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Dead Man Walking: Nat Turner, William Styron, Bruce Springsteen, and the Death Penalty

IN A 1968 INTERVIEW, WILLIAM STYRON DISCUSSED THE POSSIBILITY THAT *The Confessions of Nat Turner* might be read in ways other than “as a strict rendition of the history of slavery” in America. “In every time, every era we live in, people seek intellectually in books for different things,” he continued. “Obviously, the thing that is closest to us at this moment is the agony of the race problem. So therefore, quite clearly, the book has seized on people’s imaginations for that reason” (Barzelay and Sussman 96). The book may never be viewed without race at the forefront. Whether or not Nat Turner’s “problems,” “residual Puritanism,” “idiom,” and “peculiarly frontier sort of experience” are “truly American” (97), as Styron went on to say of his fictional recreation, his character and circumstances are inextricable from the fact that he is a black slave in a racist society. Moreover, in Michelle Alexander’s view, it’s not just an “uncomfortable truth” that “racial differences will *always* exist among us” (243). It’s also that “the basic structure” of American society has changed less, despite the evolution from slavery through segregation and the Civil Rights movement to the Obama presidency, than the language used “to justify it” (2). Looking back on the novel decades after I first read it, for instance, I am struck by a fact that I gave little thought to on previous readings: Nat Turner is on death row. We witness his final thoughts as he reflects on his short life before being killed by the state. He views his actions as war crimes. If he also sees them as sins, then that is a personal matter. After rebelling against oppression, he has been hunted down, captured, and convicted, so far as the state of Virginia in 1831 is concerned, of an act of terrorism that has led to the murder of fifty-five people. To focus on this is to open up an area of discussion about *The Confessions* that, half a century on from its publication, feels all the more relevant, and yet for decades has been largely ignored. To do this, I will consider the novel with reference to some of Styron’s key European influences, namely Stendhal, Fyodor Dostoevsky, George Orwell, Albert Camus, and Arthur Koestler, as well

as to Richard Wright as a twentieth-century American novelist concerned with oppression and punishment, and to a contemporary artistic commentator on the social justice system, Bruce Springsteen.

In the novel, Styron underlines that the execution of Nat Turner was not about justice but a predetermined act of vengeance, and an attempted consolidation of the logic of slavery as a crude commercial enterprise. As what Styron's fictional version of Thomas Gray, author of "*The Confessions of Nat Turner*," relishes calling "*an-i-mate* chattel," Turner is capital and receives capital punishment (20). One way Styron illustrates the corruptness of the legal procedures is by having Gray, as Turner's supposed representative, treat the law as a mechanism serving the white perspective on "the killing spree" rather than as a true investigation of facts in the name of justice (Woodard 89).¹ Turner asks Gray if his fellow insurrectionists have had trials. "Trial?" replies Gray. "Hell, we had a million trials. Had a trial pretty near every day. September and this past month, we had trials runnin' out our ears" (18). As for Turner's own trial, Gray assures him that it's timetabled for "next Sattidy," after which he will be "hung by the neck until dead" (22). But Styron also illustrates state vengeance and the underscoring of Turner as capital by placing a brief statement at the end of the novel, taken from a second historical source, Thomas Drewry's *The Southampton Insurrection* (1900). From this, the reader learns that Nat Turner's body was "delivered to the doctors, who skinned it and made grease of the flesh." "[A] money purse" was "made of his hide," and "His skeleton was for many years in the possession of Dr. Massenberg, but has since been misplaced." Such treatment of an executed prisoner has, of course, nothing to do with justice. It's an assertion of ownership and the principle of profit, viciously, vengefully and symbolically enacted to satisfy white anger and set an example to further would-be rebels.

¹Woodard states that not only is there "no memorial to commemorate" Turner's "life and his efforts to free enslaved persons of the region," but that "Outside the historical society in the center of town, there is a colonial-era house that stands on a raised brick foundation behind a sign that reads: 'This is the last house on the killing spree of Nat Turner and his men.'" It's not clear when Woodard, who died in 2008, visited Courtland, but, for the record, when I was there in September 2010, the sign in front of the house described it as "the last house on the insurrection scene where anyone was killed." There was no reference to a "killing spree," but nor was there any reference to the deaths of slaves in the wake of the insurrection.

