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**TOUGH TALK IN THE BIG EASY: WARREN'S USE OF HISTORY
AND STYRON'S THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER**

JOHN K. CRANE

The Southern Historical Association held its thirty-fourth annual meeting at the Jung Hotel in New Orleans on November 6, 1968. The topic of one session was "The Uses of History in Fiction." The moderator was historian C. Vann Woodward; the panelists were Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, and William Styron. As it turned out in the over-extended two-hour session, the audience had come to *hear* Warren and Ellison; but it, or certain members of it at least, had turned out to *get* Styron, whose controversial and ultimately Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* had been published the previous year.

Styron was the only non-professor on the dais. Woodward, a sixty-year-old Arkansan, held a chair at Yale. Warren, a Kentuckian then sixty-three, had taught at Vanderbilt, LSU, the University of Minnesota, and was also currently teaching at Yale. Ellison, fifty-four and an Oklahoman, had taught college literature and was on the verge of becoming the Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at NYU in 1970. Styron, from Virginia's Tidewater, was, at forty-three, both the youngest and the least familiar with large audiences, especially hostile ones. This would soon become evident. His previous three novels—*Lie Down in Darkness*, *The Long March*, and *Set This House on Fire*—while much admired—had not brought him the fame, some would say the notoriety, of his most recent one.

Styron knew Ellison only vaguely, but he, Woodward, and Warren were relatively close friends. Styron had read *All the King's Men* in New York City during the horrific Christmas blizzard of 1947.¹ He was writing *Lie Down in Darkness* at the time, or at least trying to; and he later admitted to imitating the style of Warren's opening pages in his own first chapter as Peyton Loftis's body is shipped home from New York by train.² So much did he admire Warren's writing that he went on to read *World Enough and Time* and *At Heaven's Gate* as well. Styron felt the master Southern writer of all time, William Faulkner, was out of his (or anyone's) range. Warren became the writer to model himself upon, Styron even wanting to go Warren "one better" in bringing the past into "direct confrontation with the present."³ For some, this would prove to be his undoing, at least with regard to *Nat Turner*.

Warren was one of those who praised *The Confessions of Nat Turner* when it first appeared in the fall of 1967, notwithstanding the fact that those around him were generally castigating it for reasons that, if obscure thirty-three years later, were evident in

the audience's assault on Styron described below. Styron and Warren had first met in the early 1960's and had maintained fairly steady contact. Styron was regarded by many as the leader of the next generation of Southern writers, although he, like the others on the panel, had "expatriated" northward.

Thus on this night in early November of 1968 we find Styron on a panel with three professors, confronting an audience packed with scholars who were mostly hostile, and with a controversial book on his hands. He was also miserable over the election of Richard Nixon as President a few days before, with "terrible and ominous post-election traumatic blues all over [him]."⁴

Styron has always had mixed emotions about professors and scholars. On the one hand he sees them as parasitical, but he did cooperate fully with James L. W. West III, a Penn State scholar who is his official biographer. He also was kind to me after the publication of my own book, *The Root of All Evil: The Thematic Unity of William Styron's Fiction*,⁵ though he did leave the copy I sent him in a hotel room in, I think, Austria. (He could not escape me: the American Embassy there returned it to him months later.) In 1987, he graciously invited me to lunch at his home on Martha's Vineyard after I had sent him a copy of my novel *The Legacy of Ladysmith*.⁶ While using the bathroom, I spied the paperback copy of my book resting next to a spare roll of toilet paper atop the toilet tank. I dared not open it lest I find pages missing. (I did get my "revenge," however: I scheduled him to give a reading in San Jose, California, which took place amidst the wreckage of the so-called 1989 "World Series Earthquake.")⁷

If Styron felt a moderate discomfort with scholars, he was nevertheless the most "scholarly" presenter at the Southern Historical Association's session. Whereas Woodward, Warren, and Ellison reflected on their own uses of history in general and in their fiction, Styron invoked the complex theories of the Hungarian Marxist critic, Georg Lukács. One can imagine a Southern audience waiting to get at him sitting through this.

