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# The Many Incarnations of Nat Turner

by *Elizabeth Beaulieu*

*Nat Turner Before the Bar of Judgment: Fictional  
Treatments of the Southampton Slave Insurrection.*  
By Mary Kemp Davis. Baton Rouge: Louisiana  
State UP, 1999. 298 pp. \$30.00

Near the end of her comprehensive study of literary portrayals of Nat Turner and the Southampton slave revolt of 1831, Mary Kemp Davis sums up her argument thus: “Styron ‘signifies’ upon Drewry’s Nat Turner; Sherley Anne Williams upon Styron’s Nat Turner; Mary Spear Tiernan upon G. P. R. James’s Nat Turner; Pauline Bouve upon Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Nat Turner; and Daniel Panger, like each of the novelists surveyed here, upon Thomas Ruffin Gray’s Nat Turner, and perhaps what he had glimpsed of Styron’s Nat Turner in *Harper’s* magazine. This signifying chain threatens to extend into infinity. And well it should” (278–279). As the list suggests, Nat Turner has intrigued many writers, and Mary Kemp Davis is no exception. Her study carefully traces the development of Nat Turner as a literary figure and an historical enigma.

The Southampton, Virginia slave insurrection lasted for two days in late August, 1831 and resulted in the deaths of approximately fifty-seven whites, mostly women and children. The event triggered widespread panic throughout Virginia and spread to most other slaveholding states as well. Twenty slaves received the death penalty for their participation in the revolt, and scores of others were put to death by whites seeking retribution. Turner himself, who remained at large for ten weeks, was sent to the gallows on November 11, 1831. The exact nature of the event is difficult to define. What motivated Nat Turner and his small band of followers is fascinating to speculate upon, and it becomes clear that the moral issue of slavery is what is at stake in every examination of Nat Turner and his actions.

At the center of Davis's study lies her contention that "although he [Turner] was tried and convicted on November 5, 1831, and executed on November 11, 1831, Nat Turner has been rearraigned, retried, and resented many times during the last century and a half as a succession of novelists has grappled with the moral issues raised by this (in)famous revolt" (3). Davis observes that while only two of the novels dramatize the trial itself, "Nat Turner is figuratively on trial in all of these novels whose center is the theme of judgment" (3). Beginning with the historical documents surrounding the Nat Turner case and moving to a consideration of six novels which portray Turner, Davis skillfully unwinds the threads of history and fiction responsible for all that we know of Nat Turner today.

Davis, in her first two chapters, takes as her focus the historical texts which resulted from the Southampton slave revolt. Chapter One, entitled "The Politics of Repression," analyzes then-Governor John Floyd's December 6, 1831 state of the state address to the Virginia legislature, which Davis reads as an attempt to control the image of Nat Turner and the revolt. Davis concentrates not so much on what Floyd says but on the critical gaps evident in the speech, most noticeably his complete omission of Turner's name and his silence on the moral issue of slavery in Virginia. Davis posits that Floyd's speech before the legislature may best be understood in the context of David Walker's *Appeal*, distributed in 1829 and considered by Virginia politicians a highly inflammatory document.

Chapter Two echoes the theme of omission Davis establishes in Chapter One. In this chapter Davis turns to other artifacts, namely trial transcripts, newspaper accounts, and Thomas Ruffin Gray's pamphlet *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, published in Baltimore prior to Governor Floyd's address. According to Davis, these are the "texts" of the revolt, and the contradictions they embody problematize the establishment of any authoritative version of the event. The thesis of her study emerges most clearly here: "Rather than certainty, these conflicting accounts invite skepticism (and artistic creativity)" (46). Like Floyd's speech, these texts "silence" the black voices; in the transcripts, Davis points out, the slaves do not speak except when testifying against other slaves.

Much of the chapter deals with Gray's *Confessions*, which emerged as the point of origin for the subsequent novels about Nat Turner. Serving as amanuensis for Turner in the days before his death, Gray portrays Turner as a religious fanatic, a portrait, Davis contends, carefully designed to "sedate" whites who became obsessed shortly after the revolt with con-

spiracy theories and overwhelming fears of repeat incidents. Davis thoroughly rehearses studies which question the authenticity of Gray's text but is careful not to let this point overshadow her own emphasis on the significance of Gray's work—accurate or otherwise—as the key source for the novels to come.

Chapters Three through Eight present the meat of Davis's study. In these chapters she turns to the fictional accounts of Turner that have been produced in the century and a half since the revolt: G. P. R. James's *the Old Dominion* (1856), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), Mary Spear Tiernan's *Homoselle* (1881), Pauline Carrington Rust Bouve's *Their Shadows Before* (1899), and two twentieth-century novels, Daniel Panger's *Ol' Prophet Nat* (1967) and the most well-known fictionalized portrait of Turner, William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). In each of these chapters, Davis provides a close reading of the text at hand, focusing especially on how the author utilizes, interprets, and revises the historical texts.

The value of Davis's study lies in her careful attention to these works; after critiquing the historical record, Davis demonstrates how it shapes each novel, how each novel both draws upon and interrogates the accounts which came before, and how each author, on a quest to portray accurately the elusive Turner and the troubled times in which he lived, ultimately issues his or her own verdict on the infamous case. Davis's reading of Styron is particularly thorough; she says of Styron that he "put an emasculated Nat Turner on trial, convicted him of moral blindness, and sent him, penitent, to Judgment" (235). Davis uses Styron's own essays on the novel to contextualize her analysis and again adopts narrative erasure as her means of entrance into the text under examination. Her extended interpretation of Styron's incorporation of the figure of Margaret Whitehead (the only victim killed by Turner's own hand) is compelling.

The title for Davis's final chapter, "The Rest Is Not Silence," is indeed apt; Davis has effectively argued that much has been said, and remains to be said, about that "most cryptic 'text' of all—Nat Turner" (241). In her concluding remarks, Davis turns briefly to Sherley Anne Williams's 1986 novel *Dessa Rose*, self-described by Williams as a conscious response to and revision of Styron's *Confessions*. Davis's observations here warrant further development; too often Styron's work is once again foregrounded. But the work concludes playfully with the tidbits of Turner trivia presented, connections Davis unravels among the Turner texts, even as they extend to Turner's life, death, and mys-

teriously missing bones. One senses that this is material Davis stumbled upon but was not able to fit elsewhere in her study, but the observations are so interesting that it does not seem to matter that they appear tacked on. The ending vignette, in fact, is a metaphor for the entire study; Davis has argued that the “real” Nat Turner will never be fully known or fully understood, even if his missing skeleton should mysteriously turn up.