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William Styron on Nat Turner

by William Styron

Editors' Note: On December 7, 1977, Mr. William Styron, distinguished American novelist, Pulitzer Prize winner, and author of *THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER*, visited the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and Religion. During his visit Mr. Styron led a colloquium in which he read from work in progress and lectured informally on his current perspective on the writing and response to his most celebrated novel. Mr. Styron did not speak from a prepared text. We are pleased to present a transcript of his remarks as they were delivered on that occasion. The transcript was not edited by Mr. Styron. It is intended to serve as a record of an event of singular importance in the ongoing work of the Center rather than as a finished literary product. The editors are grateful to Mr. Styron for permitting the publication of the transcript. A videotape of the occasion has been made by the Center.

I want to say that I am going to make this presentation relatively brief and informal. I have been asked to speak on *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and I will concentrate on that work. I will try to give you a little

background as to how I wrote the book, what were the well-springs of its so-called creation, what were the by now very famous reactions to it, both pro and con, and how I feel about it now about ten years after its publication.

To do so, I want to be personal and mention something about my early life in Tidewater Virginia. I might add that Tidewater Virginia is in a curious way quite similar to north Florida in that it's an appendage in a sense just as north Florida, and I am sure it would not be considered polite to say this, is an appendage to Miami. When I was growing up, Tidewater Virginia was an appendage to Fairfax County. People fail to realize that the deep South has many oddities. It includes part of east Texas and part of Maryland. I'm talking about those regions where deep-South attitudes prevail. And the Tidewater Virginia (that I grew up in) had the same attitudes in a curious way as those of the deeper South, including north Florida. The 1930's that I remember, as do some of you — I can tell by your bifocals — some of you, most of you, thank heavens, do not remember that period, but those of you who do remember it would remember a society which was not too

different from that of present-day South Africa. I remember strikingly the sense of apartheid, segregation and alienation that I as a white person felt growing up in a civilization where black people, Negroes we used to call them, were denied equal access to water fountains, to public restrooms, to buses, and to theaters. All these are very vivid in my memory — the idea, for example, of getting on a bus and seeing a sea of black faces in the back and a distinct configuration of white faces in front. It was part of my memory and I submit that such memories have an effect on a human being. They can wound him or her as quickly as a slash on the face with a knife. In other words, I was living in a society which we've not only put far behind us but which was an anomaly.

People are not supposed to treat other human beings in that way. People are not supposed to, and when I say "people" I'm talking about the white majority, act like swine through legislation to their fellow human beings, but that was the situation. Along those lines, in 1975 while I was writing *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, I wrote an essay for *Harper's Magazine* and I'm going to read a little part of it to give you a sense of what

Included In This Issue: Lawrence Cunningham writes on Catholic sensibility in the work of Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. Report on the awarding of grants for 1978-79.

I'm talking about. It's an essay describing the creation of *Nat Turner* called, "This Quiet Dust." I'll only read a little bit of it.

My native state of Virginia is, of course, more than ordinarily conscious of its past, even for the South. When I was learning my lessons in the mid-1930s at a grammar school on the banks of the James River, one of the required texts was a history of Virginia — a book I can recall far more vividly than any history of the United States or of Europe I studied at a later time. It was in this work that I first encountered the name Nat Turner. The reference to Nat was brief; as a matter of fact, I do not think it unlikely that it was the very brevity of the allusion — amounting almost to a quality of haste — which captured my attention and stung my curiosity. I can no longer quote the passage exactly, but I remember that it went something like this: "In 1831, a fanatical Negro slave named Nat Turner led a terrible insurrection in Southampton County, murdering many white people. The insurrection was immediately put down, and for their cruel deeds Nat Turner and most of the other Negroes involved in the rebellion were hanged." Give or take a few harsh adjectives, this was all the information on Nat Turner supplied ...

