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REVIEW-ESSAY

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This Quiet Dust Swirls Back to Life

I READ THE SIX HUNDRED PAGES OF *MY GENERATION: COLLECTED Nonfiction* during a visit to Bucharest. Sitting each evening in an Old Town café I'd have appeared solitary and still. In fact I was all over the world, enjoying the eloquent companionship of William Styron, essayist. I'd glance up from my whiskey sours at the chiaroscuro of the reclaimed buildings and cobbled streets yet also see other times and other places. Skillfully edited by James L. W. West III, *My Generation* provides a constantly entertaining, provocative mental journey. Styron was fond of saying that he valued being able in his novels to transport readers to another world, and he does so through rhythm, verbal acumen, and carefully placed information. Thanks to his mastery of the art of the essay, I found myself in the 1930s gazing through a classroom window at "one of the broadest estuaries of any river in America" and thinking back to the early seventeenth century, the voyage of Captain Smith and, in 1619, another ship lumbering upstream "with a different cargo to make the James the mother-river of negro slavery for the whole New World" (61). In Tidewater Virginia in the 1940s I experienced "an orgy of moviegoing" including "ten days when we viewed a total of sixteen" (9). I attended a Rhodes Scholarship interview in Atlanta, then got "gloriously drunk on the Southern Railway local that rattled its way all night up through the Carolinas, gazing out at the bleak, moon-drenched, wintry fields and happily pondering my deliverance" from having "to row for old Balliol" and write papers "on the hexameters of Arthur Hugh Clough." Instead, I'd be "in New York, beginning my first novel" (24-26). But soon enough I was haunting a military urological ward with suspected syphilis, and found myself called up for war. In the 1950s I sojourned in Paris. In the 1960s I met President Kennedy, discussed race with James Baldwin, and attended William Faulkner's funeral in Mississippi and the Democratic Convention in Chicago. In the 1970s I trudged the bone-fragmented paths of Auschwitz, thankful to leave before nightfall, and grew to understand the experience of clinical

depression. In the 1980s I walked the Connecticut woods with a golden retriever and envisaged a trip down the Nile with Gustave Flaubert, Maxine du Camp, and Arthur Miller. In the nineties I slept well in Vineyard Haven and thought back on decades experienced in a matter of days. All this was thanks to a writer able to put words and observations together so appropriately that he becomes your guide and companion through times and places hitherto unknown.

Styron was, as West writes, “primarily a novelist” (xix). The modernist-inspired *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951) is not least extraordinary in that so young a writer could master the form with such verve. *Set This House on Fire* (1960) showed Styron’s willingness to experiment, and fail, in order to advance his art. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) has proved to be more revolutionary and impactful than its author could have realized, instigating debates about race, history, identity, and the function and meaning of the historical and the biographical novel. But Styron’s most remarkable achievement, *Sophie’s Choice* (1979), is the true complement to this collection. With that novel he found a way to combine the art of the novel with the art of the essay. In telling the story of Sophie Zawistowska and her family in Kraków (or Cracow, as Styron refers to it in the novel) during the Second World War, and her 1947 New York summer with Nathan Landau and Styron’s fictionalized younger self, Stingo, Styron weaves between fiction and fact in the service of verisimilitude. *My Generation* shows, in turn, how Styron used his novelist’s skills in the service of the essay. No less than the novels, *My Generation* is a testament (exercisable both for good and ill, as Styron points out) to “the power of the written word” (283).

Even discounting the extended passages of nonfiction in *Sophie’s Choice*, this volume is not, West notes, “an omnium gatherum.” There are other unpublished items among Styron’s papers at Duke, while his major work of nonfiction, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990), rightly stands alone and is not included. Most of the pieces have been published before, several in the expanded edition of *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings* (1993) or the posthumous *Havanas in Camelot: Personal Essays* (2008). But West has included thirty-four new items and arranged the contents from early material to late without being hidebound by chronology. We have sections on apprenticeship, the South, race and slavery, Auschwitz, disorders of the mind, warfare and military life, prisoners, presidential matters, reports, literary concerns,

literary antecedents, friends and contemporaries, and a few essays that seem to have proved hard to categorize (“Crusades, Complaints, Gripes,” “Bagatelles,” and “Amours”). The bulk of the collection reminds us of Styron’s importance as a writer interested in history, politics, American society and the non-literary at least as much as the literary. Nevertheless, *My Generation* bears out the fact that, for Styron, style and substance are intertwined. It underlines his knowledge of what significant fiction requires even as he pursues his self-designated role as chronicler and conversationalist.