The arguments ever since the novel's publication have tended to focus on Styron's use of history and interpretation of sources. John Henrik Clarke's *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), without any apparent irony on the part of the editor, does include one white "contributor"; it reproduces Gray's document in entirety. Presumably, the point of doing so is to show how Styron departed from it, just as Styron's reason for including an excerpt is to alert readers to the primary historical source from which he would indeed depart as and when his imagination dictated. Whether departure from the source matters is a moot point. On the one hand, Gray provides factual detail. On the other hand, his is an apologist tract to justify Turner's execution and implicitly the lynching of untold number of slaves in the wake of the insurrection. Styron portrays Gray in a generally unflattering light and as a racist southerner of his time, though with the redeeming features of intelligence and some sympathy for the prisoner. But as for Styron's inclusion of the passage from Drewry, it barely receives a mention in *Ten Black Writers* and, with the extensive exception of Vincent Woodard's exploration in *The Delectable Negro* of the violation as a complex mixture of homoeroticism, cannibalism, and literal consumerism, has rarely been the focus of other commentators. The details of how the Southampton County authorities desecrated Turner's corpse with the kind of calculated barbarism developed into an industry by the Nazis a century later show the true motive behind his execution to be, not justice, but part of the white authorities' determination, in Woodard's words, "to dishonor Turner, disfigure him, and make of his person and legacy a monstrosity," not least to deflect "attention away from the real, brutal circumstances of slavery that initiated Turner's revolt" (90). Nor, in transforming Turner's skin into a container for cash, did they, again like the Nazis, intend to lose out on making final use of this chattel.²

²For further exceptions, see Ernest Kaiser, Mary Kemp Davis, and Albert E. Stone. Kaiser describes Styron's reference in "This Quiet Dust" to Drewry's "bestial descriptions" as "unnecessary" and claims that Styron "seems to relish the horrible details" of white behavior (54). Davis refers to Drewry's "additional details about the harvesting of Turner's body parts," and the fact that "Both William Styron and Daniel Panger end their novels with versions of this tale" (279). Stone notes Styron's coda, stating that "Whether fact or legend, this grisly detail nails Nat Turner into American history and its white racist ideology at the same time as it establishes an analogy between slavery and Nazi concentration camps like Buchenwald" (100).

Why the ten black writers barely refer to this is an interesting question. Styron's inclusion of it provides clear evidence of the true nature of even the less oppressive forms of slavery. Why not point to it as a detail of white atrocity even in Virginia? One reason might be that it fits ill with the purpose of the volume, which, in arguing, in Vincent Harding's words, for Turner's "stature and meaning" (25) as "a heroic black leader" (28), is to refute the idea that Styron had any license to write the novel, got anything very much right, or was anything more than an unreconstructed southerner who had produced, in a comment on the novel that Alice Walker gives a character in her story, "Source," another "racist best seller" (165). A further likely reason is simply that the tensions of the time were such that Turner's execution, and the dismemberment and recycling of parts of his corpse for white satisfaction or general function, failed to register as a point worth discussing, whether in terms of Styron's novel, the society of the time, the notion of meditating on history, or any differences between American society in 1831 and the later part of the twentieth century. Woodard offers a third possible reason: that, given the complex motives for such behavior, and the implications in terms of male psychology, it was really too disturbing to contemplate let alone discuss. Such details, added to the provocatively nuanced portrayal of Turner's sexuality, meant that "Styron's *The Confessions* and the debate that surrounded it clarified, like no moment before had, why black people have maintained a tight-lipped silence on the subject of homoeroticism under slavery" (172). For Woodard, "This subtle level of discourse was lost upon and completely ignored in the prevailing black commentary and debates that centered on Styron's novel" (193) and not least because "The image of Turner as consumed by whites did not fit into this model of the sacred black heroic figure" (179).

Much as it may tell us about antebellum society, the coda about the mutilation of Turner's corpse also tells us a fair bit about Styron's influences, perspectives, and aims. This brings us to the writers mentioned earlier, from Stendhal to Springsteen. There are two aspects of this that seem important. One is the actuality of capital punishment as opposed to the abstractions of euphemism. The other has less to do with what is gained by capital punishment—we can assume vengeance and a misplaced confidence that it will deter and so control other criminals or dissidents—than the question of what oppression coupled with the example of extreme punishment for behavior connected with that oppression does to the psychology of the oppressors and the

oppressed. Alexander's deeply disturbing statistics, moreover, leave little room for doubt that Styron's subject of a man executed for a desperate and bloody insurrection against enslavement has perhaps even more resonance in the twenty-first century than it had in the 1960s. In particular, the elision of Turner as black and Turner as criminal, in assessing him as a human being, strikes a doleful chord. With literally millions of US citizens, predominantly but not exclusively people of color, either in prison or "under correctional control" (Alexander 101), and so deprived for life as felons of basic rights, mostly in the name of a war on drugs that would seem to target these specific communities, Styron's vision of *The Confessions* being read as a story of a "quest for faith and certitude in a pandemonious world, symbolized by bondage, oppression and so on," rather than "as a strict rendition of the history of slavery" in America, might just come true (Barzelay and Sussman 96).³

