

The 'Nat Turner' Controversy

Ivo Vidan

Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb

In the late sixties, William Styron, who had acquired considerable reputation with his first three novels, published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a fictionalized account of a slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831. The author himself, as well as influential white critics, thought that the book was highly sympathetic to Nat Turner, the black rebel leader, and expected a positive response from the black community. However, a number of black writers attacked Styron for what they saw as profoundly racist attitudes. This paper examines the problematic aspects of the novel and the main issues of this controversy as generally illustrative of the difficulties involved in bridging cultural and historical misunderstandings and, in its particularities, as characteristic of America in the 1960s.

William Styron achieved a considerable reputation with his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951) and by the time his fourth novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, appeared in 1967 he was thought of as one of the best continuators of the art of narrative in the Southern tradition - as one of the inheritors, but by no means an imitator, of Faulkner's art.

The Confessions of Nat Turner was in some respects a *tour de force*. It was an attempt to create the mind of a nineteenth century black slave from within. Based on an authentic historical event - a slave uprising in Southampton county, Virginia, in 1831 - its immediate written source was the deposition of the slave leader as recorded by a lawyer, Thomas R. Gray, before the condemned man's execution. With the exception of a single full length book around 1900, the Turner rebellion had been rarely and fairly sketchily treated in historiography before the 1960s, although it had many interesting aspects to it. It lasted scarcely over two days. The initial group of insurgents consisted of some seven men, who were later joined by a few dozen others. They killed, in an extremely bloodcurdling manner, fifty five people: all the slaveowners and their families that they found on their way from the farm owned by Turner's master towards the town of Jerusalem. They did not, however, touch some poor whites whose dwellings were on their way and never tortured or sexually mistreated any of their victims. They were stopped and crushed one mile before Jerusalem. Nat Turner himself, a literate and

fanatic religious visionary, killed only one young girl. He did not repent for leading the bloodshed, and when asked by Gray: »Do you not find yourself mistaken now?, replied »Was not Christ crucified?«.

The narration in the novel is done by Nat himself, retrospectively, while awaiting his execution. It is this particular and highly conscious-deployment of technique by the author, the presentation of the subjective perspective of a black slave of over 130 years before, that many of Styron's readers consider his most difficult artistic performance. The novel received high praise from many critics and from some historians, but it was very severely attacked by some others. The black writers joined and produced a book, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.² To this volume each contributed an essay, that scathingly criticized Styron. My purpose here is to present this collective critique of Styron's novel, not in order to pass judgment on the rights and wrongs of the case, but to show the nature of the controversy, characteristic of the years in which it took place, and then briefly to discuss its wider implications.

It must be admitted that of these ten hostile writers none was a major name in American letters. The most famous black novelist of the 1960s, James Baldwin, had only three or four years earlier published a very belligerent volume of essays under the threateningly biblical-sounding title *Title Fire Next Time*. Baldwin, a personal friend of Styron's, had said of the novel: »This is the beginning of our common history«³ Of the ten attackers, only one, Mike Thelwell, has a fine sense of critical discrimination, although Vincent Harding's understanding of religion along with his negative outlook also helped to illuminate aspects of the novel. All the other contributors are very crude, but since they are representative of attitudes apparently prevailing at the time, it is worth considering their opinions and line of argument. Their knowledge of historical circumstances was mainly derived from the study, published in 1963, entitled *American Negro Slave Revolts*, by Herbert Aptheker, a historian and political journalist and an embattled and highly committed critic of American society.

At first glance, some of their objections seem scarcely to be important, as they apply to Nat's purely personal situation. Nat had recollections of his grandmother, whereas in the novel she was dead long before he was born. He also had a father; in the novel the father had run away from his and his wife's master, because he had been unjustly hit by the white man. In the novel Nat early acquires some elements of reading and is after that taught by the women in his master's family; the way the historical Nat acquires literacy does not seem to be due to his owner's direct help, although details about this are not clear. According to reports many years after his death, Nat had a wife, but at a farm at some distance from where he himself lived; in the novel he is a celibate bachelor. Further, the historical Nat seems once to have run away returning after a month; in the novel he is given a short holiday in the woods – and it is then that his communion with God is established.