I must have first read this passage when I was ten or eleven years old. At that time my home was not far from Southampton County, where the rebellion took place, in a section of the Virginia Tidewater which is generally considered part of the Black Belt because of the predominance of Negroes in the population. ... My boyhood experience was the typically ambivalent one of most native Southerners, for whom the Negro is simultaneously taken for granted and as an object of unending concern. ...

Now I'm parenthetically saying that I could not write these things in exactly this language today because there have been changes. So remember this is 1965.

On the one hand, Negroes are simply a part of the landscape, an unexceptional feature of the local scenery, yet as central to its character as the pinewoods and sawmills and mule teams and sleepy river estuaries that give such color and tone to the Southern geography. Unnoticed by white people, the Negroes blend with the land and somehow melt and fade into it, so that only when one reflects upon their possible absence, some magical disappearance, does one realize how unimaginable this absence would be: it would be easier to visualize a South without trees, without *any* people, without life at all. Thus at the same time, ignored by white people, Negroes impinge upon their collective subconscious to such a degree that it may be rightly said that they become the focus of an incessant preoccupation, somewhat like a monstrous, recurring dream populated by identical faces wearing expressions of inquietude and vague reproach. "Southern whites cannot walk, talk, sing, conceive of laws or justice, think of sex, love, the family, or freedom without responding to the presence of Negroes." The words are those of Ralph Ellison [back in the early 60's], and, of course, he is right.

Then I went on to say, in the same essay:

Innumerable white Southerners have grown up as free of knowledge of the Negro character and soul as a person whose background is rural Wisconsin or Maine. Yet, of course,

there is a difference, and it is a profound one, defining the white Southerner's attitudes and causing him to be, for better or for worse, whatever it is he is to be. For the Negro is *there*. And he is there in a way he never is in the North, no matter how great his numbers. In the South he is a perpetual and immutable part of history itself, a piece of the vast fabric so integral and necessary that without him the fabric dissolves; his voice, his black or brown face passing on a city street, the sound of his cry rising from a wagonload of flowers, his numberless procession down dusty country roads, the neat white church he has built in some pine grove with its air of grace and benison and tranquility, his silhouette behind a mule team far off in some spring field, the wail of his blues blaring from some juke-box in a backwoods roadhouse, the sad wet faces of nursemaids and cooks waiting in the evening at city bus stops in pouring rain — the Negro is always *there*.

No wonder, then, as Ellison says, the white Southerner can do virtually nothing without responding to the presence of Negroes. 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 that 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.

Now that was part of the essay that I wrote in 1965 when I was writing *Nat Turner*, and I suspect, indeed I know, that I was trying, however fitfully, through *Nat Turner* to know the Negro. As for Nat Turner himself, he was a shadow in the back of my consciousness when I was a kid. I went to a little high school along the banks

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of the James River. Even then I might add parenthetically that the Commonwealth of Virginia, largely due to Senator Harry Byrd, ranked 49th in public aid to education when we only had 48 states. It came after Puerto Rico. So the education one received in the commonwealth then, I might add, perhaps even now, was of not the highest quality. Nonetheless, we had a good time. I was manager of the football team, and often we went over to Southampton County which is across the river. The county high school was our biggest rival. Whenever we played them, my imagination was smitten over and over again by a large highway marker somewhere in the county which we would pass, one of those historic markers that the state of Virginia pioneered in, saying something like this: "Ten miles to the west of here, in 1831 there occurred a terrible rebellion of the blacks against the whites" — very much paralleling the passage that I just read. The marker stuck in my mind. At that time, that little part of Virginia grew in the Fall, during football season, peanuts and cotton, and I would see black men out in the fields working hard, and as a very young boy something stuck in my craw about this. The disparity between what I saw around me — black people not in the best of circumstances juxtaposed against a historical figure who was beginning then to melt in my recollection or at least in my consciousness, a black man who had the audacity to rise up in rage and despair and do something or try to do something about his existence. So the name Nat Turner at the age of thirteen or so was stamped in my consciousness. It became very very clear to me that there was very little to know about Nat Turner. I asked around; I went to the rather meager archives of the school that I was attending, as well as others, and I came up with this repetitive nullity, this shadowy figure, this absolutely enigmatic human being Nat Turner. There was nothing, save a paragraph here, a

paragraph there. Unlike Abraham Lincoln, about whom one could absolutely go to sleep trying to read all of the mountainous information, as about other famous white heroes, there was nothing about this black man. In fact, as I later learned he was an unknown quantity to both blacks and whites.