To consider these particular influences on *The Confessions*, Camus, Orwell, and Koestler are all writers Styron saw as having had an extensive impact on the direction of his career. None of them writes about American slavery but all write about oppression and capital punishment. They "tried to grab the issues" that Styron felt mattered. "All writing is important when it's good," he said, "but there's an added dimension when it tries to grapple with these virtually incomprehensible things that go on in history" ("Appendix Conversations" 222). Some of their pertinent writing he would have come across when he read "the available literature on capital punishment" in preparation for an essay for *Esquire* at the start of the sixties (West 320). He refers in "Transcontinental with Tex," an account of visiting the Cook County Jail in Chicago with Rose Styron and Terry Southern in 1964, to having "undergone a recent conversion about capital punishment, transformed

³Alexander's argument is that, even though studies show that "People of all races use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates," and that "whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in illegal drug dealing than people of color" (99), the war on drugs has consciously or unconsciously been orchestrated in such a way as to catch and punish particular communities disproportionately, making criminals of such citizens for crimes perpetrated by the "clear majority of Americans of all races," presidents included (104). While officially colorblind, the criminal justice system labels blacks criminals and "then engage[s] in all the practices . . . supposedly left behind" (2). She calls this "the New Jim Crow." The case of Steven Avery, the subject of the American web television series, *Making a Murderer*, first streamed on Netflix on December 15, 2015, serves as a reminder that the criminal justice system swallows up white individuals, too, if not in the same ratio.

from a believer—albeit a lukewarm believer—into an ardent opponent” (*My Generation* 488).

In *Darkness Visible*, he calls Camus “a great cleanser” of his intellect. Most notably, “Reflections on the Guillotine” convinced him “of the essential barbarism of capital punishment” (21). Camus focuses in that essay both on the inhumanity of the death penalty and on its dubious consequences in terms of its effect on witnesses and criminals alike. He argues “that society itself does not believe in the exemplary value it talks about . . . that there is no proof that the death penalty ever made a single murderer recoil,” that “it constitutes a repulsive example, the consequences of which cannot be foreseen,” and that any suggestion that it can set an example is negated by the fact that “instead of taking place publicly,” executions have for many decades in the West been conducted “before a limited number of specialists” (130). As for the event itself, hidden under euphemism’s “verbal cloak” (128), Camus writes of his father, in Algiers in 1914, witnessing the beheading of a man who “had slaughtered a family.” He never told anyone what he saw. According to Camus’s mother, “he came rushing home, his face distorted, refused to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit” (127).

In turn Orwell, in “A Hanging,” provides a ghastly, firsthand description of capital punishment, from the response of a dog that strays into the proceedings to the way the prisoner steps “slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path” to the gallows. Implicit in this image is both the psychological effect on those who live under the threat of execution and those who, directly or indirectly, witness or condone it. He records how he and other onlookers became so unhinged by the experience that they ended up laughing at the idea of someone having to pull on a dying person’s legs to complete the killing. The puddle moment brings home to him “what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man” (16).

When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working—bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming—all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same

world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less. (16)

The dog cannot reflect in such eloquent terms, but its reaction is no less telling. Having been racing around wagging its tail, at the sight of the corpse it retreats to stand among the weeds in the corner of the yard, “looking timorously” at those responsible (17).

Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1941) impressed Styron for its “rigorous view of evil” (“Appendix Conversations” 223). In the novel, Koestler depicts the solitary pain of an ex-Commissar of the People, N. S. Rubashov, whose life he describes as “a synthesis of the lives of a number of men who were victims of the so-called Moscow Trials” (front matter n.p.). Koestler knew several of these men and dedicates the book to their memory. As soon as officials of the People’s Commissariat of the Interior arrest Rubashov he realizes that he will stay in an isolation cell until execution. Not unlike Camus’s own novel of the same period, *The Outsider* (1942), and *The Confessions* itself, *Darkness at Noon* follows the prisoner’s thoughts as he faces capital punishment. But Koestler, unlike Camus or Styron, depicts the actual moment of death. The novel ends as shots disintegrate Rubashov’s consciousness. “A second, smashing blow” hits him on the ear. All becomes quiet. He hears “the sea again with its sounds.” A wave slowly lifts him, coming from afar and traveling on sedately, “a shrug of eternity” (216).

Such material raises other rarely discussed aspects of *The Confessions*: the actual effect on Turner—in life or in Styron’s version—of witnessing brutality, including his mother’s treatment as a sexual object by the overseer, McBride; of recognizing, after being the subject of Samuel Turner’s favor, his actual “value” in the society, and then in the insurrection itself of seeing beheadings, of killing Margaret Whitehead, and of knowing of the imminence of his own predetermined death. Styron’s surmise is that the witnessing and perpetrating of murder dissipates the momentum of the insurrection. The testimony of these writers forced Styron, and forces us, to consider the full horror of unnatural death. They make it obvious that Turner’s reaction is psychologically more than merely plausible in an intelligent, sensitive, empathic human being. *The Confessions*, revisited through this lens, is all the more plainly a melding of historical facts and literary precedent.

