

REVIEWS

White Fantasies — Black Man's Burden?

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THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

By William Styron

A Signet Book, New American Library, Inc., 1966 404 pp \$1.25

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The man who led the most publicized slave insurrection in the United States¹ is the subject of the 1968 Pulitzer prizewinning book by William Styron. Many white reviewers have hailed Styron's book as a remarkably penetrating insight into the psyche of a black slave revolutionary. There is no question that Styron has analyzed Nat Turner in a way that appeals not only to white readers in general but also to liberal white literary critics.

Yet I am left with the persistent suspicion that Styron did not successfully analyze the black hero. Styron is a twentieth-century white, free American; Turner was a nineteenth-century black, slave American. Such a gap is nearly impossible to bridge. For although we all have known oppression and injustice, probably few white Americans have known it with the intensity that black men in this country even today know it, to say nothing of those who survived the terrible abuses of slavery.

Styron says in his introductory note: "I have rarely departed from the *known* facts. . . . I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events." It is my opinion that in writing the story of Nat Turner, Styron has ignored some important facts and traditions about the man and in so doing has perpetuated, unconsciously, contemporary white fantasies about race.

1. Styron describes Turner as a celibate who was obsessed with thoughts of white women, in spite of the evidence that he was married to a black woman owned by the master of a neighboring plantation.² Why did Styron lose the hero in a white dream world when Turner had his own real black world? Why does Styron omit any mention of Turner's wife? It seems likely that but for her there would have been no rebellion. Surely one can at least begin to imagine the incredible frustration of having a wife who was owned by another man who could beat her, disgrace her, or sell her on a whim. If anything would drive a man to violence, surely this would! But Styron, ignoring the evidence and this obvious consideration, supports the arrogant fantasy that black men dream primarily of white women.

2. Turner is presented as fearful, unmanly, and thoroughly "Samboized." In fact, Turner had escaped from his owner and returned to help free his own people.³ Is this the act of an effeminate coward? Styron implies that Turner lacked courage because he did not take a major part in the fighting during the rebellion. What does one expect

of a commanding officer with a small army? Styron seems to feed the fantasy that there is no such thing as a brave, dignified black leader.

3. According to Styron, Turner was literate because his early owner thought he was cute and taught him to read. This is not in accord with the statement about Turner from the original *Confessions*: "As to his ignorance, he certainly never had the advantages of education, but he can read and write (*it was taught him by his own parents*) and for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, is surpassed by few men I have seen."⁴ Why does Styron have Turner educated by whites rather than as he was, by his own parents? Why support the delusion that knowledge, original thought, and the ability to teach are peculiar to the white race?

4. Will, who joins the rebellion, is pictured by Styron as a bloodthirsty animal. The original *Confessions* depict a different Will, one who says, on joining the rebellion, "My life is worth no more than others, and my liberty as dear to me."⁵ These are hardly the words of a moronic beast. I know of no attempts to picture the colonists who took part in the Boston Tea Party or the attack on Fort Ticonderoga as unthinking, violent fools. Why picture what seemed to be an intelligent revolutionary black as stupid? Nevertheless, in Styron's account, the animal Will challenges Turner as the leader of the rebellion, and poor Nat quakes! This seems an insult to the obvious ability of Turner. Again, Styron is supporting the white fantasy that a nonwhite simply cannot lead.

These are but a few examples of an attitude that strips the black revolutionary of his heroic qualities. Styron's analysis of Turner's motivation for the rebellion does the same: his frustration comes from his desire to be white. Why such a reason for a man who loved his people and gave his life in an attempt to free them? Why not frustrated because he was a man and had seen too much oppression and injustice? If taxation without representation is tyranny, and as such is frustrating enough to provoke violence, isn't slavery? Is it surprising that intelligent, decent men would die for such a cause? The fact that these revolutionaries lost surely does not make them less noble, less honorable, less courageous, less heroic. George Washington won his war and Nat Turner lost his. Does that make Turner's cause less just and Turner less a hero? If so, Huss, Jerome, Nathan Hale, and Alexander Dubcek are not heroes — they also lost.

Styron's book is hardly all bad; certainly it is not sinister. It is a very readable account directed against some of the paralyzing abuses of the institution of slavery. Styron seems to be a sensitive man who empathizes with downtrodden humanity. But with all his empathy, in my opinion, Styron does a disservice to both blacks and whites by encouraging contemporary white prejudices and by emasculating a black hero. He thus continues a modern version of the attitudes that are our heritage of the slave system and perpetuates a defense of past injustices against minorities.

