CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

What's Past?

The story of Nat Turner had long been gestating in my mind, ever since I was a boy—in fact since before I actually knew I wanted to be a writer.

—WILLIAM STYRON (1993)

In 1967, the American novelist, William Styron, published his third major work of fiction, a book entitled *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.[1] Styron's *Confessions* represented itself as the autobiographical narrative of an African American slave, known as Nat Turner, who in August 1831 had led a slave revolt (known as the Turner Rebellion) in Southampton County, Virginia, not far from Virginia's southeastern tidewater region where Styron himself had grown up. Both Turner and the event that bore his name were real enough—Styron took his title from a pamphlet account of Turner and of his rebellion that had been published in November 1831, a few days after Turner's capture and execution;[2] his book's point of departure was the series of conversations between Turner and the pamphlet's publisher, a Southampton County lawyer named Thomas Ruffin Gray, that had occurred while Turner was in jail awaiting trial, and on which Gray drew heavily in constructing his pamphlet. But for Styron the man revealed in those conversations was a person with whom he wished to have nothing to do, "a person of conspicuous ghastliness,"[3] utterly beyond moral reclamation. The Turner of record, Styron emphasized—confidently, consistently, repeatedly—was "a ruthless and perhaps psychotic fanatic, a religious fanatic," a "madman," a "dangerous religious lunatic," a "religious maniac, a psychopath of almost fearful dimensions," a "demented ogre beset by bloody visions," who had led "a drunken band of followers on a massacre of unarmed farm folk."[4]

FIGURE P.1. Cover of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1st ed. (1967). Reproduced by permission of Penguin/Random House. Photograph by Christopher Tomlins.

And so, claiming "a writer's prerogative to transform Nat Turner into any kind of creature I wanted to transform him into,"[5] Styron invented his own Nat, a sexually inhibited, homoeroticized celibate, whose actions were driven not by eschatological fervor but by an "exquisitely sharpened hatred for the white man" learned over many years from the quotidian mortifications of his dehumanizing and emasculating condition of enslavement.[6]

Styron's objective, he explained, was to demonstrate that Turner (his Turner) was inspired by "subtler motives" than those manifested by Gray's Turner, and so enable the man to be "better understood."[7] Casting aside the "apocalyptic and deranged visions . . . heavenly signs and signals . . . divinely ordained retributive mission" allegedly on display in Gray's pamphlet,[8] Styron instead gave Turner's impulses "social and behavioral roots."[9] Styron's Nat is religious, but his religiosity is "stern piety" not "demonic fanaticism."[10] His violent rebellion is not mindless slaughter but a rational, though tragically misguided, response to the behavioral degradations, disappointments, and humiliations of his enslavement.[11] In Styron's eyes it assumes the comprehensible form of "Old Testament savagery and revenge,"[12] to which the novel counterposes at its climax a redemptive and forgiving "New Testament charity and brotherhood" that melts Turner's anger and allows his humanity fully to appear.[13] The agent of Turner's redemption is the young and virginal Margaret Whitehead, the one person the historical Nat Turner is recorded as killing during the rebellion that bears his name, who becomes in Styron's hands both object of Turner's sexual desire and his sacrificial savior, through whom (in a masturbatory fantasy minutes before his execution) Turner recovers his unity with the God he believes has abandoned him because of his bloody rampage.[14] "Perhaps," wrote Styron, "she had tempted him sexually, goaded him in some unknown way, and out of this situation had flowed his rage. . . . It was my task—and my right—to allow my imagination to range over these questions and determine the nature of the mysterious bond between the black man and the young white woman," for in their bond (and their mutually determined fate) lay the symbol he sought, the "dramatic image for slavery's annihilating power, which crushed black and white alike."[15]

Why, one might wonder, did the William Styron who had been obsessed by the story of Nat Turner since he was a boy, and who had felt an urge to explain him to modern America ever since he became a writer, nevertheless make no attempt to comprehend the Turner whom he actually encountered in the sources he consulted ("I didn't want to write

about a psychopathic monster")?[16] Why "re-create" Turner in a persona that might be "better understood"?[17] The answer lies in what Styron represented as an act of self-expiation that was also and simultaneously an act of regional and even national expiation, an act that led him to claim that his *Confessions* was not a "'historical novel'" but a "meditation on history."[18] By re-creating Nat Turner and his motives, Styron sought respite from American history's violent racial storm in cathartic reconciliation with (through knowledge of) "the Negro":

> No wonder the white man so often grows cranky, fanciful, freakish, loony, violent: how else respond to a paradox which requires with the full majesty of law behind it, that he deny the very reality of a people whose multitude approaches and often exceeds his own; that he disclaim the existence of those whose human presence has marked every acre of the land, every hamlet and crossroad and city and town, and whose humanity, however inflexibly denied, is daily evidenced to him like a heartbeat in loyalty and wickedness, madness and hilarity and mayhem and pride and love? The Negro may feel it is too late to be known, and that the desire to know him reeks of outrageous condescension. But to break down the old law, to come to *know* the Negro, has become the moral imperative of every white Southerner.[19]

Styron's "social and behavioral" explanation pulls Turner into Styron's present in order to capture and complete him. By explaining this particular Negro, Styron will come at last to know and to explain *the* Negro. He will fulfill the felt moral imperative; overcome the old law of suppression, suspicion, and separation; lay the ghost; and earn redemption for himself, every other white Southerner, and arguably the nation as well. Completion of the past relieves and completes the present.