The tradition of scrutinizing the death penalty by dramatizing the mind-set of the condemned reaches both back into literary history and

forward to our present. The condemned Claudio states in anguish, in *Measure for Measure*, that “the weariest and most loathed worldly life that age, ache, penury or imprisonment can lay on nature is a paradise to what we fear of death” (III, I, 127-30). Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* thinks, “to live! No matter how” (152). But particularly pertinent to *The Confessions*, for me, are *The Red and the Black* and *Native Son*. Like Camus, Koestler, and Styron, Stendhal and Wright focus on the mind-set of the condemned. Julien Sorel expresses widely varying emotions in his death cell in *The Red and the Black*, not least the coldly logical. “And what shall I be left with,” he asks, “if I despise myself?” (526). Bigger Thomas makes contradictory assertions. “I don’t want to die,” he exclaims (Wright 392), yet his “will to kill” ultimately includes a desire to consume himself (304). Although Styron conceived of his novel’s architecture having read *The Outsider*, where Meursault is all but posthumous in his anticipation of execution, Stendhal, too, has Julien contemplate his life in the face of the guillotine. Convicted to die despite not actually killing his former lover, Madame de Rênal, he refuses to try to save himself and verbally attacks the bourgeoisie, who are outraged when faced with “a peasant who has rebelled against his lowly lot” (501). This example, along with *The Confessions*, points unerringly at another function of the death penalty, according to Camus in “Reflections on the Guillotine”: its use as an instrument of “intimidation” (141) and “retaliation” (142) by the ruling class against the lowest classes and lowest perceived ethnic groups.

Richard Wright, of course, entwines the issue of class with that of race. According to James L. W. West III, for all Styron’s reading up on the death penalty in order to write his *Esquire* essay, he found that he needed “a case study” to humanize the narrative (321). The subsequent essay therefore, focusing on a real inmate, became “The Death-in-Life of Benjamin Reid.” West notes that the “Benjamin Reid case almost surely had some effect on Styron’s thinking as he prepared to write his novel,” and not least in terms of the “image of Reid” in his cell, “meditating on his childhood and contemplating the murder.” This would in turn have triggered in Styron “Larger questions about slavery and imprisonment—about their effects on the captive and on the society that holds him in prison,” and his understanding of “links between the antebellum South” and his own “contemporary but not necessarily more enlightened” society (West 323). But one would think, too, that his experience at the Cook County Jail in “Transcontinental with Tex,” where the black

warden, Captain Boggs, introduces the electric chair and asks the visitors “if they’d care to set down,” would have reinforced his awareness of *Native Son* as a literary precedent (*My Generation* 489). Fictional though Bigger Thomas is, they are after all in the very jail, and perhaps before the very chair, that Richard Wright makes his protagonist’s final destination.

Wright’s novel offers a bleak depiction not only of what it means to feel you are “black and at the bottom of the world” (179-80), in a society where capital punishment is a ready weapon of social control, but also of how that combination of socially-engineered low self-worth and desperate economic conditions can fuel a psychology of hatred and fear, an end result of which can all too easily be violence. Moreover, violence against others is only one part of a cocktail that can include a desire for oblivion, and so perversely render the death penalty as a way out of a cordoned-off existence. It’s striking on reading *Native Son* with *The Confessions* in mind to observe how frequently the words “dread,” “scared,” and “fear” appear. For all the accusations in *Ten Black Writers* that, in Lerone Bennett’s words, Turner is portrayed as something other than a “virile, commanding, courageous figure” (5), he expresses little in the way of fear. In contrast, Bigger Thomas, though like Styron’s Turner in expressing hatred, is a desperate figure for whom “hate and fear” are rarely separate emotions (Wright 374).

But the most important aspect of Bigger’s psychological makeup would seem to be the way that committing crime makes him feel. Through killing he feels he has “created a new world for himself” (272). The “accidental murder” of Mary throws him into a position where he senses “a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him.” Accepting “moral guilt and responsibility for that murder” leaves him feeling “free for the first time in his life” (304). He realizes, just as Styron shows with Nat Turner, that white society has not merely “resolved to put him to death” but is “determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment.” He knows, moreover, that this has as much to do with their view of him “as a figment of that black world” they fear and are so “anxious to keep under control,” as with his actual behaviour (306). As his Marxist lawyer, Max, sums up, Bigger’s “entire attitude toward life is a *crime!* The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence” (426).

Alexander echoes that sentiment in the twenty-first century. “Practically from cradle to grave,” she writes, “black males in urban ghettos are treated like current or future criminals” (162). Only violence leaves Bigger feeling self-determined, since “*He* had done this,” and so brought about “the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him” (270). Such feelings go some way to explaining how, in Alexander’s words on our own times, gangsta culture enables young black men to put on “a show—a spectacle—that romanticizes and glorifies their criminalization” (174). All such activities have their “roots in the struggle for a positive identity among outcasts” (175).

