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Gavin Cologne-Brookes  
HCI  
Bath Spa University  
Corsham Court Campus  
Corsham SN13 OBZ  
ENGLAND

5395 words

### Rome to Ravello with *Set This House on Fire*

More than half a century after its publication William Styron's *Set This House on Fire* (1960) retains the power to fascinate. It is his least successful, least integrated work, and had he not already produced *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), and gone on to write *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and *Sophie's Choice* (1979), as well as his memoir on clinical depression, *Darkness Visible* (1990), it might now be forgotten. It has, to use Louis Rubin's phrase, "a grievous structural flaw." The same story is recounted twice but with little new revelation the second time around. The primary narrator is Eisenhower-era attorney Peter Leverett. He recounts what he knows about the murder of old school friend and wealthy playboy Mason Flagg and his Italian servant, Francesca, on the very night that Peter arrives from Rome to visit him in the hilltop Amalfi coastal town of Ravello (known as 'Sambuco' in the novel). In particular, Peter has witnessed Mason's humiliation of Cass Kinsolving, an alcoholic painter with a long-suffering wife and small children. For much of the novel's second half Peter cedes the narrative to Cass and we learn that this semi-literate, self-absorbed man has helped Francesca, with whom he is romantically involved, steal medicines from Mason to give to her dying father. Believing Mason to be responsible for her rape and death (the perpetrator is in

fact a local named Saverio), Cass turns out to be Mason's murderer. Contrived though this twice-told tale is, Styron's awkward experiments with viewpoint proved to be a dry run for the assured shifts of *Sophie's Choice*. Moreover, *Set This House on Fire* still contains enough good material for fellow novelist Michael Mewshaw to write in his memoir, *Do I Owe You Something?* (2003), that it left him hoping to meet Styron and one day live in Italy. Even in this problematic work, Styron knew how to captivate a reader through evocation of personality and place. Having written about visits to Styron's other settings in *Rereading William Styron* (2014) I therefore travelled to Rome and Ravello to see what further insights I might glean about Styron and his work.

Many years have passed since our friendship ended at the onset of what his daughter, Alexandra, described at his memorial service as his "epic, wretched descent" into terminal decline. Many years more have passed since I discovered *Set This House on Fire*. But I feel a personal connection to it. The novel was the subject of my first publication and during my research I found that *The New Statesman* carried a review of it on the day I was born. I sent Styron the essay and explained that his novels were the subject of my PhD. He invited me to Connecticut. The thesis became *The Novels of William Styron* (1995) containing an appendix of our conversations. He spoke of *Set This House on Fire* as transitional in that he was trying to write another big book without being sure of his subject matter. *Lie Down in Darkness* had brought him both personal and professional rewards including his first encounter with Rose Burgunder, who would become his wife of more than fifty years, and the *Prix de Rome*, which involved a sabbatical in the Eternal City and, coincidentally, a reunion with Rose. By 1954, when he began *Set This House on Fire*, they were raising a family in the farmhouse in Connecticut that, along with a summer place on Martha's Vineyard, would be their home until his death in 2006. The novel, prize, and sojourn in Rome thus enabled him to follow Flaubert's advice, and be orderly in his habits like a bourgeois in order to be revolutionary in

his work. With *Lie Down in Darkness* set in his Virginia Tidewater hometown of Newport News and adopted city of New York, it must have now felt logical to mine his time in Europe. The problem was that, after writing a first novel in which he had articulated matters important to him concerning art and life, he didn't have the resources to produce another such novel at that time. *Set This House on Fire* therefore became a kind of creation-for-the-sake-of-creation. Perhaps this is part of its attraction for me in that I, too, was at the time writing on Styron without much sense of why. "We do not go, we are driven," counsels Montaigne, "like things that float, now leisurely then with violence, according to the gentleness or rapidity of the current."