The attempt was, of course, hopeless. *The Negro* was a wholly white ideological-cultural construct (albeit one with a very long history), nonexistent as such, hence unknowable in any form that could satisfy Styron's desire "to know the Negro."[20] Styron's Nat was the figment of a white authorial imagination that, notwithstanding Styron's insistence that he had respected "the *known* facts," sedulously refused to listen to any of Turner's own explanations of himself.[21] Yet this fatally flawed exercise was neither uninfluential nor unimportant. As a published book Styron's *Confessions* was a major commercial success. It became one of the principal channels through which white America, in the midst of its confrontation with civil rights agitators, Black Power, and the urban riots

of 1967 and 1968, renewed its acquaintance with slavery and slave rebellion. It generated intense controversy within late 1960s academic and "public intellectual" circles, largely in the form of a series of confrontations between African American intellectuals who attacked Styron's depiction of Turner and of slavery, and Styron's self-appointed defenders, notably the bumptious polemicist of American slavery and defender of the American South, Eugene Genovese. And it stimulated critical assessment of the novel's fictive realities and their relationship to the representation of historical events. In all these respects, Styron's claim that his work was no "historical novel" but a "meditation on history" was, perhaps intentionally, deeply provocative, for it ensured that his fictive depiction of reality would continuously challenge, rather than simply be haunted by, the shadowy presence of that with which the depiction did not accord.

Styron's attempt to "humanize" Turner, to make him understandable—and worthy of understanding—in Styron's present, locates him in time (as a slave in antebellum Virginia) but treats him as if exempt from time (as an essence or being intelligible at any time). Such a "metaphysics of presence," a problematic endemic to historical explanation, has long been considered philosophically suspect, an ontological denial of time in that it treats all modes of being as modes of presence, hence all modes of temporality as facets of a single primordial present.[22] "The past and the future are always determined as past presents or future presents," Jacques Derrida writes. Being is "already determined as being-present."[23] Derrida's deconstructive response is *différance*—a nonmetaphysical past, irreducibly in time and irreducibly past, a past that has never been and could never be present.[24] Among historians, the poststructural equivalent has been the turn to critical historicism, the basic proposition that "a social practice or a document is a product of the preoccupations of its own time and place, and that if it survives to be reenacted or reread at a later time, it will acquire a new set of meanings from its new context."[25] Historicism in this vein is an antifoundational philosophy of history. By pinning phenomena to time and place we render their meaning entirely a consequence of their circumstances, and so rob them of numinous possibility.[26]

Must one, though, treat the past as never capable of anything but being-past?[27] Might not the past inject itself into our here-and-now, precisely at moments in which it becomes recognizable, and is recognized by us?[28] Might it not at those moments become both enlivened by our recognition, and enlivening of our recognition, of the interest we dis-

cover in the past precisely because it has managed to force recognition upon us?[29] Styron desired to put the past to a present use by completing it on his own terms, but he also groped for something else, a way to express that desire as recognition and relation, which is to say as something other than simply fictive manipulation. Hence his rejection of the label "historical novel"; hence his "meditation upon history."

As prologue to this speculative inquiry into the matter of Nat Turner, I ask what called William Styron's fictive realities into being, and how they were crafted. I also ask what made his work a "meditation on history"—and why it failed. Finally, I ask whether it might be possible to redeem Nat Turner from endless deferral—the effect of our attempts to "understand" him as a figment of text without listening to (or for) him as a person.[30] From William Cooper Nell and Martin Robison Delany to Sharon Ewell Foster, from Kyle Baker to Nate Parker and Nathan Alan Davis, African American popular culture has tried, with some success, to retrieve Nat Turner, to recognize and assimilate him to itself, without deferral.[31] Might he ever achieve a *historical* presence of his own that is other than past?[32] How?

I

William Styron was born in 1925 in Newport News, Virginia. He lived in Newport News until he was fifteen years old, when he was sent to an Episcopalian boarding school near Urbanna, Virginia, some fifty miles to the north. College followed, first at Davidson in North Carolina—a conservative Presbyterian school, chosen by his father, where Styron remained only one year—then at Duke under the auspices of a Marine Corps training program. Styron was called up in October 1944, never saw combat, returned to Duke, and graduated without distinction in 1947. Through connections made at Duke he secured a junior editorial position at McGraw-Hill in New York where he remained for a few months, then quit to embark on a career as a writer.[33] His first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, was published four years later, his second, *Set This House on Fire*, in 1960. Both were Faulknerian, gothic, and preoccupied with doom, despair, entrapment, and particularly the latter, existential angst.[34] Both, also, were florid and portentous in style and in substance, particularly *Set This House on Fire*, in which Styron began his twenty-five-year, three-book struggle with the depiction of evil.[35] Styron's protestations notwithstanding, both were perceived as representative of a "southern" literary tradition, characterized as one that "looks to the past, is

deeply concerned with race relations and class differences, the force of superstition and religious belief over the rational mind," and by obsession with "disorder, psychological disturbance, defeat, and unnaturalness."[36] The first was greeted with considerable acclaim, the second, in some quarters at least, with derision.[37]

All this time—ever since he had concluded to be a writer—Styron had been toying with transforming boyhood curiosity about Nat Turner into a book.[38] In the immediate aftermath of *Lie Down in Darkness* he decided Turner would be his next subject, noting, "It'll probably take a bit of research," but also that "when I'm through with Nat Turner . . . he will not be either a Great Leader of the Masses—as the stupid, vicious Jackass of a Communist writer might make him out—or a perfectly satanic demagogue, as the surface historical facts present him, but a living human being of great power and great potential who somewhere, in his struggle for freedom and for immortality, lost his way."[39] Styron was dissuaded from proceeding further at this time by his editor, Hiram Haydn, who advised against involvement "in subject matter as purple as your own imagination."[40] So instead he wrote *Set This House on Fire*. But in 1960 Styron turned back to Nat Turner. Turner was to be his voyage of discovery, the means to satisfy "his powerful curiosity about black people,"[41]—people who had "barely existed" in his boyhood South "except as shadows which came daily to labor in the kitchen, to haul away garbage, to rake up leaves," people who were "simply a part of the landscape," who would "blend with the land and somehow melt and fade into it," people whose collective presence haunted Southern whites "like a monstrous recurring dream populated by identical faces wearing expressions of inquietude and vague reproach," yet who were as individuals irremediably absent, people who had surrounded him but with whom he had had no intimate connection, people of whom he was utterly ignorant. "Whatever knowledge I gained in my youth about Negroes, I gained from a distance, as if I had been watching actors in an all-black puppet show."[42] Here was the collective "Negro" whom Styron now thought it his moral duty to know.