Woodward as moderator opened the session by saying, "Historians have too long cultivated a rather priggish, Nineteenth-Century cult of fact, a creed that borrowed its tenets and prestige from the sciences and the heyday of their ascendancy" (Transcript, 114). A few moments later, he got to his central point: "Since fiction was conceived to be, in this usage, the opposite of fact, and since novelists dealt exclusively in fiction, historians were inclined to be rather priggish about novelists, especially if they ventured into historical subjects" (Transcript, 114). He concluded, however, that "an historian stands in no less need of imagination than the novelist; if anything he needs rather more" (Transcript, 115).

Woodward then called upon his panel to initiate a discussion, which was to be followed by questions from the audience. He presented the panelists in order of seniority—Warren, Ellison, and Styron.

Warren agreed with Woodward that history "is not merely about what happened in the past, it is also the imaginative past" (Transcript, 117). The difference between history and fiction, however, is that "the historian does not know his imagined world; he knows *about* it, and he must know all he can about it, because he wants to find the facts *behind* that world. But the fiction writer must claim to *know* the *inside* of his world for better or for worse" (Transcript, 117-18). Like painting and music, fiction is an art. Therefore it must find form, no matter how much that form "violates the vision of humanity" (Transcript, 119).

Ellison next called historians “responsible liars” (Transcript, 119) because of their devotion to chronology. Echoing Bergsonian theories of matter and memory, although he never once mentioned Bergson by name, he argued that much of American history is permeated by racial themes, both consciously and subconsciously. Novelists have a special and necessary freedom: “Time is their enemy, and while chronology is the ally of the historian, for the novelist it is something to manipulate and even to destroy” (Transcript, 120). He then singled out Red Warren as the model of such manipulation: “when he wrote about a great American politician who governed his state and refused to intrude into the area of the historian, he refused because he was canny enough to realize that he could never get *that* particular man into fiction” (Transcript, 121). In so saying, Ellison seems to me to be laying down the gantlet for Styron who in fact *did* use a historical figure and tried to capture him. Where Warren disguised Huey Long as Willie Stark, Styron called Nat Turner Nat Turner.

Next, Styron rose to speak. He apologized for not being an accomplished public speaker nor a teacher; therefore, he felt he had to *read* from a text he had composed on his Eastern Airlines flight that afternoon. He told the audience that if one closed his or her eyes, he/she might be able to pretend that he’s not reading it.

“Last spring in an exchange in the *Nation*, I quoted at some length from a volume called *The Historical Novel*, by the great Hungarian Marxist critic, Georg Lukács, in an effort to explain my attitude toward the freedom of movement and choice any good novelist must exercise when writing historical fiction” (Transcript, 122). He admitted that Lukács reflected his own views about the novelist’s duty to make sense out of history rather than a raw compilation of known “facts.” Lukács had chosen Sir Walter Scott as his example. Scott had freed the historical novel from its previous form. Preparing for the criticism Styron expected from this particular audience, and from others, he quoted Lukács that “every really original writer who portrays a new outlook upon a certain field has to contend with the prejudices of his readers” (Transcript, 123). Not that those prejudices are necessarily wrong, but they may inhibit the imagination of the novelist who is attempting to “reproduce the spirit of an age faithfully and authentically” (Transcript, 123). As Lukács had insisted, the writer must be allowed great latitude in structuring his vision of the past. Otherwise he is a historian rather than a novelist, a social scientist rather than an artist. His efforts would be, therefore, utterly valueless. Styron then sat down, hoping that Lukács’s theories of history would provide “substance for further discussion this evening” (Transcript, 124).

All panelists having now spoken, C. Vann Woodward felt compelled to provide a summary: “As an historian I gather from the comments of Mr. Warren that the novelists deal with the inside of history, leaving the outside, I suppose, to the historian; from Mr. Ellison, that historians are essentially liars, and this leaves the truth to the novelists; from Mr. Styron that fidelity to fact is not an obligation of novelists, and this *emancipates* them. Am I too far off base, gentlemen, in saying that it seems to me that you are saying you are going to write a ‘super-history,’ or at least a better history than historians can write?” (Transcript, 124)