What held true then to some extent still does. Rather as Styron embarked on the novel with some vague sense that a story would develop, I flew to Rome armed with little more than memories of *Set This House on Fire* and of Styron himself. I stayed at the Hotel Francesco in the cobbled Piazza San Francesco d'Assisi in Trastevere, close to the Piazza Santa Maria that features in the novel's opening sequences. Peter describes his final evening after several months working in the city before driving south. He recalls his fine office "facing the ruined green sweep of the Circo Massimo," just over the Tiber and within the vicinity of the main ruins of ancient Rome. His home has been "in a run-down building" on the Gianicolo Hill, where he has suffered the "tireless lament" and "dismal" meals of a "rheumatic woman named Enrica." Negotiating Rome in an Austin sports convertible, he has spent his evenings listening to Wagner, Liszt and Tchaikovsky, "drinking commissary whiskey and watching the whole city" spill out beneath him "in a luminous frieze of rust and gold." Eating his last of Enrica's meals, his compensation for the ravioli "like plaster" and the "bilious, syrupy" wine, has been the sight of the Colosseum "aglow in the phosphorescence of floodlamps," the Forum's "ruined assembly of stark white shafts" and "a fire-trail of neon" marking "where

the outskirts of the city” ramble “up the hills into sightless gloom.” Such a panorama, he reflects, made “Rome look suddenly more immense than any city in the world.”

Though enticed by such descriptions, where Peter prefers evenings I chose mornings, awakening to successive limoncello dawns cracking through the umbrella pines and sharpening the spire of the Basilica of Saint Anastasia. It was never later than six a.m. that their mesmerizing silhouettes shimmered in the frame of my open window against a sky turning turquoise above the crest of the hill, and ushered me out running. Rome is at its most beautiful on such summer mornings, before the tour buses trundle toward the veritable venues and vistas. With barely a person in sight or a vehicle to impede, I ran through Trastevere’s cobbled lanes to the shrieks of gulls, the sound of my own footsteps and soon the cacophony of the Tiber flowing over the weir near the island of Isola. Crossing the Ponte Palatino, its weed-wreathed chunk of Roman bridge crumbling against ever-bluer sky, I ran through the Piazza Bocca della Verità, up the short incline of Via della Greca to the grassy swathe of the Circo Massimo. Pounding between the crepuscular shadows of pines along the southern side of this vast arena, I entered the wide stone-paved Via di Saint Gregorio, passed the Arch of Constantine, and reached the thunderous ruins of the Colosseum. A few scattered workmen sat smoking on fallen columns beneath the Palatine Hill. Otherwise the place was deserted.

Back in the Circo Massimo one afternoon, I reread the passages I’ve outlined from *Set This House on Fire*. Scanning the buildings to envisage Peter’s office window onto the arena, I mused about time. This seemed a Styronian thing to do. In *Set This House on Fire* Peter recalls his shock, revisiting Tidewater Virginia, at the disappearance of his childhood haunts. In the author’s note at the start of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, an Italian first edition of which, serendipitously, I found for a few euros on a shelf of second-hand books at the back of a Trastevere bar, Styron writes of how “the relativity of time allows us elastic definitions” (or, in my translated copy: “*La relatività del tempo ci permette definizioni elastiche*”). In

*Sophie's Choice*, the narrator ponders George Steiner's notion of "time relation," wherein some lives can continue in an ordinary manner while others exist in a living hell, and meditates upon the relationship between Sophie and her past, and his own relationship with his younger self. Standing in the Circo Massimo I held in mind not only the era of its initiation as the first great sporting arena, in use before the empire came into being, but also the rise and fall of Rome, and the relatively late construction and decay of the Colosseum, which shimmered in the distance.

The timescale comes into relief when one reads Charles Dickens, writing of Rome in the 1840s. "Except where the distant Apennines bound the view upon the left," he wrote in *Pictures from Italy* (1846), "the whole wide prospect is one field of ruin. Broken aqueducts, left in the most picturesque and beautiful clusters of arches; broken temples; broken tombs. A desert of decay, sombre and desolate beyond all expression; and with a history in every stone that strews the ground." The Rome Dickens encountered was very different from the one that Styron describes or that we know today. Everything has been spruced up and organized, with tickets for entry, guided tours, and barely a weed in sight. Rome's ruins are an industry, and no place more than the Colosseum. Its walls and arches are no longer "overgrown with green," there is no "long grass growing in its porches," and no trees grow "on its ragged parapets." But, as in Dickens' time, we remain free to imagine "the whole great pile" as it once was, "with thousands of eager faces staring down into the arena, and such a whirl of strife, and blood, and dust going on there." We can still "climb into its upper halls, and look down on ruin, ruin, ruin, all about it; the triumphal arches of Constantine, Septimus Severus, and Titus; the Roman Forum; the Palace of the Caesars; the temples of the old religion; fallen down and gone," and see Rome's ghosts "haunting the very ground on which its people trod." It remains "the most solemn, grand, majestic, mournful sight, conceivable."

