Styron’s Nat: or, The Metaphysics of Presence

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Abstract

In 1967, the American novelist William Styron published his third major work of fiction, a book entitled The Confessions of Nat Turner. Styron’s Confessions represented itself as the autobiographical narrative of an African American slave, who in August 1831 had led a slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, not far from the Virginia Tidewater region where Styron himself had grown up. Both Turner and the revolt that bore his name were real enough. But for Styron the Turner of record was “a person of conspicuous ghastliness” with whom he wished to have no connection. So Styron invented his own Nat, inspired by “subtler motives” than those manifested by the historical Turner. In this essay I ask what called Styron’s fictive realities into being, and how they were crafted. I ask why he insisted his work was not a “historical novel” but a “meditation on history”—and why, despite his insistence, he could not explain what that meant. Finally, I ask whether it is possible to redeem Nat Turner from the effects of our attempts to “understand” him; whether, that is, he might achieve a historical presence of his own that is ever other than ghostly, or ever other than 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 (1992)

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In 1967, the American novelist William Styron published The Confessions of Nat Turner, his third major work of fiction. Confessions represented itself as the autobiographical narrative of an African American slave who in August 1831 led a slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, not far from the Virginia Tidewater region where Styron himself had grown up. Both Turner and the revolt were real enough—Styron’s title was borrowed from a contemporary pamphlet published a few days after Turner’s capture and execution; his point of departure was the series of conversations between Turner and the pamphlet’s author, Thomas Ruffin Gray, that occurred while Turner was in jail awaiting trial, upon which Gray’s pamphlet drew. But for Styron, the man revealed in those conversations was someone with whom he wished to have nothing to do, “a demented ogre beset by bloody visions” who had led “a drunken band of followers on a massacre of un-

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1 Thomas R. Gray, The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va., As fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray, in the prison where he was confined (1831).
armed farm folk.” And so, claiming “a writer’s prerogative to transform Nat Turner into any kind of creature I wanted,” Styron invented his own Nat, a homoeroticized celibate driven not by religious fervor but by an “exquisitely sharpened hatred for the white man” learned from the quotidien humiliations of his enslavement.

Styron explained his objective was to demonstrate that Turner was inspired by “subtler motives” than those manifested by Gray’s Turner, and so to enable the man to be “better understood.” Concretely, Styron gave Turner’s impulses “social and behavioral roots.” Styron’s Nat is religious, but his religiosity is “stern piety” not “demonic fanaticism.” His violent rebellion is not mindless slaughter but a rational, though terribly misguided, response to degradation. Styron describes it as “Old Testament savagery and revenge,” to which the novel’s climax counterposes a redemptive and forgiving “New Testament charity and brotherhood” that melts Turner’s anger and reveals his humanity.

William Styron had been obsessed by the story of Nat Turner since he was a boy. He had felt compelled to explain him to modern America ever since he became a writer. Yet he made no attempt to comprehend the Turner whom he actually encountered in the sources he consulted. Why “re-create” a persona that might be “better understood”? The answer lies in what Styron represents as an act of self-expiation that is simultaneously an act of regional, even national expiation, an act that led him to claim that his Confessions was a “meditation on history.” By re-creating Nat Turner, Styron seeks respite from American history’s bloody racial rampage in cathartic reconciliation with (through knowledge of) “the Negro.” By explaining this particular Negro, Styron will come to know and to explain the Negro. By overcoming the old law of suppression and separation he will discharge a moral duty, and earn redemption—for himself, every other white Southerner, and the nation.

The attempt was, of course, hopeless. Styron’s Nat is not a knowable Negro, but the figment of an authorial imagination that sedulously ignored all Turner’s own explana-

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8 William Styron, This Quiet Dust, Harper’s Mag., Apr. 1965, at 135, 138; Styron, supra note 5, at 442.

9 William Styron, Author’s Note, in Styron, supra note 4, at xi.

10 Styron, supra note 8, at 138.
tions of himself. Yet the attempt was influential and important. Styron’s *Confessions* became one of the principal channels through which, in the midst of civil rights agitation, Black Power, and urban riots, white America renewed its acquaintance with slavery and slave rebellion. It generated intense controversy within “public intellectual” circles, sparking confrontations between African American intellectuals who attacked Styron’s depiction of Turner and slavery, and Styron’s self-appointed defenders, notably the irrepressible Eugene Genovese. And it stimulated critical assessment of the novel’s fictive realities and their relationship to the representation of historical events.