So, I went off to college and decided to become a writer. After I wrote my first novel which was published in 1951, I decided that the time had come to try and write a novel about Nat Turner. Alas, I came up against a stone wall. How on earth could one write a novel about someone who was a shadow, an absolute phantom? It defeated me. I had good advice from some friends and editors with whom I discussed this. They all counseled wisely, I think, to forget about old Nat: "You could never deal with him; besides he was unimportant. Why would you want to write about a poor old colored man down in Virginia who did a dumb thing like trying to kill a bunch of white people?" So, I put it aside again. Time passed and I wrote several other books. Finally, something happened. I suppose there was a conjunction of circumstances. I became almost coincidentally a very close friend of a man whom I still admire very much, James Baldwin. At the time he didn't have two nickels. It was just before his fame arose, just before he wrote that remarkable and prophetic work, *The Fire Next Time*. I had a little money by that time and I lived in Connecticut. Someone said, "Do a favor for Jimmy as a fellow writer. He needs a roof over his head." So I agreed and he lived in a little house that I had on my property for about seven months. During this time he wrote the celebrated essay, *The Fire Next Time*. More important to me personally was the fact that for the first time I had laid my soul and spirit on the line with a black man and vice versa. We were close friends then and we still are. This sounds confessional, but I've said it before: to a young man who had, as I

say, gone through the crucible of exclusive black toilets, exclusive black buses, I'd gone through years when the Negro was a caricature, when someone could show me a cover of *The New Yorker* magazine coming out in 1935 which was hard to believe for such a sophisticated journal, but the cover showed the black man as chicken thief. In other words, after this experience of knowing the black man only in a posture of inferiority and semi-degradation, I found in Jimmy Baldwin a man who was positively splendid. I saw, I think for the first time, what tremendous fire was burning in the black soul, what tremendous passion, and most important, what intellect was at work. This was 1962 or 3. All these things came into focus that particular winter in the early sixties. I think that without the experience of having known Baldwin that well I might not have written *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. I worked for four or five years.

People have asked me what kind of research I did. I did very little research. I am a foe of research. I think research chokes and corrupts. I wanted nothing of the file card in my book. So I allowed no file cards in the book. On the other hand, to be quite honest, I had to, if I was going to create a book which tried to give not only a picture of Nat Turner but also a sense of what slavery was, I had to absorb a great deal of the past. And with profit I read books which any of us could still find on the library shelves: The Grimke Sisters, Frederick Law Olmstead, Fanny Kimble, and various informal accounts of slavery. I also read certain collections of slave narratives which the Library of Congress did back in the 1930's and forties. The research was mainly a matter of absorption. It was not a matter of making notes. It was a matter of accreting unto myself, unto my brain, a sense of the time.

I tried to immerse myself in that remarkable period, especially the period between 1790 and roughly 1840, which was, of course, Nat Turner's,

they were his years. I did have a model for Nat Turner's master, a remarkable Virginian who was a friend of Thomas Jefferson named John Hartwell Cock, the master of Brimo Plantation in Fluvana County, Virginia, an ardent abolitionist, hater of slavery, a tormented man who seemed to me to fulfill the bill for getting a picture of what really was happening in Virginia at that time, namely to hone in on the persona of this man Cock, upon the desperate sense of agony that most slave owners in Virginia were enduring because of slavery. He is the only character, I suspect, that I actually plucked from history in documentary form aside from Nat himself.