1. John Henrik Clarke: *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, Boston, 1968, p. 104.
2. See note 1.
3. Clarke, p. 32 a

In 1971 Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender published a long article in *The American Quarterly*,⁴ which showed that all the important facts at issue were unproved or questionable or based on unreliable assertions much after the events or on ambiguous formulations in the original *Confessions* published by the lawyer Gray. On the other hand, the circumstances as imagined by Styron were not so very different from what the critics maintained as to produce totally different consequences in terms of Nat's behaviour and action. Styron's detractors were anxious to see Nat coming from a fairly stable family background, having a married life, and rebelling, by running away, before organizing a great and bloody revolutionary uprising.

In Styron's novel, Nat is involved in sexual scenes which, it is implied, motivate his personality according to the »neo-Reichean hypothesis about the correlation between sex repression and revolutionary leadership«. ⁵ What he sees and imagines about women appears then to be an important driving force behind his rebellion and a direct, if subconscious, incitement to his only murder. In some of these scenes, powerful, direct, and yet not pandering to the bookbuyer's prurience, Nat is a secret spectator. One of these scenes involves a brutal overseer and Nat's mother, and her satisfied behavior after the event to which she had been forced. Then there are fantasies and dreams involving refined white women from the houses in which he serves or an imagined degraded negro whore; and finally, a tenuous relationship involving intimations of mutual understanding and tenderness between Nat and his future victim, Margaret Whitehead.

Styron's black critics see in this pattern of susceptibility – combined with Nat's visions of an enraged Old Testament divinity issuing commands to his prophet and revenger – a sly attempt at slandering and compromising the revolutionary purity of the black leader. They object, by the way, to references to Napoleon. These namely spring up in Nat's mind, and none to the great black revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture, who had for a while successfully liberated the slave population of Haiti. Whether this kind of allusion would have had any historical justification, the present writer is not competent to discuss.⁶ Certainly, the black authors involved in this joint criticism see Nat as a great popular hero of the American Negroes, although before Styron's novel he appears not to have been known in any detail to the general public, white and black (in spite of there being a traditional song, »Old Prophet Nat«). It is thanks to Styron's novel that he has entered the popular imagination of our time.

The objection to the slandering of this relatively obscure hero is spurious as far as it pertains to Nat as an individual. Yet the motivation of a rebel leader is a matter of wider significance, and something will have to be said about this. Another aspect of the anti-Styron critique concerns more general issues of the states of mind and the attitudes existing among the slave population in the way Styron presents them, compared to what one can infer from historical records.

One of his black critics quotes an earlier article by Styron, remarking that Slavery »dehumanized the slave and divested him of honor, moral responsibility and man-

4. »History, Politics, and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner«, *American Quarterly*, 23 (October 1971): 486–518.

5. Clarke, p. 63.

6. In the Clarke volume he is mentioned several times.

manhood«. ⁷ What however does dehumanization mean? It may refer simply to a state of existence – with animal instincts working for the individual's survival and with no principle or dignity left. Or it may denote a process, a result of circumstances, a phase in the interaction between human beings. In either case it registers the consequence of the institution of slavery: the living conditions, the lack of being able to ignore one's lot, the exposure to the master's decision of whether a person – a slave! – should be sold and a family separated. In the precarious game for a more tolerable life many slaves developed patterns of behavior in which any feeling of personal pride was suppressed and supplanted by ingratiation, by a pretence of naivety and stupidity, and by clowning. These are attitudes which, in Styron's novel, the more self-conscious slaves often deliberately assume as a protective mask. Now, the black critics maintain that Styron's ignorance and lack of understanding have made him fall back on stereotypes. »Sambo« is a white racist invention. ⁸ Why has Styron – one of them asks – not created a Lucas Beauchamp, Faulkner's proud and reserved Negro, who even in genuine relationships with white people maintains his distance and superiority? (Yet Lucas, we may answer, is not a slave any more. The feeling of guilt in generations of white people is involved in Faulkner's presentation of his position.) The critics are particularly angry with Styron for his treatment of Will. This slave, who according to the original *Confessions* murders with a single-minded efficiency, is presented by Styron as a demented, lecherous, wild man. His bestiality is due to the unendurable cruelties of a sadistic master. Even so, the critics do not allow Styron the imaginative latitude that he has taken: »Styron lyingly makes a monster of Will who in reality was not like that at all.« ¹⁰ The second half of this sentence is pure speculation and the first part an insulting exaggeration.