Ellison took immediate objection to this summary, implying that history so far had been one-sided, having left out what he referred to as the Negro experience. He was not calling historians liars so much as “myopic.” Even Henry Steele Commager and Samuel Morison were reconsidering their earlier, more narrow views because what they

and others had previously written had “imposed upon Negroes a high sensitivity to the ironies of historical writing and created a profound skepticism concerning most reports of what the past was like” (Transcript, 126). He, Ellison, would have a hard time portraying Bedford Forrest as a hero for most blacks; rather Faulkner’s Lucas Beauchamp and Sam Fathers would come closer to the mark, despite the fact that they are entirely fictional characters. Twain’s Jim, however, was “not rounded enough” (Transcript, 126).

Warren underscored this with a brief story of his daughter memorizing historical facts for an exam: ““Oh, Poppy! . . . this is for an exam; this is not the truth. I know better than this”” (Transcript, 127). Warren did, however, lay down a caution that was more aimed at Styron than anyone else. “The autonomy of the art is always subject to the recalcitrance of the materials and to your own lack of self-understanding” (Transcript, 128). Ellison agreed. “The freedom of the fiction writer, the novelist, is one of the great freedoms possible for the individual to exercise. But it is not absolute” (Transcript, 130). Warren responded: “Quite right” (Transcript, 131).

At this moment Ellison dropped a bombshell. He made a claim that Styron felt was a lie.⁸ I agree. Ellison claimed he had not read *The Confessions of Nat Turner*! “Our house burned down so I didn’t get to read it at first, and after the controversy I deliberately did not read it” (Transcript, 131). Yet, later in the same paragraph of the transcript he seemed to belie this: “On the other hand, Bill, I would suggest that whether you like the dissonance you picked up, you’ve written a very powerful novel, and it’s very self-evident. Don’t kick it. Don’t knock it. Just leave history alone” (Transcript, 131). Ralph Ellison was not known to accept other people’s judgments, especially critics’, so how could he know about the power of the book without having read it? West suspects, and I agree, that Ellison knew there was a fray coming as questioners approached the microphone, that he and Warren had accidentally or purposely set Styron up and now wished to stay out of it. Biographer West elaborates on this: “Styron did not believe Ellison; he felt that Ellison was simply avoiding the necessity of taking sides” (*A Life*, 393).

Time ultimately allowed for five questioners. Styron got the first four, Ellison the fifth, Warren none. In fact, once the questioners got started, Warren said not another word. Perhaps he was simply too dignified and courtly to get involved in the gutter brawl that ensued. Styron was not and gave as good as he got. I, in reading the transcript, feel that all four of Styron’s were outraged blacks. Ellison’s may or may not have been; and, besides, the final questioner was more polite no matter what his or her racial heritage. Woodward had to be ecstatic about this—it gave him the opportunity to conclude a contentious session on a civilized note.

As it turned out, Styron’s first adversary cited Ellison’s claim that the writer does not have the right to distort facts completely; he asked about the fact that Nat Turner was married, a fact that Styron had omitted entirely in *Nat Turner*. Styron, not yet knowing what was coming, responded with some politeness: “It seems to me I’ve heard this before. I can only reiterate what I have said despairingly in public and even more despairingly in cold print, that in the evidence which was available to me when some years ago I began to collect the few basic materials to write this book, there was no evidence that told me he had such a wife” (Transcript, 135). The questioner went on to say the information was in Thomas Gray’s *Confessions*, Styron’s basic source. Styron denied this and implied the questioner had not read Gray’s document, which the

questioner admitted, saying he got it out of an article in *Ebony* by Lerone Bennett. “Bennett’s wrong,” Styron said, and then launched his first salvo at the questioner: “But I only ask again, certainly not for the last time, that people who, like yourself, constantly castigate me for leaving his wife out, consult the evidence yourself, and use a little reason” (Transcript, 135).

One can imagine Warren, Woodward, and Ellison squirming in their chairs, especially as the man persisted. He moved next to Nat’s obsession with Margaret Whitehead, the element that the majority of black readers objected to the most. Styron, attempting briefly to control himself, said that Margaret Whitehead was part of his fictional imagination.