Had I known that I was on collision course as I finished this book with all those things that James Baldwin had predicted in *The Fire Next Time*, namely, the cataclysmic events of 1967 when the cities of America burnt down, I might have requested a postponement. But I didn't. The book was in the works, and depending on how you look at it, the book could not have come out at a more advantageous or disadvantageous time. As some of you may know, the book was an immediate and monstrous success, fulfilling even the dreams of Jacqueline Susann. It was number one on the best seller list for some incredible number of weeks, I think a record number of weeks. It was immediately translated into twenty languages. It was every writer's hope fulfilled. It was sold to the movies for an extreme amount of money. I wish I could say I'd given it to the NAACP, but I didn't, having children to educate. It was a remarkable thing to happen to a writer. But all was not happiness. For one thing, I was unhappy that a great deal of the success of the book was probably a result of its coincidental publication at a time when the entire American consciousness was absorbed and obsessed with the problem of blacks and blacks with whites.

I suppose I should have predicted what would happen, but I was unable

to. I'm not talking about the generally splendid reviews that the book received from white critics, including critics whom I most respect, but within six months the book was the object of one of the most vehement attacks that any book in America has ever received. I was not prepared for it. However, I had thick enough skin by that time more or less to let the worst part of it wash off my back. Nevertheless, there was a violent reaction on the part of blacks. Just to refresh your memory, I'd like to simply read to you a few lines from some of the more violent criticisms. There is a book called *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* published by Beacon Press in Boston. Some of the words I quote from that book will give you a feeling of the kind of lambasting I took. This is from a black writer named John Oliver Killens, who is a novelist, whose work I had read and rather liked. So, it hurt me a bit more:

After faithfully plodding through the Number-One Best Seller, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, after reading all the ballyhoo and pretentious interviews in *The New York Times Book Review* and in *Newsweek* about the book and its author and its author's attitudes vis-a-vis Nat Turner and the writing of the book and black folk generally, I too have a confession to make. I had this uncomfortable feeling that a hoax was being perpetrated against the American reading public. I also had the uneasy feeling, even worse, that the reading public dearly loved it. Like a whore being brutally ravished and loving every masochistic minute of it.

You can imagine how I felt when I read that.

Americans loved this fake illusion of reality because it legitimized all of their myths and prejudices about the American black man, and further, because it cut yet another great American black man down to the size of a boy. Nat Turner, in the tradition of most black Americans, was a man of tragedy, a giant, but William Styron has depicted him as a child of pathos.

Charles V. Hamilton, who is a distinguished professor at Roosevelt University, wrote this:

... Styron is entitled to his literary license, but black people today cannot afford the luxury of having their leaders manipulated and toyed with. Nat Turner struck a blow for freedom; Nat Turner was a revolutionary who did not fail, but rather one who furthered the idea and cause of freedom precisely because he chose to act for freedom. Black people today must not permit themselves to be divested of their historical revolutionary leaders. And it is incumbent upon blacks to make this clear to the Styrons and to all those who read his book and are soothed.

It went on in that vein at great length. Some of it I had to resent; some of it I understood then as now for what it was, and I don't mean to be condescending when I repeat now what I felt then, that at a very critical moment in the history of the black people in this country, a white man had indeed achieved a kind of watershed act in the sense that he had written a book which, whatever its faults, had opened up a very important chapter in the past, and had with a certain amount of honesty tried to show readers, white and black, what slavery was like with as much objectivity as he could muster. Now, I could understand some of the criticisms, like the ones I have just read, as being products of that kind of bitterness, a very valid sort of bitterness. And, indeed, some of the criticism was well taken. A professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Mike Feldwell, a black born in Jamaica, and another writer, Vincent Harding from Spellman University in Atlanta, both had, I thought, some very valid points of view in the sense that they felt that being a white man, I had not really caught the tone, the cadence of black speech. It's a criticism I more or less had to yield to because, even though I was trying a very difficult task, that of writing about a man who died over one

hundred years ago, I realized that I was deprived of certain rhythms, what Al Murray, another very fine black writer, called the jive and the jazz of black speech rhythms. All I can say about this is that I regretted the lack and was sorry for it.