In each respect, Styron’s claim that his work was no “historical novel” but a “meditation on history” was deeply provocative. It ensured that his fictive reality would continuously challenge, rather than be haunted by, the shadowy presence of that with which the depiction did not accord.

Styron’s attempt to make Turner understandable—and worth understanding—in Styron’s present locates him in time (a Virginia slave) but treats him as if intelligible at any time. Such a “metaphysics of presence” has long been considered philosophically suspect, an ontology that treats all modes of being as modes of presence, hence all temporalities as facets of one primordial present. Derrida’s deconstructive response is *différance*—a non-metaphysical past irreducibly in time that has never been and could never be present.11 Among historians, the equivalent has been the turn to historicism, to the proposition that “a social practice or a document is a product of the preoccupations of its own time and place.”12 Historicism in this vein is an anti-foundational philosophy of history. By pinning phenomena in time we render their meaning entirely contingent upon circumstance, robbed of numinous possibility.

Must one, though, treat the past as never capable of anything but being-past? Might not the past inject itself into our here-and-now, at moments in which it becomes recognizable by us, and is recognized? Might it not at those moments become both enlivened and enlivening, precisely by our recognition?13 Styron put the past to a present use by completing it on his own terms, but he also groped for a way to express his action as recognition rather than merely fiction. Hence his rejection of “historical novel” for “meditation upon history.”

Here I ask what called Styron’s fictive realities into being, and how they were crafted. I ask what made his work a “meditation on history”—and why it failed. I ask, finally, whether Nat Turner can be rescued from our attempts to “understand” him, whether he might achieve a historical presence of his own that is ever other than ghostly, or ever other than past.

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William Styron was born in 1925 in Newport News, Virginia. After college he secured an editorial position at McGraw-Hill in New York but remained only a few months before quitting to become a writer.\(^{14}\) His first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, was published in 1951, his second, *Set This House on Fire*, in 1960. The first earned considerable acclaim, the second, in some quarters at least, derision.\(^{15}\)

Ever since he had concluded to be a writer, Styron had toyed with transforming his boyhood curiosity about Nat Turner into a book. “It’ll probably take a bit of research,” he wrote, but “when I’m through with Nat Turner . . . he will not be either a Great Leader of the Masses . . . 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.”\(^{16}\) Turner would also be the means to satisfy “his powerful curiosity about black people”\(^{17}\)—people who had surrounded him in his boyhood South but with whom he felt little connection. “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.”\(^{18}\) Here was the collective “Negro” whom Styron thought it his moral duty to know.

Research on the Turner of record was the easy part. Styron quickly concluded that what he took to be the sum of available materials—Gray’s *Confessions*, some newspaper stories, William Sidney Drewry’s 1900 monograph *The Southampton Insurrection*—was easily mastered, and mostly slim pickings.\(^{19}\) Nor, from his first encounter with those materials in 1952 until his final commentaries on his book fifty years later, did he ever change his mind about the Turner they revealed: the “religious fanatic” without plan or purpose who takes a few followers on a “rampage of total destruction.”\(^{20}\) This was the Negro Styron could not understand and did not wish to know, whom he wished to replace with a different *knowable* Negro.

To re-create Turner as a Negro he could know, indeed possess (“I supplied him with the motivation. I gave him a rationale. I gave him all the confusions and desperations, troubles, worries.”\(^{21}\)) Styron employed three mid-twentieth century sources: Albert Camus’s *L’Etranger* (1942); Stanley M. Elkins’s revisionist *Slavery: A Problem in American

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\(^{15}\) See, e.g., Richard Foster, An Orgy of Commerce: William Styron’s *Set This House on Fire*, 3 Critique 59 (1960).

\(^{16}\) West, supra note 14, at 55-56, 183, 221.

\(^{17}\) Id. at 317.

\(^{18}\) Styron, supra note 8, at 136.