Finally, in a series of links from Stendhal through *The Confessions*, not least among them Camus’s point about class, we come to Bruce Springsteen and his preoccupation with the blue-collar communities of his youth. Whether or not Springsteen knows *The Red and the Black*, *Native Son*, *The Confessions*, Camus, or Koestler, he knows the musical equivalents—from Robert Johnson’s “Hellhound on My Trail,” through Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” to John Fogerty’s “Fortunate Son”—and has continued the concerns evident in Styron’s novel. Moreover, he is evidently “quite a student”—as he admitted to Robert Santelli when the latter expressed amazement at his shelves of books—and especially of Dostoevsky and Orwell (426). The victim of a mock execution, Dostoevsky is unique among these writers in being able to depict from firsthand experience what it actually feels like to expect imminent death by execution. Orwell, in turn, not only witnessed executions during his time in Burma, but was shot through the neck during the Spanish Civil War.⁴ Springsteen’s interest in violence and social oppression goes back to *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, and more tangentially to *Born to Run*, and his interest in the death penalty in particular goes back to the start of the eighties, with “Nebraska” and “Johnny 99,” on *Nebraska*, as well as being reprised with “Dead Man Walkin’,” written for the soundtrack of Tom Robbins’s film *Dead Man Walking* (1993), based on Sister Helen Prejean’s account of comforting death row inmates in the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola) and included on *The Essential Bruce Springsteen*. Criminal lawyer Abbe

⁴See “Bruce Springsteen: By the Book” and Steve Kandell (323, 326). Butler, of Canadian band Arcade Fire, gives Springsteen a copy of Orwell’s *Why I Write*, which contains “A Hanging.” Orwell describes being shot in *Homage to Catalonia*. “Roughly speaking,” he writes, “it was the sensation of being *at the centre* of an explosion” (177).

Smith describes it as “one of the best songs ever written about being on death row” (789).

Springsteen’s interventions further illustrate that, together with being a neglected area of criticism in terms of Styron’s preoccupations in *The Confessions*, the question of capital punishment is at least as pertinent now as when the novel appeared. It thus helps the novel continue to resonate, showing indeed, as Styron observes in his Author’s Note, that “The relativity of time allows us elastic definitions: the year 1831 was, simultaneously, a long time ago and only yesterday.” The past has no monopoly on barbarism, nor is it necessarily “a foreign country,” where they do things all that differently.⁵ But, of course, the novel came out at a singular moment, and not merely in terms of “the charged, pivotal 1960s” we think of in terms of Civil Rights and Black Power (Woodard 173). In the year of the novel’s publication, a national moratorium on the death penalty came into effect. Only in 1972 did the Supreme Court strike down all statutes in the country, and only in 1979 did a state, Florida, perform an involuntary execution (the 1977 Utah execution of Gary Gilmore—brother of Springsteen critic Mikal Gilmore—being voluntary). This might further explain why the controversy surrounding the novel was largely silent about the fact that this was a fictionalized account of a real man sent to his death as punishment for waging war against his and his people’s enslavement. Whatever number Turner’s execution was of the 1,388 Virginia executions since Captain George Kendall in 1608 and Robert Gleason in 2013, in 1967 the death penalty appeared to have been consigned to American history. The controversy focused, instead, on Styron’s portrayal of Nat Turner’s personality, sexuality, masculinity, and attraction to and for Margaret Whitehead.

To dwell on such matters rather than on the mutual brutality racism produces feels quaint. For in retrospect it would seem that Styron’s aim was to give his version of Turner a complex personality distorted, just as Gray’s is, by the society he lived in and the position he had little hope of escaping. The fact is that what he faced in 1831, many still face: whether specifically in terms of slavery by other names, or poverty, dispossession, and no apparent choice but to turn to criminality. Alexander’s book is far from a lone voice, whether one looks in the direction of the national organization Black Lives Matter or at the concerns of contemporary

⁵The opening line of L.P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between* is: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (9).

writers. “[H]ardly to our credit,” writes Joyce Carol Oates in her introduction to *Prison Noir*, a collection of inmates’ writing she has edited, “the United States locks up nearly 25 percent of the world’s prison population, while having only 5 percent of the world’s overall population. Or, in other terms, the United States incarcerates more than 2.2 million individuals, a far higher rate per capita than any other nation” (14). Alexander reminds us how much of an increase this has been—“from around 300,000 to more than 2 million” in “less than thirty years,” and with “drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase” (6).