Early in his Turner inquiries, Styron by happenstance became personally acquainted with James Baldwin, who became in effect his "first" Negro.[43] Knowing Baldwin helped Styron create the autobiographical Turner that was so striking—and controversial—an aspect of his *Confessions*: much of the characterization of Styron's Nat can be read as an adaptation of the "small, tightly wound, very dark, articulate and intense . . . unattached homosexual" Baldwin.[44] The larger part of Styron's prepara-

tory work, however, consisted of research on the historical Nat Turner, on slavery, on the event of the rebellion, and on the psychology of rebelliousness.

Research on the Turner of record and his rebellion was the easy part. Styron quickly concluded that what he took to be the sum of available materials—Gray's *Confessions*, a few contemporary newspaper stories, William Sidney Drewry's 1900 monograph *The Southampton Insurrection*—were easily mastered and mostly slim pickings.[45] He would remark on one occasion that "any C+ history student" could learn all there was to know in "official sources" about Nat Turner in a few days; on another that it would take only a day; on yet another, that twenty minutes would suffice.[46] Nor, from his first encounter with those materials in 1952 until his final commentaries on his book fifty years later, did Styron ever change his mind about the Turner they revealed: "A ruthless and perhaps psychotic fanatic, a religious fanatic who, lacking any plan or purpose . . . takes five or six rather bedraggled followers and goes off on a ruthless, directionless, aimless, forty-eight hour rampage of total destruction, in which the victims are, by a large majority, women and little children."[47] This was the Negro Styron could not understand and apparently did not wish to try to know, the Negro whom he wished to replace with a different *knowable* Negro.

To re-create Turner as a Negro he could know, indeed of whom he could take complete possession ("I supplied him with the motivation. I gave him a rationale. I gave him all the confusions and desperations, troubles, worries")[48] Styron turned to three mid-twentieth-century sources: the existentialism that had already influenced *Set This House on Fire*, notably in this case Albert Camus's *L'Etranger* (1942);[49] the history of slavery—in particular Stanley M. Elkins's psychology-influenced *Slavery* (1959);[50] and the newly fashionable genre of psychohistory, specifically Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1958).[51]

From *L'Etranger* came the book's broad plan, its beginning and end—Part I, "Judgment Day," and Part IV, "It Is Done . . ."—and the idea of an autobiographical narrative. All were sparked by the situational parallel that Styron saw between Nat Turner and *L'Etranger*'s central character, Meursault:

> About 1962 . . . I was up on Martha's Vineyard and I had just read for the first time Camus' "The Stranger." It is a brilliant book, the best of Camus, and it impressed me enormously: there was something about the poignancy of the condemned man sitting in his

> jail cell on the day of his execution—the existential predicament of the man—that hit me. And so did the use of the first person, the book being told through the eyes of the condemned. The effect of all this was so strong that I suddenly realized my Nat Turner could be done the same way: that like Camus, I would center the novel around a man facing his own death in a jail cell, which of course was true of Turner and how his life ended. And so there, suddenly provided, was the architecture of the book, its framework, along with the idea of telling the story in the first person.[52]

From Elkins, meanwhile, came a conception of slavery so insidiously dreadful that it could dwarf, hence explain, even justify, the savagery of the rebellion, and at the same time render comprehensible the haunting absence—that elusive otherness—of the Negro Styron desired so urgently to know: a North American slavery distinct from that of any other time or place; a despotic slavery produced by an utterly unrestrained agricultural capitalism; a slavery so total in its domination that it produced in its victims the perpetual submissive childishness of "Sambo," not as racist stereotype but as psychological actuality; a slavery that rendered the plantation analogous to the Nazi concentration camp:

> Both were closed systems from which all standards based on prior connections had been effectively detached. A working adjustment to either system required a childlike conformity, a limited choice of "significant others." Cruelty per se cannot be considered the primary key to this; of far greater importance was the simple "closedness" of the system, in which all lines of authority descended from the master and in which alternative social bases that might have supported alternative standards were systematically suppressed. The individual, consequently, for his very psychic security, had to picture his master in some way as the "good father," even when, as in the concentration camp, it made no sense at all. But why should it not have made sense for many a simple plantation Negro whose master did exhibit in all the ways that could be expected, the features of the good father who was really "good"? . . . For the Negro child, in particular, the plantation offered no really satisfactory father-image other than the master.[53]

If *L'Etranger* provided the book's framework, *Slavery* provided much of its substance—the "black shit-eating people" that Styron's adult

Nat so despises, "faces popeyed with black nigger credulity," and of whom he despairs, "lacking even the will to destroy by their own hand their unending anguish"; the "cheap grins and comic shufflings" to which even his closest confidant is prone; and Nat's own early unawakened life as "a pet, the darling, the little black jewel of Turner's Mill," the "spoiled child" of saintly Marse Samuel's plantation household.[54]

How does the spoiled child of *Confessions* Part II, "Old Times Past," become the avenging Old Testament rebel of Part III, "Study War"? Here Styron turned to Erikson's *Young Man Luther*, a psychobiographical case study of late adolescent/early adult "identity crisis." Identity crisis, for Erikson, referenced "that period of the life cycle when each youth must forge for himself some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood."[55] Styron's Nat experiences his identity crisis as a moment of collapse and betrayal—the failure and disintegration of his home, Turner's Mill, and with it the end of Marse Samuel's plans for Nat's advancement—a new life in Richmond, apprenticeship, and eventual emancipation (the hopes of his anticipated adulthood). Here lie the beginnings of what would become Nat's "exquisitely sharpened hatred,"[56] in Erikson's terms the birth of his "new world perspective" in a moment of "total and cruel repudiation" of his former understanding of the world (literally "old times *past*"). Here too lie the beginnings of the transformation of naïve adolescent religiosity into "Old Testament vengeance."[57] Erikson observes:

> We will call what young people in their teens and early twenties look for in religion and other dogmatic systems an *ideology*. At the most it is a militant system with uniformed members and uniform goals; at the least it is a "way of life" or what the Germans call a *Weltanschauung*, a world-view which is consonant with existing theory, available knowledge, and common sense, and yet is significantly more: an utopian outlook, a cosmic mood, or a doctrinal logic, all shared as self-evident, beyond any need for demonstration. What is to be relinquished as "old" may be the individual's previous life; this usually means the perspectives intrinsic to the life-style of the parents, who are thus discarded contrary to all traditional safeguards of filial devotion. The "old" may be a part of himself, which must henceforth be subdued by some rigorous self-denial in a private life-style or through membership in a militant

> or military organization; or it may be the world-view of other castes and classes, races and peoples: in this case these people become not only expendable, but the appointed victims of the most righteous annihilation.[58]

This, the righteous annihilator, is the new Nat of "Study War."

How, though, to separate this righteous Old Testament annihilator from the religious fanatic Styron did not wish to know, and from the reader's reproach and condemnation? How to make him, despite his acts, worthy of knowing? Here Styron drew further on Erikson, and on two psychological impulses of his own, sexual desire and conflicted love, united in the character of Margaret Whitehead.[59] The moment Styron's Nat, goaded by the insane, rape-obsessed, rebel "Will,"[60] consummates his hate/love longing for Margaret Whitehead (with which we have become familiarized through Nat's own serial rape fantasies)[61] by killing her, his rebellion loses direction and meaning, and Nat himself begins a headlong slide from righteous annihilation to grief and guilt-ridden despair, utterly estranged from God.[62] And the moment he acknowledges and consummates his unconflicted love of Margaret (the preexecution masturbation fantasy) he surmounts his last Eriksonian crisis, the integrity crisis, which "leads man to the portals of nothingness . . . to the station of *having been*,"[63] and in Nat's case points him toward death finally united with a New Testament God of brotherhood and forgiveness, forever severed from the Old Testament's primitive desert God of rage and terror. Styron's Nat exits the world a rather conventional Christian sinner saved.[64]

By integrity, Erikson means a state of mind in which the ego has achieved "assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning." He continues:

> It is a post-narcissistic love of the human ego—not of the self—as an experience which conveys some world order and some spiritual sense, no matter how dearly paid for. It is the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. . . . Before this final solution, death loses its sting.[65]

In the final moments of his life, Styron's Nat becomes the Negro the author desires so urgently to know, the bearer of a promise of acceptance and reconciliation, the embodied hope of the author for himself and for an America healed of racial violence, ignorance, and hatred.[66]

II

To re-create Nat Turner, to make him his own (so as to make him the embodiment of an integrated self and nation), Styron had to displace two other Nat Turners, the Nat Turner of Thomas Ruffin Gray's original *Confessions*, and the Nat Turner of oral legend, particularly of African American legend. In each case Styron's displacement strategy was the same—denial and rejection. The two denials, however, were quite distinct.

Styron's denial and rejection of the Turner of Gray's *Confessions* was not based on any carefully reasoned conclusion that he was a fabrication.[67] Rather, Styron insisted that this Turner was an insane monster, a religious fanatic who did not deserve attention or comprehension.[68] Styron's impression thus reproduces precisely what Gray desires his reader to see, "a gloomy fanatic . . . bewildered and overwrought . . . endeavoring to grapple with things beyond [his] reach," so described by a man who advertises his own repulsion at "the expression of his fiendlike face when excited by enthusiasm . . . daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven." As "I looked on him" says Gray, "my blood curdled in my veins."[69] Unlike Gray, however, it is not Turner's religiosity as such from which Styron recoils.[70] "Old Testament vengeance" is a central and essential component of Styron's Nat.[71] But enthusiasm—evangelical Christian faith—is not. Like Gray, Styron treats Turner's enthusiasm as insanity.[72] To domesticate him, Styron simply relieves Turner of his enthusiastic ideation, substituting in its stead those "subtler motives" suggested by social and behavioral explanation.[73] Styron's Nat is a noticeably calculating, a highly rational, strikingly modern intelligence.[74]

In small part, Styron separated his Nat from religious enthusiasm the better to use the book as an opportunity to inveigh against institutionalized Christian hypocrisy. "I've always been partially intent on contrasting the spiritual impulse as it is defined by Christianity with the hypocritical ritual and hypocritical shallowness and thought that surround much of [its] manifestations in life."[75] In *Confessions*, Styron's attack on Christian hypocrisy takes the form of an attack on denominational churches (notably the Methodist Church) on the grounds that "in Turner's time" the church was one of the two institutions (the other was the legal system) "which sold the Negro down the river" by promising salvation but failing to deliver.[76] "Basic psychology dictates that when you are offered the sweetest of promises and you experience only total frustration of it, you're driven round the bend. . . . It was perhaps the cruelest

sell-out of all time."[77] Much more important, however, the separation of Turner from religious enthusiasm was a device that enabled Styron to insert a quite different Christian sensibility in its place, by having his Old Testament warrior first abandoned by the God of the prophets, then saved at the last by the intercession of Margaret Whitehead's Christian love.[78] "He was an avenging Old Testament angel. . . . I intentionally avoided the mention of Christ as much as I could throughout the book. He is almost never mentioned. Because if the book does have a sense of redemptive quality, it is only at the very end that it comes."[79] This is by any measure an extraordinarily perverse treatment of the Turner of Gray's *Confessions* (a treatment, one should note, for which Styron was commended by C. Vann Woodward),[80] whose religiosity is couched almost entirely in New Testament discourse, and who is himself his own redeemer.[81] It is explicable only by Styron's (and Woodward's) refusal (or inability) to recognize that Turner's New Testament did not belong to the "charity and brotherhood" species of Christian "spiritual impulse" espoused by twentieth-century white liberals, but to the martial and ascetic evangelicalism of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Anglo-American Protestantism, whose history of salvation began before the Fall and hence rejected any distinction between Old Testament and New.[82] Styron appears not to realize that in this species of Christian faith, the avenging angel is Christ himself.[83]