The Turner rebellion is not shown in the context of other slave uprisings. It is true that the novel does not refer to attempts analogous to Turner's, which took place in the preceding decades and also close to Turner's. After all, Gray recorded Nat's statement that he did not know »of any extensive or concerted plan« nor of »the insurrection in North Carolina happening about the same time«. Other rebellions did take place; there is historical evidence of them, although Styron calls Nat's »the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro slavery«. ¹¹ Styron's treatment of it, however, does not imply that Nat Turner's was an isolated action or that the causes for it did not exist elsewhere. In fact the circumstances are described as generally prevailing in the slave states, although the economic retrogression in Virginia is shown to be a direct cause of some of Nat's misfortunes. What Styron does is to present Nat as an individual reacting individually – thanks to his exceptional talents and intelligence which we can infer from the Gray document – acting within the set of circumstances in his own individual history which contains all the general features of American slavery.

Consequently, to what extent was this particular rebellion defeated thanks – ironically – to faithful slaves who defended their masters by shooting at the attackers at the farms close to Jerusalem? Nat, hiding in a cave, was betrayed by blacks – this is

7. Clarke, p. 7.

8. This argument is also repeated several times, in different forms.

9. Cf. *Go Down Moses* and *Intruder Into the Dust*.

10. Clarke, p. 60.

11. »Author's Note«, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, New York, 1967, p. IX.

stated in the Gray document – and that masters were saved by loyal slaves in other uprisings has also been recorded in the historiography. Styron's cannot be accused of malicious falsification.

Styron's »ultimate treatment reinforces what white America wants to believe about black America«, ¹² says one of the critics, Charles V. Hamilton. The novel as it were panders to white liberal delusions and, worse, to the ingrained racist attitudes, an example of which is the presentation of slavery in some reputable and widely used history books as a basically kindly and considerate relationship. Whenever the treatment of Nat, or of other slaves, is shown as humane, it turns out that the ultimate outcome of that particular situation will be profoundly hurtful to feelings and will ruin some human ties, separate friends and families, betray confidence. By showing apparent possibilities the novel achieves the subtle effect of revealing the total and irredeemable corruption of the system. (In the words of Eugene D. Genovese: »The novel describes a social system that brought people together in intimate relationships, negated that intimacy, relentlessly suppressed any awareness of the feelings created, and necessarily turned that love into hatred and fear.«) ¹³ The black critics, however, wonder at best if Styron was an unwitting victim of his own unconscious white racism for which he alone cannot be held fully accountable, but elsewhere in their volume he is accused of being an apologist for slavery, having a vile racist imagination, his »ignorance and arrogance« knowing »no bounds«. ¹⁴ He is supposed to be dishonest, sly, motivated by »pure hatred«, ¹⁵ guilty of manipulation, moral cowardice, »moral senility«, ¹⁶ lying, slandering, maliciously attempting to revoke Nat Turner's credentials »as an authentic hero in mankind's struggle against tyranny«. ¹⁷

This unrestrained flow of obloquy should, however, be distinguished from the much more subtle judgment by Mike Thelwell: »If this book is important, it is so not because it tells much about Negro experience during slavery but because of the manner in which it demonstrates the persistence of white southern myths, racial stereotypes, and literary clichés even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds. Their largely uncritical acceptance in literary circles shows us how far we still have to go. The real 'history' of Nat Turner, and indeed of black people, remains to be written«. ¹⁸ This opinion, whatever its justice, implies a real problem, the one which makes this 20-year old controversy worth remembering: the need to understand and to believe the other side's genuineness in its attempt at understanding, to tolerate imperfection and to allow the possibility of new insights even from unexpected quarters. After all, what could have been Styron's purpose in using Turner's uprising as subject matter for his novel? Was it simply to offer a historical account of this episode from the past of the neighbourhood of his own native region and of the USA? Through several years he did in fact study the records, and in 1963 published a review of his future white critic's, Aptheker's, book on

12. Clarke, p. 73.

13. »The Nat Turner Case«, *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XI, No. 4, September 12, 1968, p. 36.