The brain cannot process such numbers when trying to imagine the effect on so many lives. But the questions Styron’s portrayal raises, and that Stendhal, Orwell, Koestler, Camus, and Wright raised before him with regard to the death penalty, Bruce Springsteen still raises: how does it feel to have no choice? How does it feel to be invisible? How justifiable are the state’s actions? How different are those who commit crimes, including murder, from those who do not? Alexander addresses head on the fact that, for many people, it’s not racial hostility that prevents understanding but “racial indifference” (14), and the fiction that “a vast gulf exists between ‘criminals’ and those of us who have never served time in prison” (216). Abbe Smith writes of how it’s precisely because Springsteen “identifies with the common criminal” and “writes songs about the damaged, the dispossessed, the poor, the prisoner,” that he provides such a service (789). Writing in 2005, Smith anticipates Alexander, detailing how “Since the 1970s, when mandatory sentencing swept the United States, sending more men and women to prison than ever before and for longer periods of time,” “more than 2 million people” have been locked up (790), and “more than 5.6 million” have been “in prison or have served time” (791). “Thirteen million,” he writes, have been “convicted of a felony,” which amounts to “almost 7 percent” of the population. “If all of these people were placed on an island together,” he notes, “that island would have a population larger than many countries, including Sweden, Bolivia, Senegal, Greece, or Somalia” (791). A “disproportionate number” of these inmates have been “poor and nonwhite” (792). We live, Smith explains, in a “very punitive time,” and “Most people want to lock up all criminals, throw away the key” (794). This is why he is so impressed that “Springsteen tells stories about people who have committed crime from their perspective, unflinchingly and without judgment” (798).

Springsteen's own perspective helps explain both what he tries to do, and the spirit of what Styron tries to do in *The Confessions*. "You're laying claim to that character's experience and you're trying to do right by it," he says. "You're taking the risk of singing in that voice." But "the writer's job" is to "imagine the world and others' lives in a way that respects them," honoring them from one's own viewpoint (Zimny). Turn to Springsteen's death penalty songs and we see how he does this. Although inspired by the film *Badlands* (1973), loosely based on the murderous road trip of Charles Starkweather and Caril Fugate, Springsteen's narrator in "Nebraska" is his own creation. Like Styron with Nat Turner, he gives him a degree of sensitivity the original source may not have possessed. What is clear, however, is that the speaker, like the historical Starkweather, and Turner as depicted by Gray and Styron, absolutely fulfills Camus's delineation of the psychology of the condemned.

For centuries the death penalty, often accompanied by barbarous refinements, has been trying to hold crime in check; yet crime persists. Why? Because the instincts that are warring in man are not, as the law claims, constant forces in a state of equilibrium. They are variable forces constantly waxing and waning and their repeated lapses from equilibrium nourish the life of the mind as electrical oscillations, when close enough, set up a current. (137)

"For capital punishment to be really intimidating," he argues, "human nature would have to be different; it would have to be as stable and serene as the law itself." In other words, it "would be dead." The fact that "It is not dead" explains

why, however surprising this may seem to anyone who has never observed or directly experienced human complexity, the murderer, most of the time, feels innocent when he kills. Every criminal acquits himself before he is judged. He considers himself, if not within his right, at least excused by circumstances. (137)

Springsteen's "Nebraska" narrator tells the judge that he cannot apologize and that, "at least for a little while," he and his girl "had us some fun." Alternately respectful and sardonic, he asks that his girl be sitting on his lap when they release the current. As for why he did what he did, he has no explanation other than that "there's just a meanness in this world." We can take this line, adapted from one in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," to be a confession about his own nature or a

condemnation of the world that has shaped him, or both.⁶ But no less than Turner, he is full of self-justification, as are killers and oppressors the world over, inside or outside government.

In “Johnny 99,” a song influenced by Julius Daniels’s 1927 recording, “Ninety-Nine Year Blues,” Springsteen takes a different tack. This time we view the protagonist from the outside. Ralph is not a killer on the scale of Starkweather, nor is he on death row, though like Gary Gilmore he pleads for execution. He has lost his job, been unable to find another, and in a drunken stupor has shot a night clerk. Whether the victim has died is unclear, but Ralph is anything but a calculated criminal. He is desperate, waving his gun in the air after the shooting and threatening suicide. He gets ninety-nine years. Unlike the protagonist in “Nebraska,” Ralph’s explanation is extensive. Losing his job has meant mortgage problems. The bank is repossessing his house. He does not claim innocence, but he does claim justification and believes he would “be better off dead.” The song may not directly address race, but it’s obviously about class. It’s also about a man driven to extreme behavior by desperate circumstances and a loss of all the things that might provide esteem or lawful self-determination. Years later, in response to Dale Maharidge’s *Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of America’s New Underclass* (1985), Springsteen wrote “Youngstown.” The book and its photographs haunted him when he read it through a sleepless night. He understood these people as being similar to the kind he grew up with. The speaker in “Youngstown” states that when he dies he wants nothing to do with heaven. Having worked as a scarfer in a steel mill, now closed down, he knows he “would not do heaven’s work well,” and prays the devil come and take him “to the fiery furnaces of hell.” Ralph, in asking to be executed rather than given the eternity of life in prison, hopes for effectively the same thing.