The main things, though, that were alleged against the book, were really rather specific. There were too many to enumerate in detail, but some of them were these: (a) that I implied that there were no slave revolts at all, that this (i.e., Nat Turner's rebellion) was the only exception in the history of Southern black history. Alas, the critics were wrong. Nat Turner's was the only *significant* revolt; (b) that I made Nat an irresolute figure without guts, who tried to kill and couldn't. My intent in doing that was simply to show that the man was basically a very *human* human being and that his irresolution was the product of the squeamishness that almost any human being would have in trying to viscerate another person, especially a young woman; (c) that I portrayed slavery as a benign system, although anyone reading the book rationally could not accept this criticism, because I did not; (d) that I had Nat educated by white people, not black people, and was therefore trying to portray black family life as fragmented and uncohesive. This was in fact the truth about black families at that time; (e) that in having the slaves fight back against Nat I was creating an historical lie, since no honest slaves would join against a revolutionary leader and try to bring his downfall. In reality, all history has shown that human beings, whatever their color, at one time or another have been capable of betraying their own kind; (f) that I denied him a wife. This was the second most important accusation I received. It seemed very important to black people that I give Nat Turner a wife, which to me seemed ultimately a very bourgeois attitude, but they insisted. I would have given him a wife if any of the very meager evidence we had, namely the confessions that I used as my

groundwork, had really shown that he had a wife; (g) finally, the most important accusation levelled against me and the book was that Nat Turner was an unregenerate luster and lecher after beautiful white virginal Margaret Whitehead. This outraged blacks most of all. I'm afraid this was the thing that stuck in the collective black craw the most: the idea that Margaret Whitehead was his only victim, the only person he actually killed with his bare hands. It made black people violently angry that Nat could conceive of a love relationship or any kind of relationship with this white girl. Why couldn't he have a beautiful black girl like all good black revolutionaries should have? I had no answer except that as a writer I had a simple obligation to imagine things as I wanted to imagine without betraying the historical record. I want to quote briefly along those lines from Georg Lukacs, who is probably the greatest Marxist critic of literature and whose monumental book called *The Historical Novel* I believe nails everything down about the relationship of the historical novelist to his material and his responsibility, especially as to whether a writer has the right to have a black man lust or love a white girl when there is no evidence.

The deep and more genuinely historical a writer's knowledge of the period, the more freely will he be able to move about inside his subject and the less tied he will feel to individual historical data. Every really original writer who portrays a new outlook upon a certain field has to contend with the prejudices of his readers. The image which the public has of any familiar historical figure need not necessarily be a false one. Indeed with the growth of a real historical sense and of real historical knowledge it becomes more and more accurate, but even this correct image may in certain circumstances be a hindrance to the writer who wishes to reproduce the spirit of an age faithfully and authentically. I would require a particularly happy accident for all the well-known and attested actions of a familiar historical figure to correspond to the

purposes of literature. What matters in the novel is fidelity in the reproduction of the material foundations of the life of a given period, its manners and the feelings and thoughts deriving from these. This means that the novel is much more closely bound to the specifically historical individual moments of a period than is drama.

But this never means being tied, and this is important, I'm underlining this, *but this never means being tied to particular historical facts*. On the contrary, the novelist must be at liberty to treat these as he likes if he is to reproduce the much more complex and ramifying totality with historical faithfulness. From the standpoint of the historical novel, it is always a matter of chance whether an actual historical fact, character or story will lend itself to the particular method by which a novelist conveys his historical faithfulness.

Alas, I read Georg Lukacs after I had written *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, but I realized that with some unconscious will I had more or less obeyed my own instincts and had created these people out of a sense of desire of making history work fictionally on the printed page.