\(^{19}\) Id. at 138-39.


\(^{21}\) Id. at 83.
Institutional and Intellectual Life (1959); and the key work in the new field of psychohistory, Erik Erikson’s Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History (1958).

From L’Etranger came the book’s broad plan and the idea of an autobiographical narrative, both sparked by the situational parallel Styron saw between Nat Turner and L’Etranger’s central character, Merseault:

[T]here 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 . . . . 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.22

From Elkins came a conception of slavery so dreadful that it could dwarf, hence explain, even justify, the savagery of the rebellion, and simultaneously illuminate the otherwise incomprehensible otherness of the Negro: a slavery so total in its domination that it produced “Sambo,” not as racist stereotype but as psychologically-damaged actuality. Hence the childish “shit-eating people” that Styron’s adult Nat so despises; hence the child Nat himself, fawning on his patriarchal master.23

To turn the spoiled brat of Confessions Part II, “Old Times Past,” into the vengeful rebel of Part III, “Study War,” Styron turned to Erikson’s psycho-biographical case study of late adolescent “identity crisis,” referencing “that period of the life cycle when each youth must forge for himself some central perspective and direction” from the “remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood.”24 Styron’s Nat experiences identity crisis as collapse and betrayal—the disintegration of his plantation home, and of Marse Samuel’s plans for his emancipation. His “exquisitely sharpened hatred” is born in a moment of “total and cruel repudiation” of his child’s-eye view; naïve adolescent religiosity becomes “Old Testament vengeance.”25 As Erikson observes, the youth’s old self may be a part of himself henceforth subdued “or it may be the world-view of other castes and classes, races and peoples [who] become not only expendable, but the appointed victims of the most righteous annihilation.”26

How, though, to differentiate righteous annihilator from fanatic; to make him, despite his acts, worthy of knowing? Styron drew further on Erikson, and on two impulses of his own, sexual longing and conflicted love.27 The moment Styron’s Nat consummates

22 Plimpton, supra note 7, at 36-37.
23 Styron, supra note 4, at 27, 169.
25 Styron, supra note 4, at 246-47, 252-53.
26 Erikson, supra note 24, at 41-42.

his hate/love longing for the virginal Margaret Whitehead (with whom we have become familiar through Nat’s rape fantasies) by killing her, his rebellion loses direction and meaning, and Nat begins a headlong slide from righteous annihilation to despairing estrangement from God. And the moment, seconds before his execution, that he acknowledges unconditional love of Margaret, he surmounts his final Eriksonian “integrity crisis” and embraces death as a Christian sinner saved, united with a now definitively New Testament God of brotherhood and forgiveness. Thus, Nat becomes the Negro Styron desires so urgently to know—bearer of reconciliation, embodied hope of the author for himself and for an America healed of racial violence and hatred.

II.

To re-create Nat Turner, Styron had to displace two others, the Turner of Gray’s Confessions and the Turner of African American legend. In each case Styron’s strategy was denial.

Styron’s displacement of Gray’s Turner was not based on any carefully reasoned conclusion that he was a fabrication. Rather, Styron insisted that this Turner did not deserve comprehension. To domesticate him, Styron stripped Turner of his religious enthusiasm, substituting those “subtler motives” suggested by social and behavioral explanation.

In small part, Styron separates his Nat from religious enthusiasm the better to inveigh against institutionalized Christian hypocrisy on the ground that “in Turner’s time” denominational churches had “sold the Negro down the river” by promising solace but failing to deliver. But the separation of Turner from enthusiasm also enables Styron to insert a quite different religious sensibility in its place: the Old Testament warrior abandoned by the God of the prophets and saved by Margaret Whitehead’s Christian love. This is actually an extraordinarily perverse treatment of the Turner of Gray’s Confessions, whose religiosity is couched almost entirely in New Testament discourse, and who is himself his own redeemer. It is explicable only by Styron’s refusal (or inability) to recognize that Turner’s New Testament did not belong to the “charity and brotherhood” species of Christianity espoused by twentieth century white liberals, but to the martial and ascetic