Finally, “Dead Man Walkin’” is the closest Springsteen comes to a rendition of Nat Turner, as conceived by Styron, calling to mind, too, the end of *Native Son*. The speaker is in his cell on his last night. He will “rise in the morning,” his “fate decided.” He may or may not be alone. He refers to “mister” as well as to “sister,” perhaps a prison guard, his lawyer, a family member, or a nun, such as Helen Prejean. Either way, he

⁶“No pleasure but meanness,” says the murderer known as the Misfit (O’Connor 132). Springsteen cites O’Connor as an influence, especially on *Nebraska*, in *Born to Run* (298).

provides snippets of his childhood, if only to register the fact that he once had the ordinary things that others have, a job, a partner, but that “between our dreams and actions lies this world.” He will probably die by lethal injection. Like Styron’s version of Turner, and like Bigger Thomas, he feels numbness, and is haunted by memories of his victims, but forgiveness is beyond his seeking since his sins are all he has. We leave him, as we leave Nat Turner and Bigger Thomas, in the silence of his cell, with a new day coming, and his dreams full on his final night.

In its detail and sentiments, “Dead Man Walkin’” takes us beyond those earlier songs. The man’s drugged state when he shot the victims rings all too true. “Almost all the killings here in St. Thomas,” writes Prejean of the New Orleans housing project for poor black residents where she was working when asked to befriend a death row inmate in 1982, “seem to erupt from the explosive mixture of dead-end futures, drugs, and guns” (3-4). Springsteen’s 1993 song, compared with his earlier attempts, is a deeper version of the horrifying sense that we have, as we also do with Styron and these other writers, that a consciousness that contains a world is about to be obliterated. These men have killed; they have destroyed consciousnesses not unlike their own; they have destroyed minds and bodies, and therefore worlds. But for opponents of the death penalty that realization only adds to the obscenity of what it actually amounts to. Bigger Thomas, Nat Turner, and Springsteen’s speaker all echo Camus’s observation that “Every criminal acquits himself before he is judged,” at the very least “excused by circumstances” (137). Bigger Thomas feels free of fear when he kills and, in “refusing to accept the consolations of religion,” finds “recognition of his personality” (443). Turner decides that, with the exception of Margaret Whitehead, he “*would have done it all again*” (428). The Dead Man Walking clings to his criminality, not unlike Alexander’s explanation of gangsta culture, as his only possession. When we look at society in the second decade of the twenty-first century, with its forms of enslavement, its brutalities, and the desperate actions of desperate people, as well as the vindictiveness of some individuals and some governments, we might do well to join Styron in meditating on history. For all the joys of life, and all the technological advancements, and maybe even in certain ways the forms of tolerance and intercultural understanding that do exist, both 1831 and 1967 seem indeed “a long time ago and only yesterday.”

If these writers help us to contemplate such matters, readers and listeners might ask further questions. What is art for? Where and why

and when might art matter? Is art useful or futile? The view of Georg Lukács, writing about the novel form, was that art is most significant when it deals directly with the relationship between individuals and their historical moment. Styron often invoked Lukács, and felt that he only really thought well when he related his ideas to history.⁷ Peyton Loftis's story in *Lie Down in Darkness*, Nat Turner's story, and Sophie Zowistowska's story in *Sophie's Choice*, are what they are because of the character's historical moment. Styron's novels remain significant because they speak to far more than an individual's story. His view was that novels are only "of perennial value" when they "contain these other reverberations" (Barzelay and Sussman 96). For many readers, the older we get the less time we have to spend on reading fiction to hear another story of an interesting person per se. What tends to be more compelling is the way that the story of vividly-rendered characters creates meaning from the big events that affect us when they happen and for eras afterward.

That Styron's interests as a novelist are wedded to questions of historical significance is obvious not merely from *The Confessions* and *Sophie's Choice*, but also from James L. W. West III's 2015 compilation of the nonfiction, *My Generation*. In numerous essays in that volume, Styron meditates upon social, political, and historical issues, many of the kind his fiction dramatizes. Like his fiction, his nonfiction shows him to have been a kind of survivor: of childhood bereavement, of a racist brainwashing under southern apartheid, of World War II in the Pacific, and (though the book-length *Darkness Visible* is too large to be included in the volume) of clinical depression. As a factor and consequence of this, he produced a body of thoughtful, carefully crafted, compassionate material that now stands as a testimony to the art of writing and to art as a survival mechanism. He writes of his region that, educated on the banks of the James River, "you were apt to grow up with a ponderous sense of the American past" (63). Segregation was an ordinary fact of life for him and his friends. "Whatever knowledge I gained in my youth about Negroes I gained from a distance, as if I had been watching actors in an all-black puppet show" (71). In a very real sense, therefore, when he tackled the subject of Nat Turner, his shadow self in the same Tidewater region a century before, he was dealing not with foreign subject matter but with his own divided American self. He made a point