Styron's other displacement—the displacement of the Turner of legend—was more straightforward. Styron simply denied there was any such Turner.[84] His 1965 *Harper's Magazine* essay, "This Quiet Dust," tells of a day trip to Southampton County in May 1961 in search of a legendary Turner who completely fails to materialize. "What research it was possible to do on the event I had long since done. . . . It was not a question, then, of digging out more facts" but of savoring local mood and landscape, and probing for local lore.[85] But whomever he questions on local knowledge of Turner and his rebellion, white or black, disappoints him. "The native Virginian, despite himself, is cursed with a suffocating sense of history. . . . Yet it was as if Nat Turner had never existed."[86] People seemed "simply unaware."[87] If there were no recollection here, where he had once lived and wreaked bloody havoc, then there could be none anywhere. Turner "had been erased from memory."[88] The story is entirely bizarre: Accompanied by his father and his wife, Styron tours backcountry Southampton in the county sheriff's squad car, "with its huge star emblazoned on the doors . . . its riot gun protectively nuzzling the backs of our necks over the edge of the rear seat," in search of

passersby whom they can stop and quiz on what they know about the Turner Rebellion.[89] Styron describes how the sheriff himself enthusiastically joined in the interrogations. "I think it tickled him to perplex their foolish heads, white or black, with the same old leading question: 'You heard about old Nat Turner, ain't you?' But few of them had."[90] Small wonder. Ironically, Styron's essay itself provides epigraphic evidence that gives the lie to his claim of the absence of folk lore—two verses from what was labeled an "Old-time Negro Song," the refrain of which was the impossibility of suppressing Nat Turner.[91]

After his *Confessions* was published, Styron would return repeatedly to the sparseness of fact and the erasure of memory to elevate the product of his own creative imagination above both.[92] This earned him, largely, congratulation and commendation from white commentators,[93] and—again largely—disdain and outrage from black commentators.[94] In a *New Republic* review remarkable for the seamlessness of its many transits back and forth between historical and imaginative depiction, the doyen of white Southern historians, C. Vann Woodward, awarded Styron the mantle of complete and utter scholarly respectability. "The picture of Nat's life and motivation the novelist constructs is, but for a few scraps of evidence, without historical underpinnings, but most historians would agree, I think, not inconsistent with anything historians know. It is informed by a respect for history, a sure feeling for the period, and a deep and precise sense of place and time."[95] A man one might consider Woodward's African American counterpart, John Henrik Clarke, did not agree.[96] "No event in recent years has touched and stirred the black intellectual community more than this book. They are of the opinion, with a few notable exceptions, that the Nat Turner created by William Styron has little resemblance to the Virginia slave insurrectionist who is a hero to his people."[97] Nine other black intellectuals joined Clarke in publishing a book of essays claiming the existence of a potent African American history (and lore) of Nat Turner ignored by Styron, and attempting to reclaim the historical figure of Turner from him. With perhaps two exceptions,[98] their rebuttal—*William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*—though heated, was not unduly rancorous. Nonetheless they were speedily condemned by Styron's defenders, notably Eugene Genovese, for a collective exhibition of "ferocity and hysteria" that revealed the black intelligentsia was on course for a "moral, political, and intellectual debacle."[99] Nothing had ever prevented "black intellectuals, who claim to have the living traditions of black America at their disposal, from creating their own version" of Turner, Genovese

wrote, even as he busily set about denying that black America's living traditions actually contained any memory of Turner, and excoriated the ten's attempts to defend an African American "version" as mere pandering to the Black Power movement.[100] "If white historians—for whatever reasons—have been blind to whole areas of black sensibility, culture, and tradition, then show us. We can learn much from your work but nothing from your fury."[101] Subsequently, Styron himself would claim the ten black writers were no more than a front for the U.S. Communist Party and its *apparatchik* theoretician, Herbert Aptheker, the white historian of slavery whose work Styron—like Genovese—publicly derided.[102]

III

The Confessions of Nat Turner was published, to considerable demand, in October 1967. Random House had prepared the ground carefully. Styron "would have a great many readers and make a great deal of money."[103] Book club and paperback rights had been sold long in advance, bringing $250,000. Movie rights went for $800,000. *Harper's* and *Life* bought serial rights to publish substantial excerpts coinciding with the book's publication.[104] By release day (October 9) Random House had 125,000 hardback copies in print; many more would follow.[105] The next three years saw multiple foreign editions, a Pulitzer Prize (1968), and the Howells Medal (1970).[106] Styron's *Confessions* was another "orgy of commerce"—this time a real one.[107] Commenting on the book that preceded *Confessions*—*Set This House on Fire*—Norman Mailer had written in 1959, prior to the book's appearance, "The reception will be a study in the art of literary advancement. For Styron has spent years oiling every literary lever and power which could help him on his way, and there are medals waiting for him in the mass-media."[108] *House on Fire* had not been the major commercial success Mailer had anticipated. *Confessions*, it seemed, would prove him right the second time around.