14. Clarke, p. 57.

15. *ibid.*, p. 70.

16. *ibid.*, p. 72.

17. *ibid.*, p. 70.

18. *ibid.*, p. 91.

American Negro Slave Revolts; in 1965 he came back to the subject in an essay, »This Quiet Dust«, discussing his own experience of what survives – if survival it is – of the memory and material remains of the Turner times. Of Nat himself, he wrote, his background and early years, very little can be known. This is not disadvantageous to a novelist, since it allows him to speculate – with a freedom not accorded the historian – upon all the intermingled miseries, ambitions, frustrations, hopes, rages and desires which caused this extraordinary black man to rise up out of those early mists of our history and strike down his oppressors with a fury of retribution unequalled before or since.¹⁹

In other words this is a novel, just as the 19th century novel of the Croatian peasant rebellion of 1573, *Seljačka buna*, by August Šenoa, is a novel that changes and replaces historically established facts or mythic purports transmitted orally over the centuries. The Croatian tradition, aware of much that is imagined or legendary, never objected. Šenoa's novel, in fact, helped to make a particular legend function more fully in the consciousness of a people – to be more exact, of its rising and increasingly educated middle class – eager to strengthen its own awareness of national identity.

From our vantage point – if this is what our distance from the American literary scene is – it would appear that Styron's effort was that of a stranger to the descendants of Turner's historical ethnic group (black slaves) and that he may have – indeed we are convinced that he did – profoundly sympathise with the historical figure of Nat and with present-day efforts towards full black emancipation. Yet his purpose was not to romanticize and to help create an idealized figure. Some of his critics recommended clichés and techniques of hackneyed populist fiction as appropriate to the requirements of this new and peculiar type of rising nationalism (the young beautiful black woman fighting at the side of her man etc.).²⁰ What Styron wanted was to understand – and to offer his own interpretation of Nat's motives and of the way in which he and his environment interacted in the creation of the catastrophic events. He wanted to understand what – from the perspective of later times – must be seen as one of the manifestations of the rising Black self-consciousness.

Styron's was an effort to empathize, to offer a version of the subjectivity of Turner's horizon as he grew and acted. The author, in the words of the reviewer in *Dissent*, »asked himself what it means to be a slave; he reflected on how the institution of slavery shaped the lives of everyone in the slave system; then he wrote his novel.«²¹ It seems though that Styron's dwelling on the subjectivity, on what it may have been like to be exactly Nat Turner, must have been of crucial importance. Such a creative reworking of the Turner records was particularly risky: instead of giving us the externals against which Turner would be seen as conditioned, and his behaviour as a reaction to circumstances, Styron's alleged neo-Reichian relating of sexuality and society, a drive for a double or hyphenated liberation, was in danger of offending those who wanted their history simpler and who

19. Cf. William Styron: *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings*, New York, 1982, p. 16.

20. Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* (1936, rep. 1964) is often evoked by Styron's critics as a positive counter-example.

21. James Lowell McPherson: »America's Slave Revolt«, *Dissent*, Jan.–Feb. 1968, p. 86.

against the background of an alibi for violence unquestionably warranted by history, would also not tolerate the ambiguities and weaknesses of the merely human.

Styron's critics have several very pertinent things to say. »Though William Styron-Turner talks about religion a great deal and though he quotes biblical passages in excellent style, the 'divine fury' of Old Testament experience is almost totally absent«, says Vincent Harding, and continues: »Though Nat Turner is a preacher, only one major attempt at a sermon is made in *The Confessions*, and it fails to catch any of the peculiar rhythmic and thematic strengths of this black folk art form. Equally striking is the fact that the religious music of Afro-Americans never enters as a major structural element of the novel as one would expect if such a work had been done by an Ellison, a Baldwin, or a Wright.«²²