“You said that a novel has its own reason for being. What’s the reason for being for *The Confessions of Nat Turner*? Because I read it and I couldn’t find any” (Transcript, 135). Styron called this a “majestic question” (Transcript, 135) and declined to answer it.

The Second Questioner was someone Styron had encountered before, and things quickly got nastier: “Seeing as though calling historians liars tonight has been quite popular, I can remember the last time I called you a liar, it became very bitter. It seems as though we confront each other from the North to the South. I met you in Massachusetts this summer, and now all the way down in New Orleans. I’m here to call you a liar again” (Transcript, 136).

At this moment, Ralph Ellison stepped in to ease the tension, or try to. “Which one of us, please?” (Transcript, 136).

The come-back was immediate—Styron. The questioner had met Styron at Harvard: “I heard Warren say a few minutes ago that fact can destroy, that fact can be deadly. I contend that imagination and lying can also be deadly and can also destroy” (Transcript, 136). He reiterated two objections he had already voiced at Harvard—Nat’s religious visions that told him to kill whites and the fact that Margaret Whitehead, a white girl, was a “higher symbol” for Nat. He defied Styron to say the same thing, especially about Margaret, to “these Southern whites” (Transcript, 136).

Styron, exasperated now, took note of the first question mark in evidence in the Second Questioner’s tirade and interrupted him: “Indeed you have haunted me. You’re my *bête noire*, I’m afraid. I recall you from Harvard Summer School with terror. Now here you are again. I won’t reply to your *ad hominem* remarks about my ‘lies,’ and so on, but I will try to reply directly to you about what I conceive to be the essential truth about Nat Turner’s relationship with white women” (Transcript, 136). Styron thought the questioner objected to the fact that Nat yearned for a white girl, but the questioner said that was not his point. Styron asked him to rephrase. The questioner did so, saying that Styron, in making Nat lust after Margaret, omitted entirely that white male slave owners persistently showed up at slave quarters expecting sexual favors from female blacks. Styron responded that such material *was* in his story—“you have totally misread the book. Because it’s there” (Transcript, 137).

This Second Questioner then tried a different tack: “You see, the facts you included would *sell*. The whites *wanted* to read that Nat Turner was not a strong, black, revolutionary figure, but that he had certain sexual desires that drove him on” (Transcript, 137). He accused Styron of concentrating only on the deaths of women and children when the anti-*Nat Turner* volume *Ten Black Writers Respond*⁹ [claimed] that most of the men were away at a meeting: “Possibly [Nat] had the insight to know that these same

little white babies would one day be slave masters of his children, wherever they were. So wiping out the white children would be the very same thing as wiping out those adult honkies” (Transcript, 137). In essence the speaker was accusing Styron of claiming Turner was *afraid* of white men.

Let me interrupt this exchange for a moment. On the one hand, this persistent questioner seemed to be upholding the Warren principle of using history in fiction: you cannot possibly recreate what was exactly going on in a *real* person’s mind, so why not create a fictional character in similar circumstances as Warren did in naming his character Willie Stark instead of Huey Long? In Styron’s defense, however, perhaps this questioner had never even heard of Nat Turner until the author unstrung him from the cobwebs of the Tidewater. I think the questioner’s reaction would have been very much the same if Styron had renamed him—the questioner would still have accused Styron, a white Southerner, of creating a fictional black coward driven more by his libido than by his quest for equality. But perhaps not.

Here Styron grew even more cynical: “You reappear in my dreams. I knew somehow that you’d find me here. From Cambridge to New Orleans; it’s more than the mind can encompass” (Transcript, 138). He tried to return to the Lukács theory, but the questioner would have none of it. In fact, Styron was not allowed to complete any further statement without being interrupted. Finally he said, “Well, then, we’re at an impasse, my friend, because you say it’s one way, and I say it’s another” (Transcript, 139). This Second Questioner, about to be banished from the microphone by Woodward, rejoined “Yes, but everytime we meet, you always jibe, and say that I miss your point. You ought to stop lying” (Transcript, 139).

“Are there other people who want to ask questions?” Woodward interjected (Transcript, 139).