His control of both style and substance is especially evident in scene setting. Discussing his native South, he is as attentive to the climate and landscape as to the people. In “The Oldest America” (1968), his writing about the Tidewater is visceral and vivid but also acutely observed. “What is specifically southern” about it, he writes, “becomes commingled with the waterborne, the maritime.” From this “low, placid topography,” the inhabitants “have turned to the water for sustenance—river and estuary and bay,” so that “there is an odd truth in the remark that every native of the Tidewater is a skilled boatman, even if he is a farmer” (57). In “Children of a Brief Sunshine,” about the original owners of the antebellum James River mansions, he explains the link between setting and Southern hospitality, in that isolation made hospitality not merely a ritual but part of a hunger for communion (65). Meanwhile, in “A Case of the Great Pox,” he offsets the claustrophobic confines of the urological ward with descriptions of the parade ground. Marines march “in the distance on the asphalt drill field, exhaling clouds of frigid breath,” while “the glittering white inlet of the ocean” rolls “eastward like Arctic tundra” (45). When he leaves the ward, he trudges “past the drill field in the waning light” of a November afternoon (51). The contrast between inside and outside gives the essay a three-dimensional quality, emphasizing the theme of isolation and release. Likewise, in “The Death-in-Life of Benjamin Reid,” the “strong electric light” that “shines in the face of the condemned all night and all day” in his “tiny cell” is in a prison situated in a suburb of the “lovely, elm-lined New England town” of Hartford (259-60).

One of the most compelling essays is “Chicago: 1968.” Styron brings a moment in time to life. The policemen are “everywhere, not only in the streets but in the hotel lobbies and in the dark bars and restaurants, their baby-blue shirts, so ubiquitous that one would really not be

surprised to find one in one's bed" (341). Yet it's not "their sheer numbers" that startle but "their peculiar personae," including "a beery obesity" that makes "them look half again as big as New York policemen" (341). Meanwhile, "in the black sky" a helicopter wheels overhead in "a watchful ellipse." When the police attack, in gas masks and helmets ahead of "a huge perambulating machine with nozzles" that disgorge "clouds of yellowish gas," it's "as if a band of primitive Christians on another planet had suddenly found themselves set upon by mechanized legions from Jupiter" (342). Indeed, in his creation of setting, the essays in *My Generation*, taken together, illustrate the art of contrast. On the one hand, transporting the reader to Faulkner's funeral, we are in an Oxford that "lies drowned in heat" beneath "merciless sunlight." The people walk "with both caution and deliberation" (405). The weather has "the quality of a half-remembered bad dream" reminiscent of scenes in Faulkner's fiction (406). On the other hand, we're invited to imagine the experience of first reading Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men* during a New York snowstorm. "When finally the blizzard stopped and the snow lay heaped on the city streets, silent as death," Styron knows "once and for all" that he, too, "must try to work such magic" (454).

Not the least of Styron's preoccupations is the ubiquity of the military in American history. His review-essays contain measured assessments of war and of military figures. These include General MacArthur; First Lieutenant Calley, "principal executor" of the My Lai massacre (235); and Lieutenant Commander Arnheiter, whose "bellicose fantasies" eventually led to him being relieved of his command of a destroyer escort in the Philippines after annihilating detachments of Vietcong guerrillas that "turned out to be a flock of chickens" (243). In doing so Styron writes uncompromisingly of the racism of the Second World War's Pacific theater, where, having classified the Japanese "as apes," it became "easy to employ the flamethrower" (228). Nor does he pull back from judgment of America's engagement "in wars that approach being totally depraved" (221), including the "filthy" Vietnam war (339) and the "futile and insane" Korean war (383).

Yet deftly comic character sketches also abound. MacArthur's lack of "self-doubt" produces a style veering between a "boyish tone" and "lusterless Eisenhowerese" (209-10). "Self-congratulation" beats its rhythmic way through his *Reminiscences* "in a rattle of medals, decorations, flattery from underlings, and adulatory messages from chiefs

of state.” Ultimately Styron wonders whether MacArthur’s “need to describe the charisma of his own physical presence” becomes “vaguely sexual,” as if to “lure the unwilling reader into some act of collaborative onanism” (215). Such character assessments extend well beyond the military, of course. In his meditation on Benjamin Reid, with its Camus-influenced critique of the death penalty, Styron describes Reid’s defense counsel as “an owlish, methodical man who kept shuffling through his notes” (279-80). Reid’s mother is “badly crippled with an arm adrift from her side like a helpless wing.” She says to the board, almost inaudibly, “I ask you, would you grant him life, please.” Styron and Yale’s chaplain, the Rev. William Coffin, Jr., catch up with her as she hobbles toward the bus stop. Asked what she’ll do now, she sits down, fans herself, and says, “Well, I expect I’ll just go on home” (281).

