!)

But these instances are relatively few, and are unimportant. So also the argument that by making Nat Turner into a much more intellectual and reflective person, possessing a much more complex vocabulary than the real-life Nat Turner could probably have had, Styron violates the historicity of the situation. This seems to me to overlook the fact that Nat Turner could never have been a "representative" Negro slave of the 1830's. A "representative" slave could not possibly have led the Nat Turner Insurrection. Furthermore, it is not required or fitting that Styron's Nat Turner be "representative," "typical"; on the contrary, he *must* be an exaggeration.

His thoughts, his emotions, his language must be plausible only to the extent that the reader must feel a slave preacher in Southside Virginia in the year 1831, given the admitted uniqueness of Nat Turner's situation, *could* conceivably have thought and felt and spoken as he does. Besides, what is really involved here is the reader-writer relationship; for after all, is not the reader already engaged, by the mere fact of reading the book, in an "illogical" activity, inasmuch as he is being asked to imagine that what he is reading is the thoughts and words of a long-dead Negro preacher about whom almost nothing whatever is known? To echo Doctor Johnson, surely he that imagines this may imagine more. What matters is that Negro slaves (and Negro freedmen) did have to play roles in order to deal with the whites, and Nat's awareness of the role differs from that of most Negro slaves only in that it is made conscious and articulate. The truth in that Styron's Nat Turner is nothing more and nothing less than a tragic protagonist, and we ask representativeness and typicality of such a character no more than we ask that Sophocles show representative and typical Greeks of ancient Thebes in the *Oedipus Rex*.

III.

"To a mind like mine, restless, inquisitive and observant, there was nothing that I saw or heard to which my attention was not directed." — Nat Turner, "Confession" (1831)

The *Confessions of Nat Turner* is told in the first person present. The language purports to be that of Nat, but not as spoken to anyone. Nat is thinking, "explaining" himself—to the reader, to "posterity," to himself. Though in point of strict logic this is quite impossible, it is an acceptable literary convention, much as the Shakespearean soliloquy is a literary convention.

The use of Nat as narrator affords Styron several advantages for telling his story. First of all, since Nat is a preacher, and deeply immersed in the language and style of the King James Version, we will accept from him a high rhetorical style which we might otherwise not permit, especially from a Negro slave in ante-bellum Virginia. More importantly, we soon become aware that when Nat actually talks, whether to whites or Negroes, his language is much more idiomatic and colloquial. The reader's awareness of the difference in language and voice, of the contrast between the manner in which Nat thinks or remembers and the way that he talks, is essential to the form and meaning of the novel. For not only must Nat, despite his learning, continue to play the role of humble, barely-literate slave before his betters, but the very fact of his intelligence and learning serves to isolate him all the more. The whites, no matter how sympathetic (and some are quite sympathetic), must by reason of time and place inevitably view Nat as an inferior, a freak—a slave, less than human, a bond-servant, one who surprisingly can read and write, but is still an inferior creature.

This of course is the true horror of slavery for Nat. He is considered less than a Man, and open, human contact with the whites is utterly forbidden him. The result in loneliness and rage. He comes to hate the whites because they have placed him and kept him in this position, and his rage is most keen at those times when he is being most patronized. For those whites who are kindest to him—in particular the girl Margaret Whitehead—inevitably do most to reinforce his consciousness of his inferior status, since they believe they are not patronizing him while still expecting him to remain safely in his place. In her romantic, naive way Margaret Whitehead

Flocks

Flocks in Autumn flying
 Past my loft
 Pausing near the seven skylights
 Crack open seeds on stalks that Summer
 Left for some purpose,
 Then whirl
 Dowsing the open sky with ardent
 Cries and raw cries,
 Joyous disharmony,
 Their flutter shading
 Out the sun
 —It was a tired sun—
 And soon dart off, diminished

By distance as the swift horizon
 Reaches toward them, scoops a swarm
 Of dots that vanish, and are still.
 Silent, now
 The bones of trees
 Shudder in the wind. I lean and
 Strain—could I shake
 Free my laths from these
 Joists, this plaster
 Grumbling though it crack
 My every pane I'd follow after
 Southward before snow.

—DANIEL HOFFMAN

means only the best for Nat, and genuinely likes and admires him, yet she fails utterly to comprehend the nature of Nat's position and cannot for a moment grasp what torture is involved for Nat. In part her good intentions are only an aspect of her sentimentality; in being "frank," she condescends. Yet she *does* mean well; she does, in her own way, even love Nat, and before he dies Nat comes to realize that.