What I realized from visiting Rome with *Set This House on Fire* in mind, and in contemplating Dickens's account, is how myopic Peter is. He has little feeling for the significance or history of either Rome or Italy and lacks Dickens's reflectiveness. This is one of the things that make the novel inferior to *Sophie's Choice*, where Styron offers detailed thoughts on Poland. But the point is also, perhaps, that Peter is very much a colonial visitor, and has an administrative rather than artistic mind. The colonial perspective is familiar enough in art of the period. We find it in, say, William Wyler's film, *Roman Holiday* (1953), or Alfred Hayes's *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* (1949). Hayes' novel is set in war-time in winter while Styron's is mainly set in a post-war spring and summer, but both concern a relationship between an American man and an Italian woman, predicated on money thinly disguised, in the American's mind, as romance. Hayes was a screenwriter and his novel about Robert and Lisa, a soldier and a prostitute, reads like a script. It's almost all interiors, and the main location is a single room with a red bedspread on the road that leads north from the Piazza Popolo, where still stands the obelisk brought by Augustus originally for the Circo Massimo. The novel ends with Robert searching for Lisa, who has run off down the Via Flaminia. He thought he could pay for companionship without emotional cost either to himself or to another, but has become involved, not just with Lisa but with Italy. We witness much the same dynamic in *Set This House on Fire*. Cass thinks he can have a dalliance with Francesca when in fact their relationship is bound up with her family's needs.

Peter, too, falls to type. His colonial mindset is apparent in his complaints about the weather, the food, and the natives. "Something in the Italian climate," he says, "makes the average American clerk, so remote from the mechanisms of progress, even more peevish and discontented." The commissary milkshakes are "not nearly so good as in Paris" because of the inferior "quality of the milk." His Italians, meanwhile, are comic stereotypes, not least Enrica, whose tears at his departure are "bogus" since she is really just a thief, stealing

“among other things (a fountain pen, gold tie clasp, etc.)” his razor, “which at least she could use.” Her obvious poverty gets no mention. Couple this with the facts of Peter’s sports convertible and evenings laced with commissary whiskey while Rome spreads beneath him, and we have the image of an American set apart in post-war Italy. He fails to see the country to any great depth. His aims are limited and his “attempts at ‘aid’ and ‘relief’” are, he admits, “grotesque.”

From his last supper, on Gianicolo Hill, Peter makes a final visit to the Vatican with no one in sight “save two humid, hurrying nuns,” and then heads to Trastevere for a final beer. I did the same, strolling from the San Francesco on my own final evening, up the Via San Francesco di Ripa, across the Viale Trastevere and the foaming Tiber at the weir close to the Piazza Santa Maria. Unlike the center of Rome, Trastevere has retained the feeling of actual Roman life, and is probably not that different from how it was in the time depicted in *Set This House on Fire*. Peter drinks his beer in the “shadowy and quiet” Piazza. All is “serene and decorous.” The air is “aromatic with blossoms, the fountain leaking slow trickling notes of water, like memorandums” (as Peter predictably describes it). When the church bell strikes, he takes his last look at Rome and drives south toward the Amalfi coast. Crossing “dark Campania,” he feels a “rowdy euphoria and a sudden love for the Italian night,” unaware that his reunion with Mason will coincide with mayhem.