The first reviews were fulsome indeed. "A stunningly beautiful embodiment of a noble man, in a rotten time and place, who tried his best to save himself and transform the world."[109] No one was more admiring than the literary critic Philip Rahv in the *New York Review of Books*. Styron had successfully matched his subject—chattel slavery and its consequences—to the moment—"the political and intellectual climate of the Sixties." The novel's historicity did not exclude, but rather invited, contemporaneity in a way that "only a white Southern writer" could have

managed. A Northern writer would have been too much of an outsider, Rahv argued, "and a Negro writer, because of a very complex anxiety not only personal but social and political, would have probably stacked the cards, producing in a mood of unnerving rage and indignation, a melodrama of saints and sinners." Styron had surpassed Faulkner in "ability to empathize with his Negro figures." His book was "a radical departure from past writing about Negroes"; it fulfilled its author's desire "to know the Negro."[110]

The helpless, hapless, condescension of reviewers like Rahv helps explain the appalled reaction of John Henrik Clarke and his compatriots, whose essential complaint was pithily summarized in Vincent Harding's essay title, "You've Taken My Nat and Gone."[111] Rahv seemed to think of "the Negro" as an object of study, from which truth might better be extracted by expert white observation than by attention to self-description. But, however unintentionally, Rahv had also put his finger on *Confessions*' core ambition—and the difficulty it was to cause the book's author.

The issue at hand was raised by Styron himself, twice over, in the author note accompanying his *Confessions*. First, he addressed the inevitable tension for one writing on a historical subject between historical research and creative imagination:

> During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the *known* facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom in reconstructing events—yet I trust remaining within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery.[112]

Second, and immediately following, Styron alluded to his embrace of a philosophy of history that, in effect dialectically, overcame the tension between fact and creative imagination that he had just acknowledged:

> The relativity of time allows us elastic definitions: the year 1831 was, simultaneously, a long time ago and only yesterday. Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an "historical novel" in conventional terms than a meditation on history.[113]

Styron's desire to escape the low-earth orbit of the "historical novel" and its subjective, moralistic standpoint on indubitably past events for the Proustian elasticities of "the relativity of time" is clear.[114] Unfortunately for him, he would find it enormously difficult to explain precisely what he meant by "a meditation on history,"[115] or how it had helped him overcome the fact/imagination tension, or how it gave him a standpoint different—more serious, more worthy of respect, more authentic—than that of the historical novel. As a result, when challenged—first by Aptheker,[116] later by the ten black writers and others—Styron became stuck in an increasingly petulant defensive crouch. When his creative imaginings of Turner and of slavery were challenged, Styron would cite his research, his mastery of facts and sources.[117] When his mastery of facts and sources was challenged, Styron would cite his creative imagination.[118] Some months into the controversy, Styron discovered Georg Lukács's book, *The Historical Novel*,[119] which—still unable to explain his own philosophy of history—he began citing with abandon.[120] There was a certain irony in this, given that Styron had wished to distance *Confessions* from the historical novel, but Lukács was no defender of convention, and in any case Styron thought he had found in *The Historical Novel* impeccable authority—"the greatest Marxist literary critic" or "the great Hungarian Marxist critic"[121]—for artistic license, for respectable intellectual radicalism, and above all for freedom from "the dead baggage of facts," from "particular historical facts."[122] And indeed Lukács had written that "the novelist must be at liberty to treat [particular historical facts] as he likes, if he is to reproduce the much more complex and ramifying totality with historical faithfulness."[123] But Lukács was, of course, distinguishing here between "real historical fidelity to the whole . . . fidelity in the reproduction of the material foundations of the life of a given period" and "the pseudo-historicism of the mere authenticity of individual facts."[124] It was precisely the "real historical fidelity" of Styron's representation of Turner and of slavery that was at issue.[125]

Styron's self-defense would eventually turn *The Historical Novel* into a sort of fiction writer's checklist, which also gave the unfortunate impression that he had read *The Historical Novel* before writing *Confessions* rather than come across it afterwards. Lukács "should be read by all who attempt to write in the genre" he observed in 1992:

> A bad historical novel leaves the impression of a hopelessly overfurnished house, cluttered with facts the author wishes to show off as fruits of his diligent research. Georg Lukács . . . views the dis-

> regard of facts as a state of grace: the creator of historical fiction, he argues convincingly, should have a thorough—perhaps even a magisterial—command of the period with which he is dealing, but he should not permit his work to be governed by particular historical facts. . . . 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.[126]

All that said, Styron credited Lukács in his 1992 essay with helping him in his struggle to articulate what he meant by "a meditation on history." But the statement of meaning he allowed himself on that occasion—that "historical novels which have no resonance in the present are bound to prove of only 'antiquarian' interest"[127]—was banal.

Styron struggled to articulate what his "meditation" meant because, being neither philosopher nor historian, he actually had no idea what it meant, and so took his cue from the views of whatever authoritative and apparently supportive voice he happened to encounter. In the course of a postpublication conversation about *Confessions* with C. Vann Woodward and his Yale colleague, the literary scholar R.W.B. Lewis, for example, Styron started out agreeing with Woodward that his goal had been to make "valid and authentic use of history for the purposes of fiction," and to be faithful to, and respectful of, "the period, the time, the place." Lewis then asked whether "meditation on history" meant "a meditation on the mysterious processes of history." Styron answered that his goal had been to distance himself from the "curse" of the historical novel—a return to Woodward's contention that his goal had been to write a book that was an authentic and respectful invocation of history—then added that he had also aspired "to encompass a meditative quality as I wrote." Lewis took this to mean that Styron was not after all himself meditating on history, but rather that he wished to convey a sense of his subject, Nat, meditating on *his* history—"brooding about the entire adventure while waiting to be hanged." Styron agreed with that too.[128] When, later, Genovese argued (inveighing against Aptheker and

the ten black writers) that one should look to history not for ideological reassurance but for truth, and that Styron had told the truth about Turner and about slavery, Styron agreed with that.[129] Then, when Seymour Gross and Ellen Bender argued the opposite—that Styron like all other writers had simply produced his own partial Turner, "reading into him, and out of him, those usable truths which seemed to him to coalesce about the image he was contemplating"—Styron agreed with that too.[130] Although throughout he stubbornly insisted on the integrity of his depiction, by 1992 Styron seemed ready to surrender to the predilection for contingency that over the previous twenty-five years had become uppermost in historical scholarship. Turner "utterly evaded a consistent portrayal." He "was truly a chameleon."[131]