Indeed there were, but unfortunately Styron was still fuming. The Third Questioner remarked he or she gathered that Styron considered *Gone With the Wind* a failure. “You must be crazy,” Styron shouted; “I didn’t say any such thing” (Transcript, 139). He admired the book, calling it remarkable but not great: “You misunderstood me.”

Woodward, seeing Styron rattled, cut off any further exchange and recognized yet a Fourth Questioner, clearly hoping for the best. His hopes were dashed.

This person talked about the projected film version of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a movie that was ultimately never made. He accused Styron of having “put down” the young man, probably the Second Questioner: “I’m very sorry Mr. Ellison didn’t read your book. . . . I think that intellectually you would have had a little bit more trouble with Mr. Ellison” (Transcript, 140). Once again, the Fourth Questioner upheld Warren’s use of history in fiction, though Warren remained silent. The questioner turned to Ellison and claimed that he also disguised his characters. To which Ellison responded, “I made them up. They were all me” (Transcript, 140).

The questioner then directed his remarks to Ellison: “Would you fictionalize Malcolm [X], or would you feel free to say, well . . .” (Transcript, 140-41). Ellison’s come-back was stunning: “I would be ashamed to tell the truth about Malcolm in fiction” (Transcript, 141). The questioner was nonplused. Ellison reprimanded him: “You throw too many things at me at once, when you’re really bouncing them off me to hit Bill” (Transcript, 141). He went on to say that the question was actually about what art should attempt to be doing.

Here Ellison revealed that, while he might not have read Styron's novel, he certainly *had* read *Ten Black Writers Respond*: "I point out that two of the ten critics tried to stick to the literary, to the artistic problems involved. . . . Damn it, there is a *problem* about recreating historical figures. That's why I said it's poison to the novelist; he shouldn't bother them. Don't appropriate the names. Don't move into the historian's arena, because you can only be slaughtered there. But you can also be very, very powerful, and I think that this should not be missed: this book, whatever its literary qualities—and I will stand up for Bill's personal qualities and his . . ." (Transcript, 142). The reason he would not write about Malcolm X was because "it would destroy the myth, and this myth is a valuable myth" (Transcript, 142). He would not want Styron to do it either: "There is a world of fiction, and there's a world of politics" (Transcript, 142).

Woodward, probably gratefully, noted the clock and decided to take only one more question. The questioner referred back to Ellison's earlier comment that Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* was not rounded enough. Did Ellison think this was a failure of Twain's creative imagination or of his historical imagination? Are they one in the same? Ellison responded that Jim was written out of the popular art form of the day, the Negro minstrel. As the questioner then pointed out, Twain's "creative imagination was limited in fact by the historical moment" (Transcript, 144). Ellison agreed, but also added that Twain would not have known the work of Walter Scott and Tolstoy and have encountered ways to do it better. Also, Negroes would not have read it, while now, in 1968, everybody reads.

Woodward ended the session here, citing time constraints. He thanked the panelists and the audience.

So what is the upshot of all this? I have two analogies I think are valid. One is so familiar it need not be recounted at length, but the other is less so. Early in the 1990's Oliver Stone produced a film about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. *JFK* it was called. It was widely criticized for having "authenticated" a conspiracy plot long ago discredited. In 1966, Jim Garrison, then District Attorney in New Orleans, tried to pin the whole plot on the back of a local businessman named Clay Shaw. Many Americans, not wanting to believe that one man, Lee Harvey Oswald, could perpetrate so monumental a crime, accepted Garrison's theories religiously. Whether the Warren Commission Report is "history" or not (most disbelieve it), certainly Garrison's was not. His theory fell apart day by day, lives were ruined, and his own career was destroyed by the time Shaw was acquitted of Garrison's charges in 1969.

Stone, had he followed the Robert Penn Warren theory of the interrelationship of art and history, would have changed all the names, Kennedy's included, and shown how such an assassination conspiracy could be perpetrated against any American President. However, Oliver Stone did not. He "went by the book" of Garrison's discredited theory, misled a generation not yet born at the time of the Kennedy murder a quarter-century earlier, and tried to convince them that *this* was the way it was. Film critics howled in protest, but still Stone's film stood for some as *the* answer. People of my own generation, in their late-teens or early-twenties in 1963, often bought this as well. Stone had committed the same "sin" as Styron, only more so. Whatever Styron's imagination told him about Nat Turner, Stone rested a three-hour film upon something that had been proven erroneous. Was Stone simply not old enough to recall the disgrace of Jim Garrison? I'm trying to be as charitable to Stone as I can be.