All I knew of Ravello in advance came from guidebooks; from Styron’s novel; from literary marginalia, including the fact that Gore Vidal for many years owned the Villa Cimbrone, and from a film, *Beat the Devil* (1953), which John Huston was making when the Styrons were there. The latter provided the author with inspiration for the movie stars frequenting the town during Peter’s ill-fated visit. Written by Huston and Truman Capote, and starring Humphrey Bogart and Jennifer Jones, *Beat the Devil* melds a crime caper featuring Robert Morley and



Peter Lorre with intertwined romances involving couples played by Bogart and Gina Lollobrigida and Jones and Edward Underdown. Capote wrote Styron that the whole enterprise was absurd. He would write a scene one day and they would film it the next. Nevertheless, we now have a grainy, monochrome record of Ravello as it was when Styron conceived of *Set This House on Fire*. In my mind, therefore, I was about to drive not merely through a physical landscape to an actual Italian town, but also through a fictional landscape to the fictional setting of a melodrama concocted in and about an era before my time. Fact and fantasy were sure to merge.

Following Peter's journey south, I drove by day rather than night but the poor radio reception and multilingual voices "moaning" through "forsaken hills" did hint at the "chill comfort" he felt on hearing a voice "announcing '*Un po' di allegria negli Spikes Jones,*'" followed by a "windy snatch of Beethoven." The Campanian plains became "cliff country," with beige villages perched on ridges. Like Peter, "I plummeted down toward the coast and soon was in the town of Formia, where the warm sea was rolling in from Sardinia," eventually passed through Naples with its backdrop of Vesuvius, and hit the autostrada to Pompeii just over an hour from Ravello. It's around this point that Peter smashes "broadside into the motorscooter," driven by one Luciano di Lieto. On previous readings of *Set This House on Fire*, unacquainted with the geography, I had assumed Peter and Luciano collide near Ravello. In fact, the accident happens just south of Naples. When he suffers the melee of questioning from Luciano's relatives, and accusations of American war-time activities, "the heights of Vesuvius" loom oppressively at his back.

Not that my own journey was much smoother. Taking a minor road through a Naples suburb to relive Peter's experience, I mouthed the words of John Steinbeck in an essay entitled "Positano." Steinbeck's essay is another example of the post-war colonial's view of Italy—that, for instance, "Italian traffic" is "downright nonsense"—but a first-timer can still

empathize. In particular, there are the motorscooters, the experience of which no doubt inspired Styron's creation of Luciano. As Steinbeck writes, they "buzz at you like mosquitoes" while "everyone blows the horn all the time" to give color to "this deafening, screaming, milling, tire-screeching mess."

But I made it through and, followed Peter in negotiating "the shore drive between Salerno and Amalfi." I felt I already knew this road, and not just because of *Set This House on Fire*. In *Beat the Devil*, Bogart and Morley help a chauffeur push a stalled car. It gains momentum too quickly for them to catch up and veers downhill, crashing through a low wall and somersaulting into the sea. Moreover, Steinbeck's version of the drive provides an apt warning of what to expect. He in fact describes the road eastward from Sorrento that Cass will take, drunk on a scooter, in Part II, whereas Peter reaches Ravello driving west by way of Salerno and Amalfi. But his vivid evocation of the experience of traveling these hairpins between convex rock and the blue abyss suffices for almost any part of the twenty-two kilometer stretch. He writes of how, driven by the ebullient Signor Bassano, they "squirmed and twisted through Naples, past Pompeii, whirled and flashed into the mountains behind Sorrento," and then, "flaming like a meteor," hit the coastal road that "corkscrewed on the edge of nothing, a road carefully designed to be a little narrower than two cars side by side." He and his wife, he tells us, lay "clutched in each other's arms" as Signor Bassano "gestured with both hands" while "a thousand feet below" lay "the blue Tyrrhenian licking its lips."

Styron wrote from Ravello to Norman Mailer in 1953, recommending Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* as a study in existential angst in a hot climate. Given that this equally describes *Set This House on Fire*, volcano included, it's clear why Lowry's novel would have been on Styron's mind. Cass is a drunkard on a par with Geoffrey Firmin, and Lowry's influence is equally apparent in the opening, both novels beginning with a guidebook to outline their remote settings. Nagel's Italy, Peter notes, tells of a road "hewn

nearly the whole way in the cliffs of the coast,” allowing “an evervaried panorama” to unfold “with continual views of an azure sea, imposing cliffs, and deep gorges.” “What falls away is always. And is near,” runs a line from Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking,” which forms part of an epigraph for Part II—a sentiment the reader is likely to contemplate in terms of the precarious nature of the coastal setting as much as the metaphysical terror that grips Cass.