⁷See, for instance, Styron, "Appendix Conversations" (217, 224).

of knowing but not being hidebound by the facts. He knew that Turner's actions perpetuated slavery at a time when Virginia may have been edging closer to emancipation. But he also knew that he was inevitably writing, too, about his own time, and about race in America from Turner's day through the composition era of the novel, into the future. "The Death-in-Life of Benjamin Reid," along with two supplementary essays about the aftermath of his involvement with Reid, and a 1987 essay entitled "Death Row," speak directly to the death penalty. He writes of how men like Reid and Jack Henry Abbott suffered minds damaged by the fact that they were "in prison as *children*" (286). Clearly, his interest in these matters extended well beyond *The Confessions* and had to do with his determination to deal, by way of empathy, with matters pertinent to his time. The novel's architecture echoes Stendhal's, Koestler's, and Camus's novels, with the prisoner awaiting execution. But where they told their protagonists' stories in the third-person limited perspective, Styron opted for the first person. This was both the revolutionary aspect of his novel and one of the aspects that got him into most trouble with black intellectuals of the time. Yet, seen in retrospect, it's precisely the thing that combines his concern with race and with the death penalty.

I think of William James's revelation, in John J. McDermott's words, about "the diaphanous and utterly fragile character of the classically alleged, rock-bottom personal self" (142). Suffering from, as James puts it, "philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits," he recalled an epileptic patient he'd seen in an asylum, "a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them inclosing his entire figure." This image and James's low mood "entered into a species of combination with each other." James was compelled to admit to himself: "*That shape am I*, I felt, potentially" (McDermott 141). Thereafter, writes McDermott, he came to "doubt[] the existence of the traditional 'soul'" and opted "for a more free-flowing movement between the focus of one's own self and the fringe that we visit" (142).⁸ Styron, in turn, was deeply affected by his friendship with James Baldwin, who was very much his Other in being

⁸See McKenna and Pratt 161-72. They discuss McDermott's own contemporary pragmatist philosophy in more detail, and with regard to Springsteen.

black, homosexual, and the grandson of a slave. Styron was not only white and heterosexual but the grandson of a slave owner (his grandmother owning two girls). When he told Baldwin this, Baldwin “didn’t flinch,” writes Styron. “We both were writing about the tangled relations of blacks and whites in America, and because he was wise Jimmy understood the necessity of dealing with the preposterous paradoxes that had dwelled at the heart of the racial tragedy—the unrequited loves as well as the murderous furies” (*My Generation* 465). Styron understood his youthful indoctrination into segregation, but for all the obstacles of his upbringing, like Orwell and Springsteen, he made it his business to understand its implications.

In revisiting *The Confessions of Nat Turner* fifty years on, it’s remarkable, then, how little if at all the novel has become dated. This is partly because the era depicted was already history at the time of publication. It’s also partly because, while its themes are pertinent to the political and racial tensions of the 1960s, Styron refuses to compromise his vision in order to assuage the perspective of those who would want Nat Turner to be portrayed as an uncompromisingly “virile, commanding, courageous figure” (Bennett 5). But it’s also because Styron dramatizes a human being not just in the stream of history but sentenced to death. This puts his novel in a tradition stretching back to Shakespeare, Stendhal, and Dostoevsky, carried forward by the likes of Orwell, Camus, Koestler, and Wright, and still in evidence in the writing of Springsteen. Nat Turner’s historical moment is the era when slavery is reaching a barely discernable crisis point: his masters believe it to be benign, yet it’s proving in the long term not to be economically or, even for the owners, psychologically viable. The language and reality of America are at odds. Virginia is on the fault line between the free states and the slave states. Turner himself is on the fault line between freethinking and incarcerated thinking. He acts decisively, violently, brutally: he makes his leap for freedom. His society acts just as decisively, just as violently, just as brutally. While Turner loses his war, the great irony is that the South’s war is on the horizon, and they are just as bound to lose. But, irony on irony, the great hope of the time of the writing of the 1960s and early 1970s, that the Civil Rights movement would end once any legal apparatus that reinforced rather than protected people against prejudice was done away with (indeed, that the prison system

might, in Alexander's words, "soon fade away") has not come to pass (8).⁹ The example of Nat Turner, as an individual whose very psychology is created by the society in which he exists, whose very actions, in turning on that society, absolutely result from the way that society treats him as something other than fully human, is as pertinent today as it ever was. To quote another Springsteen song, "Wrecking Ball," "hard times come and hard time go" but "just to come again." For these reasons, and for its connection with the concerns of American and European writing past and present, the novel deserves its place in the continuity of art, and as "a meditation on history," of a kind that Lukács explained.

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⁹"[A]s recently as the mid-1970s," writes Alexander, "the most well-respected criminologists were predicting that the prison system would soon fade away" (8).

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