According to Thelwell a very important development in the drama of Nat's growth is missing: No explanation is given in the novel of the process by which Nat moves from his abject dependence on his kindly disposed first master to the self-confidence that allows him to accept the responsibility for a colony of free rebels that it was his intention to found in the Dismal Swamp. Thelwell is also very articulate on the novel's »sterile and leaden prose that not even massive transfusions of Old Testament rhetoric can vitalize«, that same prose which, in the same passage, he also calls »clear, even elegant in a baroque Victorian way«. ²³ It is indeed arguable whether the language used in Nat's personal narrative is the most satisfactory choice. Style is convention even when it tries to be realistic or even documentary, Whether the rich Southern orotundities throughout the book, conveying the frame-culture, or rather the opposing, established culture, not Nat's own, are not a failure of judgment, is open to discussion. This is certainly a style similar to that in Styron's other novels before and since *Nat Turner*, and it does not prevent a smooth flow of exciting narration nor the presentation of the protagonist's self-awareness.

Several years ago, at the University of Massachusetts the famous Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe gave a paper on Conrad's »Heart of Darkness«. He presented an argument that also got published²⁴ and provoked much controversy. The novel, which criticism has always considered to be a full-scale, profound, and searching indictment of colonialism, is taken by Achebe as racist, prejudiced, and profoundly insulting to Africans. We may argue that Achebe's view is ahistorical: in the 1890s, what kind of empathy with Congolese tribesmen could have been expected from a European sailor with a penchant for literature? And we may say that circumstantial details presenting the exteriority of the author's experiences are only indications that take us into the depths of an insight that subverts the then existing, generally accepted, complacent view of contemporary Europeans. Yet, who are we to quarrel with the sensitivity of Africans who in terms of education and intellectual prowess have by now become equal partners in any cultural discussion concerning the matter of Africa?

22. Clarke, p. 29.

23. *ibid*, p. 81.

24. Cf. Chinua Achebe: »An Image of Africa«, *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, Winter 1977, pp. 782–94.

In a similar way, one can see that we deal with a kind of reversed color bar in statements like this one: »When depicting black people in fiction, white writers are guilty of two fundamental faults, to which William Styron is no exception. First, they are incapable of portraying black characters as human types, and second, they look upon the black man's condition of social degradation as being natural to his *inferior* character, rather than resulting from the racial oppression of the American social system.«²⁵ Such passages seem absolute in their conviction that it is possible for white people to imagine what it is to be black. While it is true that »it is the responsibility of the black scholar of this generation to pull out, articulate, and define the form and meaning of that past in ways that have never been done«,²⁶ the question is should white authors desist from even trying to grasp the colour problem from inside the other's skin as it were, in order to avoid further offenses? If wrongs are to be redressed, can this be done by perpetuating the barrier of knowledge and feeling?

Eugene D. Genovese, an Italo-American historian of socialist leanings, a scholar with a reputation of great integrity, thinks that »the trouble with the old white historiography was not that it presented the view from the great house but that that was all it did. To write a history of slavery without sympathetic attention to the master class – which need hardly imply approval – would be to repeat all the old mistakes in another, if more politically acceptable, form. For this reason, among many others, white historians need to hear what black historians have to say about the masters, as well as the slaves...« And also: »The indifference of white historians to black history and culture has been only a special case of a more general bias – a class bias.«²⁷

Such a position lends weight to his criticism of *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. According to him, this book »shows the extent to which the American intelligentsia is splitting along racial, rather than ideological, lines. It is clear that the black intelligentsia faces a serious crisis. Its political affinities lie with the black-power movement, which increasingly demands conformity, myth-making, and historical fabrication.« This, he says, leads into the same moral, political, and intellectual debacle, as it happened to political movements in which intellectuals in a hysterical way, demanded new myths in order to serve current ends. »The revolutionary task of intellectuals is, accordingly, not to invent myths, but to teach each people its own particular contradictory truth.«²⁸

This ultimate idea sounds unexceptionable, and the state of affairs that provoked it will appear familiar to readers in many climates. The Puritan debate in 16th and 17th century England and in America throughout all its own history should serve as a reminder that we are dealing with a universal phenomenon. It would seem, however, that when Genovese calls the split »racial« rather than »ideological«, he simplifies matters to some degree. The racial issue is in itself ideological. The black writers may include people contributing to a glossy establishment magazine bearing the euphemistic