But undaunted, I accelerated on the straights and braked for the corners until, bend by bend, I eventually reached a sign for Ravello and began an ascent that is just as memorable as the coastal drive. At one sharp corner a scooter lay mangled against a metal pole, a car steamed by the rock face, and a dazed lad sat with paramedics. Always narrow, the road winds ever upward beside a verdurous gorge with glimpses of the sparkling bay. Cars must give way to buses, but some parts are too narrow for larger vehicles to pass one another unscathed. Often reversing is impossible because vehicles have gathered behind. In such cases, you squeeze by and expect scratched paintwork or a back wheel spinning dust into the abyss, if not a plunge downward. I saw a van squeeze by a coach on the inside only to have a wing mirror crushed by rock. By the time I neared Ravello it was mid-afternoon yet felt later. As Peter describes it, “already above me” its location on “the great peak” had sure enough “obscured the westering sun, sending a vast blue shadow across the sea.” To my left, “past the outermost limits of the shadow, where the light still shone, the water was as green as clover,” while “toward shore it was a transparent blue, lakelike, upon which half a dozen little boats seemed not so much to float as to suspend, held up over the clear sandy bottom as if by invisible threads.”

Cass best describes the views from the summit. The whole of Italy rolls “eastward, in haze, in blue, in a miracle of flux and change” and, “steaming with noon far below, the Vesuvian plain” sweeps “toward the Apennines.” But Ravello itself, which dates to the sixth century, is also a wonder to behold. The central piazza, dominated by an eleventh-century

duomo, is unexpectedly large and busy. That particular day was the first of a festival and hosting an Italian-Scottish wedding. The guests were gathered on the duomo steps, sweating in their tightest collars and nattiest togs, kilts included, tanned faces glistening around the bride resplendent in white. To the left of the duomo is the Vialle Wagner—the composer wrote *Parsifal* while in Ravello. I recognized the sloping lane with widely spaced steps as the one that Robert Morley, in *Beat the Devil*, marches down before turning into the Via Roma where the lane opens out into the piazza.

Almost as soon as I arrived, then, reality and fantasy interwove. I was undergoing the disorientating experience of superimposing the imagined setting and characters of *Set This House on Fire* and *Beat the Devil* onto a real place. While Styron renamed and adapted Ravello to suit his themes, Huston and Capote rearranged it geographically. In the film it stands for Porta Bella and is supposedly at sea level with an accessible beach. Morley may stride down the Vialle Wagner, and the Bogart character, Billy, take in the scenic views from his balcony before retreating indoors with Gina Lollobrigida, but in a piazza café Bogart encounters Underdown and Jones as a British couple waiting for their boat to sail. Displaying yet more of the colonial condescension Styron portrays in *Set This House on Fire*, the Underdown character, Harry, bemoans being stuck “in a squalid, fifth-rate port,” and having to deal with “hopeless inefficiency.” Only Bogart seems to notice the “magnificent country.”

With lines and images from the novel and film in my head, I continued to tramp Ravello’s sunny streets, feeling that perhaps, while the 1950s was another time, the town was much the same. The tangle of fantasy and reality tightened. As if in a print by Maurits Escher—yet another figure inspired by the town—I wandered along an alley and “very shortly the alley became a cobbled little street,” and then “the street a labyrinth winding narrowly between rows of dank, deserted houses, and the labyrinth finally a walled path which straggled away from the center of the town and mounted gradually the side of a

dizzying precipice so vertical and so smooth that it was as bare of vegetation—even of moss or lichen—as a crag in the remotest north.” In fact, the lanes I took brought me to the Villa Cimbrone, visited over the years by, among others, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. I meandered through its sun-splashed gardens to its spectacular terrace. Along the balustrade, weathered white busts stood in relief against the azure sky and deeper blue of the Mediterranean, and between them to the left the Amalfi Coast spread into the distance, and further off and fainter the coast of Cilento. Here, I reflected, half a century ago strolled Bogart and Jones in character, flirtatiously, captured in the flicker of monochrome footage.