Styron stimulates pity, but not respect, for the blacks. Therein lies the greatest tragedy for all Americans, the seeds of racism. Though unchristian, racism has prospered in this country, and the organized Christian church has often contributed to the tragedy rather than alleviating it, in spite of the fact that racism underlies the meanest chapters in the annals of Christian and white history, from the Inquisition to American slavery to Nazism. As we Christians consider those of another race or

creed as inferiors and less than fellow men created in the image of God, we deny our own Christian heritage, foolishly embrace our own vain fantasies, and cut ourselves off from the spirit of understanding and love that we claim as Christians. We become living symbols of hypocrisy. Who cannot see through our false dignity and rationalizations? Surely those who suffer from our oppression or spinelessness see it most clearly of all.

A tragedy of Adventism is that it did not continue its early interest in abolition and equality. There was a time when Adventists were encouraged to go to prison for the civil disobedience of breaking the fugitive slave law.⁶ Currently, removed from the realities of the problem, we have fallen unwittingly into prejudices, and thus we show the same attitudes that make Styron's book, a literary masterpiece, an unplanned tragedy.

Most Seventh-day Adventists are not white, yet our church history books refer almost exclusively to whites. Our rallies tell of the history of our conferences and unions and divisions, and the actors are white, except perhaps for a benediction from a black pastor. We warn of the horrors of the last days, when the people of God will be unable to buy and sell, yet we perpetrate the same horrors on nonwhites by refusing them jobs and housing. Are the value of our property and our own egos worth more than the feelings of human beings? Is the Golden Rule outdated?

It is a continual temptation for a man on top to believe he is there because God wants him there. But right inevitably wins only for the pragmatist — and Christians are not supposed to be of that ilk. Sometimes he who controls does so *because* he is dishonest and ruthless. The question is not, "How do we maintain control?" but rather "What is just, merciful, and truthful?"

By facing this question we white Seventh-day Adventists can show that we are mature enough to face up to our past hypocrisy. Many men of good will have said and done nothing, because they do not know the facts. Contemporary analyses of the problems suggested in Styron's *Confessions* are available in such books as *Before the Mayflower*, *Crisis in Black and White*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and *Black Like Me*. The greatest potential value in carefully considering Styron's *Confessions* is that perhaps we may come to wrestle with our own arrogance — the arrogance that is almost invariably inherent in power. But Styron's book is best considered after reading at least one such book as these mentioned above.

Our past arrogance is difficult to face and will lead to temporarily shattered egos and trying situations, but Christians have met such challenges before. We must not, we cannot, refuse to consider the terrible injustice to the black people. Such consideration can lead us to real Christian brotherhood and understanding and to the joys and freedoms of leaving prejudice behind.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 On August 21, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, Nat Turner led a band of slaves in an attempt to seek freedom. The revolt was put down in a few days, and Turner was captured over a month later. Blacks thought to be involved with the uprising were executed. The event spread terror throughout the white South, and many whites fled to the North.

HERBERT APTHEKER, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (doctoral dissertation, Columbia University 1943). Published also as *Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law*, edited by the Faculty of Political Science of Columbia University, No. 501.

- 2 THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON, *Travellers and Outlaws: Episodes in American History* (Boston: Lee and Shephard 1889).
- 3 THOMAS R. GRAY, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Baltimore, 1831.
- 4 Ibid. (italics mine).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 ELLEN G. WHITE, *Testimonies for the Church* (volume one of nine volumes. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association n.d.), pp. 201-202.

Book Selections

The Beginning. By Arnold Ehrhardt. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1968. Oxford: Manchester University Press 1968. Pp. xiv plus 212. \$6.75.

This scholarly book reviews the idea of the "beginning" in Greek thought and discusses the possible relation of this to the use of the words "in the beginning" in the gospel and epistles of John, the writings of the apostle Paul, and to the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* in late Judaism and early Christianity. The author was senior lecturer in ecclesiastical history at the University of Manchester.

The Black Vanguard: Origins of the Negro Social Revolution 1900-1960. By Robert H. Brisbane. Valley Forge: Judson Press 1970. Pp. 285. \$6.95.

Crisis in Eden: A Religious Study of Man and Environment. By Frederick Elder. Nashville: Abingdon Press 1970. Pp. 172. \$3.95.

The Cry for Freedom. By Frank W. Hale, Jr. New York: Barnes 1970. \$10.00. The author is president of Oakwood College, Huntsville, Alabama.

Escape from Reason. By Francis A. Schaeffer. Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press 1968. Pp. 96. \$0.95 (paper).

A brief analysis of some of the trends of modern thought, and a call to communicate the unchanging truths of the gospel in a meaningful way to this generation.

Interrogating the Oracle. By William S. Peterson. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 1969. Pp. 276. Illus. \$10.00.

The subtitle of this book is *A History of the London Browning Society*. The author is assistant professor of English at Andrews University.

Naming the Whirlwind. By Langdon Gilkey. Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company 1969. Pp. 483. \$7.50.