But here is another, lesser-known analogy that again supports Robert Penn Warren's position on the relationship between art and history.

In 1998, A. Scott Berg published a best-selling biography of Charles Lindbergh, a book that won many prizes.¹⁰ Now, biography is a subset of history, or at least the reader assumes it to be. Earlier, in 1996, Mark Rydell had made a film entitled *Crime of the Century* about the Lindbergh kidnapping in 1932. It starred Stephen Rhea and Isabella Rossellini and was based on a book by Ludovic Kennedy. It was told, unlike Berg's biography, entirely from the point of view of Bruno Richard Hauptmann, the man executed for the crime in 1936. A key figure in the film was a friend of Hauptmann's named Isador Fisch.

Berg, writing history, handles Fisch this way: Fisch had been a friend of Hauptmann's in Germany, had become reacquainted with him in the United States, and had subsequently returned to Germany. He was suffering from a fatal illness. Again quoting Berg, according to Hauptmann's version, "Before leaving, he [Fisch] had stowed several containers for safekeeping, including a shoe box, on the top shelf of a broom closet in his [Hauptmann's] kitchen" (Berg, 300). The kitchen suffered rain damage during a storm, and Hauptmann discovered the shoe box—it contained \$40,000, ten thousand less than the Lindbergh ransom money. Because Fisch had owed Hauptmann \$7,000 and was now dead, Hauptmann had no qualms about taking at least that much for himself. Hauptmann suggested to the police that Fisch had taken the remaining \$10,000 to Germany with him. However, Berg writes "Fisch's family later reported that not only had Isador returned to them penniless, but over the next year they heard from several people from whom he had borrowed money" (Berg, 301).

Hauptmann's defense attorney, Edward J. Reilley, a known alcoholic who had never won a capital case, claimed that Isador Fisch was the same man who had appeared in the dark for the ransom money exchanges at both the Woodlawn (which was botched) and St. Raymond's cemeteries in the Bronx to receive it. Furthermore, it was testified at trial that an arrangement between Fisch and Hauptmann to purchase stocks dated from 1932 or 1933, and that most of the money was Hauptmann's because Fisch was essentially broke. How did Hauptmann, a \$2,000-a-year carpenter, come into such wealth all of a sudden, in the very year the Lindbergh ransom money was paid? This was known in the newspapers as the "Fisch story," and even Fisch's sister testified that he died with only 1500 German marks to his name. A dozen defense witnesses who were to testify in support of the "Fisch story" did not even answer their subpoenas. All this is from Berg's biography (318, 327, 328).

The film *The Crime of the Century* saw this differently, however. Hauptmann was the film's central character. He is portrayed as an immigrant grateful to be in America, hard-working, a family man whose only "flaw" was a belief in the possibility of getting rich quick in America—not at the race track, not by kidnapping, not by a life of any type of crime (though he had been convicted of stealing several times in Germany after World War I "when we were all desperate")—but on the stock market (!) which he hoped would recover from its crash three years before. Fisch was his expert, but Fisch managed to lose \$7,000 of Hauptmann's money.

The plot becomes predictable here. The film allows the viewer, even encourages him or her, to believe it was Fisch who kidnapped Lindbergh's baby, both to retrieve Hauptmann's \$7,000 and get a little for himself. At this point things entirely break down

in the film. Fisch had tuberculosis and was dying from it. How could he possibly climb up a home-made ladder to a second-story window, shinny through it, snatch the baby, carry him down the ladder, and flee into the woods? This is what the producer would have the viewer believe, however! Things get worse. Hauptmann, a carpenter, would probably have *owned* his own ladder and not have had to construct a hand-made one. Even if he did not possess such a necessary implement, surely he had the skill to build a proper ladder, not one that would break in his descent. (There is a theory, that even Berg speculates on, that the Lindbergh baby was actually killed when the ladder broke and was either dropped by the kidnapper or smashed into the side of the house in the perpetrator's attempt to regain his balance [Berg, 273]). The baby's body was found in a shallow grave near the Lindbergh property two-and-one-half months later.