The contrast between what Nat thinks and can think, and what he must say and appear to be to whites whether of good intentions or bad, enforces the sense of isolation and loneliness that characterizes Nat's life. With the slaves, he does not have to pretend in the same way; in their company he can be himself as he cannot with white people. But his fellow bondsmen, being without his literacy and intelligence, cannot communicate with him either, especially after he has conceived his plan for a revolt and must bend every effort to manipulate and direct them toward his ends. Not even Hark, his closest friend and his chief lieutenant in the Insurrection he organizes, can understand or imagine what Nat is thinking or feeling. Thus Nat Turner as depicted by Styron is cut off from whites and blacks alike, and the violence of his protest is his Insurrection.

There is still another advantage in Styron's use of Nat as narrator. In the very contrast between the complex, subtle diction of Nat's thoughts, and the verbally crude language he must use to express himself aloud, there evolves a tension which grows more and more acute as the narrative develops and as Nat increasingly comes to comprehend the nature of his enforced isolation. The gulf between Nat's private self and his role in time and place builds up toward a point at which language itself will no longer suffice to provide order. There must then be the explosion of action, whereby language and deed are unified through violence—and the tragedy is accomplished.

Why did Nat Turner stage his Insurrection? This, after all, is the question that Styron sets out to answer by writing his novel. Because slavery was evil, and for a slave capable of a high degree of thought and feeling, intolerable—yes. Because Nat in particular had been promised his freedom by his first owner, only to be betrayed into renewed and hopeless bondage—yes. These are the topical answers. But because

William Styron is the fine novelist that he is, they are not the full or even the most important answer.

Nat Turner, a human being, rebels because he is deprived by his society of the right to love and be loved. I do not mean by this merely that Nat rebels because he is denied sexual fulfillment, though he is (save for one youthful homosexual experience Styron's Nat Turner is an ascetic, thereby providing psychological grounding for his messianic religious visions.) The question is larger than that. Nat cannot love—physically or spiritually. The world he inhabits is such that at best he can expect from whites only pity, and at worst outright hatred, while from his fellow slaves he can expect only inarticulate admiration at best, and at worst envy and contempt. Thus he cannot give himself to anyone. No one wants him for what he is. For everyone, white and black, friend and foe, he must play a role. For his first owner, who educated him, he is a noble experiment, an object of benevolence, a salve to the slave-holding conscience. For Margaret Whitehead he is a sympathetic auditor to whom she can pour out her girlish fancies and exhibit her broad-mindedness. For his last owner he is a clever, valuable mechanic, a source of financial profit. For his fellow slaves he is a Leader, one who can plan and organize their revenge. Even to his fellow conspirator Hark, who does indeed love and admire him, he cannot be fully himself, for Hark's imagination and intelligence are too limited to enable him to share Nat's innermost thoughts. Denied, therefore, the right to give himself, to love, Nat can only hate, and the result is destruction.

What good, the interrogating lawyer asks Nat, did his Insurrection accomplish? The lawyer answers his own question:

"Here's what it got you, Reverend, if you'll pardon the crudity. It got you a pissy-assed record of total futility, the likes of which are hard to equal. Threescore white people slain in random butchery, yet the white people firmly holdin' the reins. Seventeen niggers hung, including you and old Hark there, nevermore to see the light of day. A dozen or more other nigger boys shipped out of an amiable way of life to Alabama, where you can bet your bottom dollar that in five years the whole pack of 'em will be dead of work and fever . . ."

"One hundred and thirty-one innocent niggers both slave and free cut down by the mob that roamed Southampton for a solid week, searching vengeance," the lawyer continues. And finally, the Nat Turner Insurrection will mean much more harshly repressive laws for the slaves:

" . . . when the Legislature convenes in December they're goin' to pass laws that make the ones extant look like rules for a Sunday School picnic. They goin' to look up the niggers in a black cellar and throw away the key." He paused, and I could sense him leaning close to me. "Abolition," he said in a voice like a whisper. "Reverend, single-handed you done more with your Christianity to assure the defeat of abolition than all the meddlin' and pryin' Quakers that ever set foot in Virginia put together. I reckon you didn't figure on that either?"

"No," I said, looking into his eyes, "if that be true. No."

There was and is no Happy Ending for the Nat Turner Insurrection. Styron knew this, and his novel shows it. It did not bring Negro slavery one whit closer to an end; if anything it retarded progress. The harsh Black Codes enacted throughout most of the South in the decades before the Civil War were due at least in part to the fear of servile revolt that the Nat Turner Insurrection had triggered.

IV.

"This attempt to separate truth from fiction has been exceedingly difficult, owing to the numerous misrepresentations and exaggerations which have grown up about the subject." — Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*.

In staging his *Insurrection*, Nat Turner believed that he was doing the Lord's bidding, as it had been revealed to him in a series of supernatural visions. Styron was careful to give these moments of revelation a solid psychological basis: they come always after Nat has gone without food for several days, and is weak and feverish. Yet *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is not primarily a psychological study. The limits of Nat's personality are not defined by the science of abnormal psychology. He represents, and is, the strong man in bondage, a human caught in a situation not originally of his making but ultimately requiring his total commitment. Faced with evil, Nat cannot hide from it, but his appalling attempt to right matters only brings defeat and greater suffering. In other words, it is a tragic situation, and the resolution of it is Tragedy.