28 Styron, supra note 4, at 340, 367, 372.
29 Id. at 10, 413-17, 423.
30 Erikson, supra note 24, at 260.
31 Styron, supra note 4, at 428.
33 Indeed, Styron, supra note 8, at 138, describes Gray’s Confessions (supra note 1) as a “transcript” and “in all major respects . . . completely honest and reliable.”
34 Robert K. Morris, Interviews with William Styron, in Achievement, supra note 6, at 38; Plimpton, supra note 7, at 41.
35 Gray, supra note 1, at 9-11.
proto-Calvinist Protestantism of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Anglo-American evangelicalism, whose history of salvation began before the fall and hence rejected any distinction between Old Testament and New.\textsuperscript{36} Styron does not realize that in this species of Christian faith, the avenging angel is Christ Himself.

Styron’s other displacement, of the Turner of legend, was more straightforward. Styron simply denied there was any such Turner.\textsuperscript{37} His 1965 Harper’s Magazine essay, “This Quiet Dust,” tells of a day trip to Southampton County in May, 1961 in search of the legendary Turner, who completely fails to materialize. The story is bizarre. Accompanied by his father and his wife, Styron tours backcountry Southampton in the county Sheriff’s squad car in search of passersby whom they can stop and quiz on what they know about the Turner Rebellion. Styron describes how the Sheriff himself enthusiastically joined the interrogations—“You heard about old Nat Turner, ain’t you? But few of them had.” Small wonder. Ironically, Styron’s essay begins with an epigraph that gives the lie to his claim of the absence of folklore—two verses from an “Old-time Negro Song” the refrain of which was the impossibility of suppressing Nat Turner.\textsuperscript{38}

After his Confessions was published, Styron returned repeatedly to the sparseness of fact and the absence of memory to elevate his own creative imagination above both.\textsuperscript{39} This earned him, largely, commendation from white commentators, and—again largely—outrage from black commentators. In a New Republic review remarkable for the seamlessness of its transits between historical and fictional depiction, the doyen of white Southern historians, C. Vann Woodward, awarded Styron the mantle of complete and utter scholarly respectability.\textsuperscript{40} A man one might consider Woodward’s black counterpart, John Henrik Clarke, could not agree.\textsuperscript{41} “[T]he Nat Turner created by William Styron has little resemblance to the Virginia slave insurrectionist who is a hero to his people.”\textsuperscript{42} Nine 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. They were condemned by Styron’s defenders for their collective exhibition of “ferocity and hysteria.”\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{37} See William Styron, This Quiet Dust and Other Writings 3-4 (1993).

\textsuperscript{38} Styron, supra note 8, at 135, 144-45.

\textsuperscript{39} “About Nat Turner—of whose departed flesh-and-blood self so little is known, or ever will be known—I cared to discover only so much as my instinct as a novelist told me to care.” Styron, supra note 37, at 7.


\textsuperscript{41} Professor of African World History and in 1969 founding chairman of the Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College of CUNY (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Henrik_Clarke).


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.”

The first reviews were admiring. “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.” None was more fulsome 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 invited contemporaneity in a way that “only a white Southern writer” could have managed. A Northern writer would have been too much the outsider; a Negro writer “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.”

The hapless condescension of reviewers like Rahv helps explain the appalled reaction of John Henrik Clarke and his compatriots. Rahv seemed to think “the Negro” was an object of study from which truth might better be extracted by expert white observation than by attention to self-description. But Rahv had put his finger on *Confessions’s* core ambition—and the difficulty it was to cause the book’s author.

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

> 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.

Then, immediately following, Styron alluded to a conception of history that, in effect dialectically, overcome the tension between fact and creative imagination 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.

44 West, supra note 14, at 369.


47 Styron, supra note 9, at xi.
Styron’s desire to escape the low-earth orbit of the “historical novel” and its subjective, moralistic standpoint upon definitively past events for the Proustian elasticities of “the relativity of time” is clear.48 Unfortunately, he would find it enormously difficult to explain precisely what he meant by “a meditation on history,”49 how it helped him overcome the fact/imagination tension, or how it gave him a standpoint more worthy of respect than that of the historical novel. Consequently, he became stuck in an increasingly petulant defensive crouch. When his creative imaginings of Turner and of slavery were criticized, Styron would cite his mastery of facts and sources.50 When his research was challenged, Styron would cite creative freedom.51 Some months into the controversy, Styron discovered Georg Lukács’s The Historical Novel,52 which—unable to explain his own philosophy of history—he began citing with abandon as impeccable authority for artistic license.53 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.”54 But Lukács was distinguishing here between “real historical 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.”55 It was precisely the “real historical fidelity” of Styron’s representation of Turner and of slavery that was at issue.