While capable of being acerbic about those he disliked, Styron’s default position is compassion and generosity. Like Orwell, he is an unrelenting opponent of injustice. He is also a champion of other writers, living and dead. What matters is character and authenticity, never the baubles of social recognition of the kind that puffed up MacArthur. “There is no more crushingly contemptuous line in all of world fiction,” writes Styron, “than the final sentence of *Madame Bovary*,” where Homais is awarded the Legion of Honor (399). He is critical where it’s warranted, but ever ready to acknowledge debt. Thomas Wolfe’s “bedazzled young man’s vision of the glory of the world” may seem callow to the same reader in maturity, but it ignited Styron’s desire “to become a writer” (413-14). With Irwin Shaw’s star long fallen, Styron salutes “the splendid dawn of his career” (464). He always sees the composition of fiction as an incomparable vocation. The modernists, he writes, “penetrated the consciousness of so many young men of my time with the weight and poignancy of birth and death, or first love, or any other sacred and terrible event.” Wolfe showed him that a “tumbling riot of dithyrambs and yawping apostrophes and bardic cries” could “throw open the portals of perception, so that one could actually begin to feel and taste and smell the very texture of existence” (438). With his regard for that combination of observation, zest for life, and command of facts, he honors those who take the art seriously, and, while skeptical of the value of literary criticism, is himself an astute critic. “Not averse to talking” about literature, he’d “rather listen to music or go sailing, or drink beer while doing both” (5). But William

Blackburn, his university mentor, who gave him poor marks at first, taught him something invaluable for all writing. "Precision, you see, was what the professor was after," he writes of Blackburn's judgment, "and I was lucky to be made to toe the line early" (17). Toe it he did. These essays are an invitation to slow down and savor sound and sense.

Such verbal aptitude means that Styron can impart all kinds of information without failing to fascinate, from treatments for syphilis to the details of the electric chair (302). He provides facts and figures about such varied topics as American wars, the High Dam at Aswan, and twentieth-century smoking habits. Of the latter, he explains that sales reached one-half trillion in 1963, "one hundred billion more than in 1953" (538). The industry's strategy was to get people started, especially the young, with 1940s salesmen wearing "seersucker suits" and "evangelical smiles," swarming "like grasshoppers all over the campuses," accosting students between classes to press into their palms free packs of Lucky Strikes or Chesterfields (542). Styron, who began smoking at fourteen, acquired "a whole laundry bag" of such packs and for some time was able to puff away at no monetary cost.

The force of Styron's essays, then, as is the case with *Sophie's Choice*, rests on this combination of measured writing backed by reams of data, informed analysis, and this all-important personal involvement that lends credibility. Such qualities make up his distinctive voice. He is quite the raconteur. Among his best anecdotes is one about the short-arm inspection that he endures while gazing at a portrait of Roosevelt, "grateful for the reassuring gaze of this surrogate father, my perennial president, the only one I had ever known" while Klotz's "cold, skeletal fingers" handle his genitals (34). Meanwhile, at a Prozac-sponsored event entitled "A Conference with William Styron," the author's truth-telling about the effects of the drug lead to the conference's ostensible focus being sidelined, sans microphone, while the company spokesman takes over. Indeed, Styron's fate has often been to be sidelined in the wider public eye by more self-promotional American writers. It's funny because predictable that, after Styron has spoken during a Credentials Committee Meeting at the Chicago Convention, Governor Richard Hughes of New Jersey thanks "Mr. Michener." An aide apologizes, stating that Governor Hughes knew who he was but must have been "thinking of Mr. Michener who was a good friend." This "baffling

explanation” leaves Mr. Styron “with ominous feelings about life in general” (340).

On my final evening in Bucharest, closing this wonderful collection and ordering a final whiskey sour, I thought of the last two essays, one being “Walking with Aquinnah,” about Styron’s habit of walking with his succession of dogs, and the other “In Vineyard Haven,” about the joys of his beloved summer home on Cape Cod. These are the closest we get to witnessing Styron the private man. But I also thought of that 1962 essay on Faulkner. During the funeral procession, the car Styron is in “comes abreast the courthouse, turns slowly to the right around the square,” by the statue of the confederate soldier, “brave and upright on his skinny calcimine-white pedestal.” Given how both the square and statue feature in Faulkner’s work, Styron “is stricken by the realization that Faulkner is really gone.” Faulkner’s multitude of characters come “swarming back comically and villainously and tragically” to Styron “with a kind of mnemonic sense of utter reality” as part of a “maddened, miraculous vision of life wrested, as all art is wrested, out of nothingness.” This fills him “with a bitter grief” (410). Perhaps at the time he was also despondent at the lukewarm reception of *Set This House on Fire* and his own stalled success. He would triumph in the end, bringing to life Nat Turner, Margaret Whitehead, Thomas Gray, Sophie, Nathan, Stingo, Wanda, Emmi Höss, Paul Whitehurst and Marriott the marine. But these essays have their place. As I closed the book and wandered off to pack and fly home, I reflected that Styron too is now utterly gone from us. The Newport News authorities have named a twenty-first century housing development Port Warwick. At its center is Styron Square. Yet there’s more to recall him than stonework. His presence can be felt in his art and in his essays. After his first, miraculous if mildly derivative novel, he found his own voice, vision, and place in Southern literature and in the literature of the twentieth century, as not just a novelist but an essayist, and not least by combining the two genres to great effect.

Work Cited

Styron, William. *My Generation: Collected Nonfiction*. Ed. James L. W. West III. New York: Random House, 2015.