The specific events of Nat Turner's life which impelled him toward the Southampton Insurrection are unknown. As novelist, Styron had therefore to give him a history, and it was the task of his creative imagination to make the personal history contain the meaning forced upon the subject by history. Thus Styron represents Nat during his youth as having been favored and set apart by his owner, and imbued with much hope and optimism. When instead of being freed he is sold into renewed bondage, Nat's sense of personal rage and helplessness forces him to take account of the wretched lot of his less-gifted fellow slaves, for whom he had once felt contempt and disdain. It is at this stage in his life that the conviction of religious mission comes upon him (in which respect Styron departs from the 1831 "Confession," for Nat Turner says there that from his childhood onward he had felt himself "intended for some great purpose"). Nat then begins mapping out his plan to lead an insurrection. The growth of the spirit of rebellion in Nat is charted by Styron with calculated deliberateness; the calm, carefully chosen language with which Nat tells his story only serves to intensify the sense of impending crisis and explosion.

In *The Southampton Insurrection* Drewry repeatedly expresses astonishment over the fact that Nat Turner himself had been treated with kindness by his owner, and had stated as much in his "Confession." Drewry insists that not only Nat but almost all the slaves in ante-bellum Virginia were kindly treated. This is proved, he declares, by the fact that so few slaves joined Turner. Most remained loyal to their owners, and some distinguished themselves by their bravery in defending their white families against the insurgents. Thus the only explanation Drewry can suggest for the insurrection is that Abolitionist propaganda had inflamed the mind of Nat Turner, already crazed by a fanatical belief in his supernaturally prophetic destiny.

The true explanation, as is obvious, is that it was precisely because Nat Turner himself was treated well and had so distinguished himself in education and intelligence that he was prompted to lead his revolt; as Styron shows, his superior attainments and status only made more clear to him the hopelessness of servile bondage. Thus nothing could so madden Nat as the occasional expression of pity on the part of a white man or woman. In one of the finest episodes in the novel, Styron depicts Nat's sensations upon seeing a Northern-born wife of a planter break down and

weep at the sight of a particularly wretched and abject Negro. This unusual passage cannot be satisfactorily excerpted; suffice it to say that it is a masterful portrayal of complex emotions of hate, lust, love and shame contending within a man's heart. "I was filled with somber feelings that I was unable to banish," Nat remarks afterward, "deeply troubled that it was not a white person's abuse or scorn or even indifference which could ignite in me this murderous hatred but his pity, maybe even his tenderest moment of charity."

The point is that in this and numerous other instances, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is a very wise book. Styron's understanding of his material is most impressive. When one thinks about it, the possibilities for melodrama and easy pathos inherent in the subject matter of this novel are very broad. What a less gifted novelist might have produced, one shudders to think. Styron, for example, barely mentions the period of ten weeks that actually elapsed between the suppression of the Insurrection and the capture of Nat Turner, during which Nat himself hid out in the woods and fields. Another novelist might have attempted to make this episode the occasion for a long, pseudo-philosophical meditation by Nat on the meaning of what has happened. But Styron lets Nat's thoughts about what he has done arise in the actual retelling of the story—in, that is, his confession—so that by the time the actual Insurrection itself takes place, what it means has been convincingly anticipated and prepared for us. The events of the Insurrection, therefore, bloody as they are, are not merely horrible; they are the motivated, terribly meaningful violence climaxing an intolerable situation.

One could make many other observations about William Styron's new novel. Most of them have already been made or will soon be; publication of the novel is obviously one of the more noteworthy literary events of recent years. Its importance lies simply in the fact that a dedicated and talented American novelist has written a book dealing with one of the most fateful and pressing concerns of our country's history, one that is by no means fully resolved. The topical relevance of this book is obvious—so much so that one need not comment on it.

This observation should be made, however: at a time when many influential critics have been saying that the day of the novel is done, Styron has produced a first-rate work of fiction while working very much within the traditional novel form. By bringing his intelligence and imagination to bear upon an important and deeply human situation, he has reinvigorated the form, and shown that it is still quite alive. He has thus given the lie to all those tired critics who have been going about lamenting the death of the novel, and proclaiming the superior merits of this or that substitute. It is time, therefore, that we cease bewailing the passing of the demigods of an earlier generation, and recognize the fact that with such writers as William Styron, Saul Bellow, and John Barth regularly producing prose fiction for us, we have no occasion for complaint. A novel as good as Styron's can hold its own in any company.

—LOUIS D. RUBIN, JR.

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