25. Clarke, p. 68.

26. Mike Thelwell in »An Exchange on 'Nat Turner'«, *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XI, No. 8, November 7, 1968. p. 34.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

28. *The New York Review of Books*, September 12, 1968, pp. 36–37.

title of *Ebony*. Yet the technique of their discussion implies an ideology which they share with representatives of more extreme and destabilizing forces. The point is that the latitude required by literature to re-present a range of relationships and human attitudes (issuing, obviously, from a social set up) cannot be granted by these spokesmen, even though its intrinsic aim is to achieve full clarity of its complex vision. On the other hand, the artist may lack consideration for the ideologized segment of a social group on the move, one which perhaps is out to redress historical handicaps. Styron's handling of the sexual imagination and of the atmosphere of the field slaves cabin, although meant honestly and produced sincerely, and for us, white, detached readers impressively, betrays such an attitude.

In the German developed theory of literary reception, there exists the term *Diskulturalität* to denote the existence of a strong contradiction between the frame ideologemes of the text and the public. In the case with which we are concerned, this disagreement is rooted in the embattled stand of a very selfconscious group of educated blacks (together perhaps with some long- and short-term allies in the complex political game on the national scene), and it is this important group that articulates its objections. Theoretically speaking, at the present level of education and the existing means of information and education, the hermeneutic difference, created by the gap existing between different historical perspectives, should not be impossible to bridge: »It is within the capacity of every individual to imagine himself other than he is, to realize in himself another human or cultural possibility«, says E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in his analysis of perspectivism.²⁹

Unfortunately however, the situation of communication between a writer with Styron's ambitions and abilities, and the group that he offended by exercising these very qualities, does not allow easy and rational agreement. If men were fully rational the rocket shadow over our common sky would not exist. »None of them knew the color of the sky«, begins Crane's »The Open Boat«, one of the landmarks of early modern American literature. Never was this truer than in that period of the 1960s, although by then Arnold's celebrated lines were about a century old:

And we are here as on a darkening plain,
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight;
Where ignorant armies clash by night.³⁰

For the rationality of one partner in a dialogue to be exercised, the rationality of the other ought already to have been displayed. Our horizons are subjective and we cannot fully verify the subjectivity of the other. To do so, or to have the nourishing illusion that we have done so, we need literature of an order that I believe Styron achieved in this book. And yet what happened to him does not give us cause for confidence. In fact, my own reading of Styron and of the controversy over his work has only taught me to doubt the general validity of my own judgement.

It is perhaps a good sign that, more and more, literary scholarship is turning towards studying the subjective aspect of literary communication, the way in which a work affects the so-called horizon of expectation in the process of literary production, exchange and

29. E. D. Hirsch, Jr.: *The Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago and London, 1976, p. 47.

30. »Dover Beach«.

consumption. This, of course, is only a meager professional consolation for the loss of illusion about human contacts to which this episode in American inter-racial communication testifies. Still, it is some sort of answer to an utterance by the most American of 20th century poets, Robert Frost, concerning a spring bird in late summer written many decades before the controversy:

The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.³¹

PRIJEPOR O NATU TURNERU

William Styron, koji je sa svoja tri prethodna romana postigao veliki uspjeh, objavio je god. 1967. roman *Ispovijesti Nata Turnera*, fikcionalni prikaz pobune robova u Virginiji godine 1831. Autor i utjecajni kritičari bijelci smatrali su da je knjiga pisana iz perspektive vrlo sklone vodi pobune, te su očekivali pozitivnu reakciju čitalaca crnaca. Međutim, deset književnika crnaca napalo je Styrona da su mu stavovi duboko rasistički. U ovom radu razmatraju se problematički aspekti romana i njegove prijeborne teme, jer su karakteristični za poteškoće na koje nailaze pokušaji da se premoste kulturni i povijesni nesporazumi, a simptomatični su za Ameriku u 1960-tim godinama.

31. »The Oven Bird«.