Being neither philosopher nor historian, Styron’s attempts to articulate what his “meditation” meant tended to take their cue from the views of whatever apparently supportive voice he happened to encounter. When Genovese argued that one should look to history not for ideological reassurance but for objective truth, and that Styron had told the truth about Turner and slavery, Styron agreed.56 When Seymour Gross and Ellen Bender argued the opposite—that Styron, like all other writers, had simply produced his own partial Turner from “those usable truths which seemed to him to coalesce about the image he

52 West, supra note 14, at 393.
53 Styron in Woodward, supra note 20, at 67.
55 Id. at 166-67.
56 Genovese, supra note 43, at ¶ 4, ¶ 7; Styron, supra note 37, at 6.
was contemplating”—Styron agreed with them. By 1992 Styron was identifying with the predilection for contingency by then uppermost in historical scholarship. Turner “utterly evaded a consistent portrayal.” He “was truly a chameleon.”

In fact, the meaning of Styron’s “meditation” had been clear for all to see in the last words of his 1965 Harper’s essay, “This Quiet Dust.” At the end of his 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 explain why Styron clung to both history and art, despite his inability to articulate why. Styron’s meditation was on the impossibility of living imaginatively within any 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.

The passage is a good stand-in for so much that is maddening about Styron's Confessions. First, the house from which Styron gazed was not actually the Whitehead house at all. His “facts” were wrong. Second, the passage is heavy with Styron’s characteristic florid profundity. Nevertheless, the central idea, the “long moment indistinguishable,” is worthy of attention.

The meaning of the essay’s title is revealed only in its final paragraphs, as Styron explores the empty house, choking on “decades of dust.” 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.

Styron embraces Dickinson’s temporal cycle of life and death, but restates it as one also of memory and recognition. Amid the ruin of what he thought was the Whitehead house, his day in Southampton County “seemed to find its only resonance in the memory, and

58 Styron, supra note 5, at 453.
59 Styron, supra note 8, at 146.
60 West, supra note 14, at 334.
perhaps a premonition, of death.” His “long moment indistinguishable” rebuked those who would create as “history” a past from which the present had departed. Styron deeply resented the common critical comment that he was his generation’s William Faulkner, but he was caught in a Faulknerian moment. “The past is never dead,” Faulkner famously writes in Requiem for a Nun. “It’s not even past.”

Styron’s long moment sets him apart, philosophically, from prominent supporters: from C. Vann Woodward, for whom Styron’s Confessions was history—the reconstruction of a particular past; from Eugene Genovese, for whom it was art—and for that reason able to access transcendent truths as no historian could; and even from Georg Lukács, for whom “a real historical novel” was one “which contemporaries would experience as their own pre-history.” It puts him instead in the company of Walter Benjamin, for whom history was the representation of “our age”—the age that examines historical events—“in the age during which they arose.” This 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. For Lukács, the object of historical inquiry was to recover the reality of an object situated temporally and spatially in the past; 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.

Styron’s biographer attributes to Styron the intent to create a collision between Turner’s world, and his own, “to bring the past into direct confrontation with the present.” One

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62 Styron, supra note 8, at 146.
64 Lewis & Woodward, supra note 24, at 52; Woodward, supra note 20, at 59-60, 77-78.
65 Genovese, supra note 43; Eugene D. Genovese, Evil, Redemption, and History, in Novel History, supra note 2, at 209.
66 Lukács, supra note 54, at 70.
69 Lukács, supra note 54, at 42, 43.
71 West, supra note 14, at 336, 343; see also George Core, The Confessions of Nat Turner and the Burden of the Past, in Achievement, supra note 6, at 206, 221-22; Walter Benjamin, Eduard Fuchs: Collector and
might wonder why, if this was so, Styron had not made it clear. But apart from the conclusion to “This Quiet Dust,” Styron always struggled 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 metaphysics, its own reason for being as an aesthetic object.”\(^{72}\) 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.”\(^{73}\) A decade later Styron had become more willing to let the worlds collide, hoping that his *Confessions* “might also cast light on our modern condition . . . the agony that has bound the present to the past.”\(^{74}\) 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.\(^{75}\)