In fact, the meaning of Styron's "meditation" had always been clear and available, in his own words, for all to see, at the end of his 1965 *Harper*'s essay, "This Quiet Dust." At the end of his long and disappointing day in Southampton County, Styron discovers what he takes to be the home of Margaret Whitehead, and describes a vision of her death. What he wrote then had nothing to do with tensions between "facts" and "creative freedom." But it does help explain why Styron clung so tenaciously to both history and art, despite his inability to articulate why. Styron's meditation was on the impossibility of living imaginatively within history's decisive separation of "the past" from his "now":

> I leaned against the rotting frame of the door, gazing out past the great trees and into that far meadow where Nat had brought down and slain Miss Margaret Whitehead. For an instant in the silence, I thought I could hear a mad rustle of taffeta, and rushing feet, and a shrill girlish piping of terror; then that day and this day seemed to meet and melt together, becoming almost one, and for a long moment indistinguishable.[132]

Fittingly, the passage is a good stand-in for so much that is maddening about William Styron's *Confessions*, and simultaneously for so much about the book that was misunderstood. First, the house from which he gazed "into that far meadow" was not actually the Whitehead house at all. His "facts" were wrong.[133] Second, the idea central to the passage was conveyed with all of Styron's familiar florid profundity—every noun carefully attended by a posse of guardian adjectives. But, third, the idea itself, Styron's "long moment indistinguishable," was well worth the trouble.

The title of the *Harper's* essay reveals its meaning only in the essay's last paragraphs, as Styron explores the "Whitehead" house, choking on the dust "that lay everywhere in the deserted rooms, years and decades of dust, dust an inch thick in some places." The title is taken from Emily Dickinson's poem *The Single Hound* #74, a muse on being and nothingness:

> This quiet Dust was Gentlemen and Ladies,
> And Lads and Girls;
> Was laughter and ability and sighing,
> And frocks and curls.
> This passive place a Summer's nimble mansion,
> Where Bloom and Bees
> Fulfilled their Oriental Circuit,
> Then ceased like these.[134]

Styron's words embrace Dickinson's temporal cycle of life and death, but restate it as one not simply of presence and absence, but of memory and recognition. Amid the dusty ruin of what he thought was the Whitehead house, his "lustrous and golden day" in Southampton County "seemed to find its only resonance in the memory, and perhaps a premonition, of death."[135] Here was the "long moment indistinguishable," a rebuke to those who would labor to create as "history" a separated past from which the present had departed. Styron, who bitterly resented the common critical comment that he was his generation's William Faulkner, was nevertheless having a Faulknerian moment. "The past is never dead," Faulkner famously wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*. "It's not even past."[136]

Styron's long moment sets him apart, philosophically, from those to whom he had turned, so gratefully, for professional assistance: from C. Vann Woodward, for whom Styron's novel was *history*—a reconstruction of a particular past;[137] from Eugene Genovese, for whom Styron's novel was less history than *art*—and for that reason able to claim access to transcendent truths as no history ever could;[138] and even from Georg Lukács, for whom "a real historical novel" was one "which contemporaries would experience as their own pre-history."[139] It puts him instead in the company of Walter Benjamin, for whom the goal of history was to represent "our age"—the age that examines historical events—"in the age during which they arose."[140] As Michael Jennings has noted, Benjamin's point is liable to be misunderstood. It does not mean "that we bring a previous age to representation in our own," but the reverse—that "we bring the salient . . . features of our own age to consciousness" by

recognizing their representation in that to which we give our attention.[141] In Benjamin's own words the contrast with Lukács is clear. For Lukács the object of historical inquiry was to recover the reality of an object situated temporally and spatially in the past.[142] For Benjamin the object of historical inquiry could only exist in a condition of constellation with the moment—the "now"—of its observation:

> It is said that the dialectical method consists in doing justice each time to the concrete historical situation of its object. But that is not enough. For it is just as much a matter of doing justice to the concrete historical situation of the *interest* taken in the object. And *this* situation is always so constituted that the interest is itself preformed in that object and, above all, feels this object concretized in itself and upraised from its former being into the higher concretion of now-being [*Jetztsein*].[143]

This is a semblance of the intent attributed to Styron by his biographer, who argues that by employing a narrative voice "not . . . limited by time or place" Styron intended to create a collision between Turner's language, and world, and his own, "to bring the past into direct confrontation with the present," to possess it and transform it in "an unruly, uncooperative" fashion.[144]

One might wonder why, if this was indeed Styron's intent, he had not made it clear years before. Though it is unlikely it would have saved him from controversy it might have assisted comprehension of his purposes. In fact, apart from the conclusion to "This Quiet Dust," Styron was unwilling, more likely unable, to explain himself. First, in interviews accompanying publication, perhaps because his publisher was so determinedly insisting that the book was a commentary on the present, Styron preferred to distance himself from any desire to create a collision between the late 1960s and the Turner Rebellion: "I began the book and was concerned with the subject back in the forties, long before the civil-rights struggle was truly joined. The central meaning of the book is not consciously contemporary."[145] Second, throughout his life after *Confessions*, Styron struggled for words from which to fashion a self-reflective account of meditative intent. He managed to convey a sense of temporal doubleness, but the two elements—history and representation—remained obstinately apart. The book dealt with history but was also "a separate entity"; it had "its own autonomy . . . its own metaphysics, its own reason for being as an aesthetic object." It

was simultaneously engaged with history and "a metaphorical diagram for a writer's attitude toward human existence."[146] In 1982 he appealed to the same discourse of doubleness, calling the book "an imagined vision within a vision," but then discounted "meditation on history" by divorcing the book from "the detritus of fact" or any pretensions to "truth."[147] Ten years later Styron had become more willing to let the worlds collide: "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," and "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 . . . [on] the agony that has bound the present to the past."[148] He would reemphasize the collision another decade on:

> Americans have a penchant for historical amnesia. Very few Americans are aware of the continuity that exists between slavery and the racial dilemma we still live with in this country. Without an understanding of slavery I don't think there can be any true perception of the complexity of the racial agony in the nation. And any legitimate story, such as the one that involves Nat Turner, or any other aspect of slavery, could be an illumination for our society. Most people don't understand the extent of the utter dehumanization created by American slavery, the almost uniquely monolithic emasculating quality that slavery possessed. If a story like Nat Turner could be made part of the general consciousness of Americans at this time, I think it would be of enormous value.[149]

But this was not constellation—the creation of a dialectical image.[150] It was instead a description of hauling a piece of the past into the present so as to inform a current conjuncture with moral reflection on a prior atrocity. Here was no escape from the low-earth orbit of the "historical novel" into "the relativity of time." It suffered, moreover, from Styron's fatal persistence in simultaneously seeking a black audience that would appreciate his work, while failing to realize how completely he had excluded that audience from his imagination. Could one defensibly maintain that very few *African* Americans were "aware of the continuity that exists between slavery and the racial dilemma we still live with in this country"?[151] Still, as its author's final plea for his book's "passion and . . . honesty . . . [and] integrity,"[152] it was not without grace.

CONCLUSION

What remains is the question how one might deliver Nat Turner from those, like William Styron, who would befriend him by giving him "rational dimensions" so that he might be yanked into the American present to teach it a lesson it could understand on its own terms. How might Turner instead be encountered on *his* terms, such that "what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation," the moment of a specific recognition that teaches the present not a moral lesson about itself, but instead that it is itself a montage fashioned from dialectical images—from "critical constellations in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself with precisely this present"?[153] How does one overcome the metaphysics of presence—which dictated both the construction and the reception, on all sides, of Styron's Nat—without surrendering the past to the past?

First we have to recognize that the Turner whom Styron rejected, the Turner he met in Gray's *Confessions*, the psychopath afflicted with "crazed visions," is just as much Styron's invention as the rational Turner, gifted with human complexity, whom he created to take the psychopath's place in the modern mind.[154] The psychopathic visionary is no more Turner on his own terms than the rational calculating Turner of Styron's *Confessions*. It is instead what results from a complete refusal to engage in inquiry into those terms and to substitute instead a lazy modernist cliché—as Eugene Genovese so helpfully put it in his assault on the ten black writers, "one of those religious fanatics whose single-minded madness carried him to the leadership of a popular cause"—that excuses one from undertaking the investigation.[155]

Nor is Styron alone in that refusal. Though historians have found Turner's rebellion historically significant,[156] even praiseworthy,[157] as an event, most have contented themselves with entirely superficial assessments of Turner himself.[158] The best that Kenneth Stampp could manage was that Turner, whom Stampp thought "a rather unimpressive" slave, whatever that meant, "somehow . . . came to believe that he had been divinely chosen to deliver his people from bondage."[159] For the more censorious, ever opinionated, Genovese, "those who read the record could not be faulted for concluding that Nat Turner, unlike Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey, was a hate-driven madman who had no idea of where he was leading his men or what they would do when they got there."[160] Nor was Genovese by any means alone in preferring those who better conformed to his understanding of what the leader of a slave

rebellion should look like—Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey—to the "fanatic" Nat Turner. The major African American literary figure Arna Bontemps, author (amongst many works) of *Black Thunder* (1936), a novel about Gabriel's Rebellion, tells us he had first considered writing about Turner, but had been troubled by Turner's "'visions' and 'dreams,'" his "trance-like mumbo-jumbo."[161]

As the words of Genovese (and Bontemps) suggest, "reading the record"—which means reading Gray's *Confessions*—is taken to be a straightforward process that, inevitably, reveals the man that Gray presented, a madman confused and overwhelmed by visions, dreams, and "mumbo-jumbo." Literary scholars, in contrast, have shown us how to read Gray's *Confessions* with a far more subtle appreciation of the connotations of Turner's Christian-inflected discourse.[162] If Nat Turner is to be delivered from cartoonish caricature, the attempt must begin in a careful recovery of the layered meaning of his own speech, the soterial speech of an ascetic evangelical Protestant, not a dismissal of it as "impossibly elevated and formal," or of its speaker as fanatic or insane.[163] Here, one might say, the historian is required to encounter Derrida's past, the past that never can be present.

But, second, this "contextualization" of Turner's intellect—recognizing it the way it really was—is only the initial step in his rescue. For "articulating the past *historically*" means much more than simply "recognizing it 'the way it really was.'"[164] Historical perspective *dispels* "self-contained facticity."[165] Articulating the past historically "means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger," at "the moment of its recognizability," which is the here-and-now.[166] In other words, if we understand history as an enlivened understanding of an object of contemplation, which is to say an object rendered intelligible, we must recognize that the contemplated object is not enlivened by the relationalities within which it allegedly belongs (the relationalities of *its* time) but by the fold of time that creates it in constellation with the present. "The lines of perspective in this construction, receding to the vanishing point, converge in our own historical experience."[167] That which we recognize, and to which we give our attention, is enlivened by our recognition; it also enlivens us.

Dimly, I think, William Styron recognized that an enlivened Nat Turner could not be a Turner of self-contained facticity but had necessarily to be a Turner brought into a relationship with Styron's own present. In attempting to create that relationship, Styron so thoroughly uprooted Turner from Turner's past as to reinvent him completely in the

terms of Styron's present. Rather than "recognize" Turner he preferred to exchange one self-contained facticity for another.[168] And so he failed. But his failure was not complete. His error lay in the execution, not in its animating idea.

Contemporary historicism, the historicism whose intellectual contribution has been to pin phenomena in temporal and spatial place, would not have much time—literally—for William Styron's "long moment indistinguishable." Such a moment that melts distinct spatio-temporal locales into one and the same makes no sense to a historicism whose purpose is relentless temporal separation. Fortunately there are other ways of doing history that may help us make sense of indistinguishable moments. They will help us produce an enlivened Nat Turner who is no longer merely enigmatic spectator.

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