In retrospect, I have no apologies. I realize that the book has many flaws, and that blacks had a very profound bone to pick with me and that the difficulties and miseries that they expressed in regard to my book were valid ones. There was a psychological trauma, I think, and I can understand why black people do take issue with the book as book. But on the other hand, I do not withdraw my basic faith in the book; it's there for people to read and I stand by the statement I made when I was being besieged at the most extreme point of 1968. I said, "Deep down, if I felt I had betrayed history, if I suspected dishonesty, conscious or unconscious, I would have a powerful sense of guilt. But I have discharged a novelist's obligation to history and my conscious conscience is clear." With that statement,

what I would like to do now is to simply open this seminar to some questions for informal discussion.

Question:

Sir, at the time you were going through this seige, did not Eldridge Cleaver demonstrate in *Soul On Ice* how much white women meant to him and show how right you were in your portrait of Nat Turner's psychology?

Styron:

That's an interesting point about Eldridge Cleaver because his book was published about a year after *Nat Turner*. As I recollect the first chapter of *Soul On Ice* is an absolute incredible combination of hymn, imprecation and total obsession with white women. I don't think I'm misquoting when I say at one point he says, "Black men care only for white women." I know that he says, "I care only for white women." In every respect it was like receiving support from some unasked-for but welcome source when I read that. I suddenly realized that black men or I should say black men and women (because some of my most vocal critics were black women), who felt that by having this black hero "hung up" or whatever the word is, I refuse to say love because there was very little love in his fantasy relationship with Margaret Whitehead. It was basically frustration, sexual frustration of a very innocent sort. It was hatred of the sort that could only be experienced by a black man in any Southern situation who is outrageously flirted with by a very attractive white woman. The thing that the black critics failed to realize is that Nat was acted upon, not merely acting himself in terms of that relationship. He was the victim of one of the worst aspects of antebellum and even post-bellum Southern society, namely the absolute hegemony of the idea of women's divine right to be anything they were — white women I'm talking about — and their ability to parade themselves in front of black men without any sense of pride or

shame. This is what Nat was a victim of, but I was accused of, in turn, rather, of making him into some sort of a wanton, sort of bottled-up rapist which indeed he wasn't.

Question:

Was there not a document unearthed which attested to the fact that Nat Turner had a wife on a neighboring plantation and this was part of the cause of his frustrated revolt?

Styron:

My answer to that was that I would have rejected that evidence anyway, because it did not fit in with what to me was a much more important aspect of Nat Turner, his nature and his psychology, namely that all of the young revolutionary figures I have ever read about, such as Danton, Robespierre, Martin Luther, Che Guevarra and Jesus — you can name them over and over and over — are demonstrably men who have bottled up their sexual instincts and subsumed them to a larger cause. Guevarra was very vocal about this. He refused to have girls in Cuba because he wanted to keep his energy for the revolution. It seemed to me far more likely that Nat Turner was like this since he did not ever mention in his own confessions that he had a wife. This is very important. Although he mentioned all the other members of his family, he never mentioned a wife. I was convinced that he didn't have a wife, and for very good reason, because he was an authentic revolutionary with authentic revolutionary desires to which a wife would have been a hindrance.

Question:

Had you read, before writing *Nat Turner*, in general any historical novels?

Styron:

Yes, I had. Quite a few.

Question:

Had you read a book by a black writer named Arna Bontemps called

Black Thunder, which is about another aborted slave rebellion?

Styron:

Yes.

Question:

Had you read a book by Margaret Walker?

Answer:

No.

Question:

David Walker's *Appeal*?

Answer:

Yes.

Question:

Do you think Nat Turner had read or discussed David Walker's *Appeal*?