This was not, however, constellation—the creation of a dialectical image.\(^{76}\) 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 upon a prior atrocity. It suffered, moreover, from Styron’s fatal persistence in simultaneously desiring a black audience for his work, yet excluding 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”?\(^{77}\) Still, as its author’s final plea for his book’s “passion,” “honesty,” and “integrity,”\(^{78}\) it was not without grace.

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\(^{72}\) Styron in Woodward, supra note 20, at 71.

\(^{73}\) Styron, supra note 8, at 7, 8.

\(^{74}\) Styron, supra note 5, at 454.

\(^{75}\) Styron, supra note 3, at 227.

\(^{76}\) As Benjamin puts it,

> Every present is determined by those images which are synchronic with it: every now is the moment of a specific recognition . . . . It isn’t that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past; rather an image is that in which the past and the present moment flash into a constellation.

Benjamin, supra note 70, at 463.


\(^{78}\) Styron, supra note 2, at 225.
IV.

The question remains how one might save Nat Turner from those 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, so that “the past and the present moment [might] flash into a constellation” that teaches the present not a moral lesson about itself, but instead that it is itself a collage of dialectical images—of “critical constellations in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself with precisely this present”?79 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?

First one must recognize that the Turner whom Styron rejected—the psychopathic visionary—is as much Styron’s invention as the rational Turner gifted with human complexity that he created in the psychopath’s place. The psychopathic visionary is not Turner investigated on his own terms but as a modernist cliché—as Genovese 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”80—that excuses one’s refusal to investigate further.

Most mainstream historians have refused. The best Kenneth Stampp could manage was that “somehow Turner came to believe that he had been divinely chosen to deliver his people from bondage.”81 For the more censorious Genovese, “those who read the record could not be faulted for concluding that Nat Turner . . . 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.”82

Genovese’s words suggest that “reading the record” is a straightforward process that, inevitably, reveals the man that Gray presented: a religious enthusiast overwhelmed by visions. Literary scholars have shown us how to read Gray’s Confessions with a more subtle appreciation of Turner’s Christian-inflected discourse.83 If Nat Turner is to be rescued from historians’ cartoonish caricature, the rescue must begin in a careful recovery of the layered meaning of his own speech, the soterial speech of an ascetic eighteenth-century evangelical protestant. Here the historian is required to encounter Derrida’s past, the past that never can be present.

79 Benjamin, supra note 70, at 463; Benjamin, supra note 71, at 262.
80 Genovese, supra note 43, at ¶ 9. As Vincent Harding stressed, the refusal to understand Turner’s religious persona was one of Styron’s greatest failings. See Vincent Harding, You’ve Taken My Nat and Gone, in Styron’s Nat Turner, supra note 42, at 23.
82 Genovese, supra note 65, at 210-11.
But 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.” Historical perspective dispels “self-contained facticity.” 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 now. If we embrace 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.” That which we recognize, and to which we give our attention, is enlivened because it enlivens us.

Dimly, I think, William Styron recognized that an enlivened Nat Turner could not be a Turner of self-contained facticity but had to be brought into a relationship with Styron’s 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 exchanged one self-contained facticity for another. But his failure was not complete. His error lay in the execution, not in its animating idea.

Contemporary 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.” Melting distinct spatio-temporal locales into one and the same makes no sense to a historicism whose purpose is relentless differentiation. Fortunately there are other ways of doing history that help us make sense of indistinguishable moments. They will help us produce an enlivened Nat Turner who is no longer mere onlooker, nor mere ghost.

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85 Walter Benjamin, Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno, in id. at 108.
86 Benjamin, supra note 84, at 390, 391.
87 Benjamin, supra note 85, at 108.