So how does all this relate to the use art, especially literature, can make of history? According to Warren, the writer must tell a similar, even parallel, story but change the names and some of the circumstances lest, as Ellison said to the Fourth Questioner, the writer get "slaughtered" by historical fact (Transcript, 142). William Styron in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* had not followed this principle. In fact, like the movie *JFK*, his version has *become* the Nat Turner that the general public knows. Other records are simply too skimpy to suffice. This, I think, is what the "ten black writers" and at least four of the five questioners at the session were so upset and annoyed about.

Of my two analogies, that of Oliver Stone can be discarded out of hand. But Berg, in attempting to write history, must bring us back to Woodward's statement at the start of the 1968 session: "An historian stands in no less need of imagination than the novelist; if anything he needs rather more" (Transcript, 115). Berg, based on the *facts* available to him, concludes that Hauptmann was indeed the kidnapper and killer. While there is some evidence that does not "fit"—that nasty matter of the broken ladder, say—there is too much that does. He does not make a judgment, though his reader can infer what his judgment would be. Rydell, the director of *Crime of the Century*, pushes much harder to have the viewer accept his thesis that in executing Hauptmann the authorities got the wrong man. While he does not *say* the killer was Isador Fisch, he all but compels his audience to infer it.

I think Robert Penn Warren would say that Rydell would have been better served, and better served his viewers if he had drawn a parallel case to the Lindbergh kidnapping: an American hero whose young son is kidnapped and murdered in a nefarious plot—the Hauptmann equivalent tangentially near it—to create the sympathy for the falsely accused that Rydell attempts to create for Bruno Richard Hauptmann. He could even have his American hero, as Lindbergh did, perjure himself on the witness stand to see "justice" done.¹¹ By not doing this, Rydell had to invent too much that was inconsistent with the evidence of the Lindbergh case. But, as Styron's Second Questioner implied, such an alternative story would not "*sell*" (Transcript, 137).

I have to return to a remark Ralph Ellison made that November evening in 1968 in New Orleans. When a novelist tampers with historical fact, he or she "can only be slaughtered there" (Transcript, 142). This is why Robert Penn Warren created Willie Stark. As he said in his 1953 Introduction to *All the King's Men*, "Willie Stark was not Huey Long. Willie was only himself, whatever that self turned out to be, a shadowy wraith or a blundering human being."¹² William Styron chose another course.

[Convert endnotes to footnotes on appropriate pages. –Editors]

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- ¹James L. W. West, III, *William Styron: A Life* (New York: Random House, 1998), 154.
- ²Michael West, "An Interview with William Styron, 6 February 1977," in *Conversations with William Styron*, ed. James L. West III (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985), 221.
- ³West, III, *A Life*, 343.
- ⁴The full transcript of this session was printed in the *Southern Literary Journal* 1 (spring 1969), 57-90. It is reprinted in West, III, *Conversations*, 114-44. This quotation is on page 122. Hereafter, all citations will be in parentheses in the text and refer to the West, III page numbers preceded by the word "Transcript."
- ⁵John K. Crane, *The Root of All Evil: The Thematic Unity of William Styron's Fiction* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984).
- ⁶John K. Crane, *The Legacy of Ladysmith* (New York: Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1986; New York: Penguin Books, 1987).
- ⁷October 17, 1989. Epicentered closer to San Jose than to San Francisco, as was reported at the time.
- ⁸West, III, *A Life*, 393.
- ⁹John Henrik Clarke, ed. *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).
- ¹⁰A. Scott Berg, *Lindbergh* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1998).
- ¹¹Lindbergh had told police investigating the case that he could not possibly recognize the voice of the man in the darkness to whom he delivered the ransom money—the man had only spoken two words. Under oath, however, he testified that it had definitely been Hauptmann's.
- ¹²Quoted in Charles H. Bohner, *Robert Penn Warren*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, no. 69 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1964), 86.