Answer:

I very much doubt it, because given his situation, given the man's basically insulated hermetically sealed little universe where there was an almost inconceivably remote nature to intellectual life, I very much doubt if he would have heard of it. Had he lived in a place like Richmond, I think it would have been very likely that he had, but given the fact that he lived in this backwater of Southampton, I very much doubt it.

Question:

I wish that we could share your evaluation of F. Randolph Edmond's play, also entitled *Nat Turner*, which didn't make it to Broadway.

Styron:

I would like very much to read it, but it's not available. I would like to have it available.

Question:

How are sales doing? Do you feel ten years later as violently besieged as you were ten years ago?

Styron:

The sales are fine. No, I do not feel myself as violently besieged. I feel that the book has found its level. I really don't know about the sales, but I do know that it is required reading in many universities and colleges and

there is a constant demand for it in libraries, so I presume that the sales are o.k.

Question:

What did you mean by calling your novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a meditation on history?

Styron:

I think I used that in the most metaphysical way. It's very hard for me to explain it. I think I used it to try and lift the book out of the mold which most historical novels have found themselves mired or stuck in. Historical novels do not have a very good reputation for some reason in this country, largely because they are usually written by people without a great deal of talent and are often quite just simply sensational. I think I used that phrase to say that I was using every resource that I had in order to brood and dream about history and somehow come up with a sense of history which was large and round and

which would give a sense of the place and time that I was writing about in a way that other books had not yet done. Whether I succeeded or not is a different question, but that is what I think I was trying to get at with the idea of meditation.

Question:

You seem to have implied that growing up in a segregated apartheid-type South that you grew up in left a wound, but has it healed or whatever?

Styron:

I would say to some degree yes. I think that the writing of Nat Turner again and I'm saying "pace" to my black critics, gave me something. It helped me a lot, whatever laceration I had received by growing up in an atmosphere of extreme hatred. It was a cathartic act, I think. And though I'm far from perfect, in terms of any apprehension of the racial situation now, I think that the book was a good

and rewarding experience for me to have done personally.

Questioner's statement:

Just to give some closure then, it seems like in the first part of your discussion this evening that you talked about the intense concern of the white with the black man as part of the landscape and at the same time the extreme lack of any realistic measurement. In other words, people were dealing with stereotypes. So your writing, perhaps then, was an attempt to break out of the stereotypic mind, because that's really where the situation arises and still is now.

Styron:

Right.

Questioner:

So breaking out of that and personalizing . . .

Styron:

Yes, that was not a question but a statement and I would think a very honest and good one.

Catholic Sensibility and Southern Writers*

by Lawrence Cunningham

My topic this evening is the Catholic sensibility of Southern writers. It will be, in fact, a talk about two writers, the late Mary Flannery O'Connor of Milledgeville, Georgia and the very lively Doctor Walker Percy of Covington, Louisiana. Before I talk about these two people I need to say something about my use of the phrase "Catholic sensibility".

The notion of "Catholic sensibility" is one of those protean catch

phrases like "The American Way of Life" which nearly defies accurate definition. Yet it is important for me to tell you how I understand the term and in what sense I am going to use it in this lecture. Let me begin, in the manner of the medieval mystics, with the *via negativa*, i.e. the ways in which I am not going to use the phrase.

There are novels in which it is extremely useful to know something about Catholic belief and mores in order to comprehend what the novelist is trying to do. In that sense an intelligent reader needs to be sensitive to Catholic theology to grasp fully the point of the novel. James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* is a case in point. One can read that

novel without being conversant about Jesuit education and spirituality or the notion of the Catholic priesthood or the doctrine of Transsubstantiation but a knowledge of such topics would aid the reader in seeing how Stephen Daedalus, the hero of the novel, rejected the traditional Catholicism of his youth to become, as an anti-type, a secularized priest who changes bare words into art as the older priesthood changed bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

There are yet other novels in which a knowledge of Catholicism is not presumed but is gained. In the very reading of such novels there comes an awareness of the peculiarities of being Catholic in a given historical situation.

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