“Are you a typical American?” asks Jones. “I think it’s important that I should know.”

“Why important?” replies Bogart.

“There are two good reasons for falling in love,” she breathes. “One is that the object of your affections is unlike anyone else, a rare spirit, such as Lord Byron, the other is that he’s like everybody else, but superior.”

Thus the couple begin their romantic dalliance, ending up on a cliff edge among wild flowers, spied on by Peter Lorre. In fact, though, the “walled path” Peter describes leads him to the precipice where Cass has battered Mason to death and thrown him off the cliff. Peter looks over and sees the body far below.

Thereafter the novel switches to Cass’s narration, as orchestrated by Peter, who asks Cass to relate what really happened and records his lengthy version. Where Peter is ill-at-ease yet essentially detached from events, Cass is central to them and in turmoil. He feels “utterly hemmed in” by the town. “There was nowhere,” he thinks “with mounting terror, nowhere at all to go.” One can see how Ravello might foster such feelings. Described by André Gide as “closer to the sky than the seashore,” such a place might seem idyllic to a casual visitor on a summer afternoon yet isolating to the long-term resident, especially one of fragile mind.

When Cass visits “a promontory among the rocks where people go to watch the sea,” he finds

trees “stunted and bent from incessant winds” while a low wall is all that “protects the maladroit, or the drunken, or the unwary” from dropping “almost a quarter of a mile” into the rocky valley. He leans over the precipice and sees “someone hardly larger than a gnat” toiling “far below in a toysized lemon grove.” Meanwhile, “a swollen torrent in the valley, white with spume,” looks “no more forbidding than a rivulet of milk.” “Dizzied, bereft of all save the merest wisp of self-preservation,” the horror “these gallant heights” evoke in him is “ardent” enough to resemble love. “*Prendimi*,” he murmurs, “take me now,” before pitching forward as the mortar crumbles in a “foretaste of oblivion.”

Cass’s vertigo is a kind of claustrophobia amounting to terror. Life, for Cass, is a trap, and I came to see that Styron uses this town-on-the-way-to-nowhere as a metaphor for an aspect of being that haunted him throughout his writing life, a suicidal urge he outlines in *Darkness Visible*. During the thrilling weekend when I first met him in Roxbury, I recall him shrugging gloomily, during a discussion of the ending of Wallace Stevens’ “Sunday Morning,” and saying that maybe it would be okay “to be swallowed up in the gorge of existence.” “Taking the broadest philosophical view of human destiny,” he said, “you realize you’re a speck of dust.” He puffed his cigar then blew a spiral of blue smoke toward the beamed ceiling. “Unless our intuitions are totally haywire,” he went on, “we know that the earth is going to be turned into a cinder.” The young man that was me, of course, felt nothing but the glamour and glory of this existential angst.

But that was thirty years after the publication of *Set This House on Fire* and a quarter of a century ago as I write. Now I am much older than Styron was when he wrote the novel, and the poignancy of this setting as a metaphor for our lives, and for art, is not lost on me. Sitting in my study back in Wiltshire, I can recreate my journey from Rome to Ravello, and superimpose *Set This House on Fire* onto *Beat the Devil*, and both onto the town also known

as Sambuco and Porta Bella, a setting which even now has become my own semi-fictitious recollection. To follow the novel's descriptions of Roman ruins, or hilltop pathways, or to trace the film's links between settings, scene by scene, is to experience a dream that combines an Escher print, a Kafka fable and a Borges riddle. Coherence seems always possible but ever elusive, even receding.

Toward the end of my visit I found a secluded spot in the Villa Rufolo, long ago owned by the family from whence came Landolfo, Boccaccio's lucky merchant in *The Decameron*, and sat there in the shade with bygone visitors and residents from Wagner to Vidal to consider what Styron might have been aiming to do with this flawed but ambitious novel. I thought of time passing. I thought of Dickens in Rome in the 1840s, of Hayes in the 1940s, of Styron there and in Ravello in the 1950s, and pondered how best to articulate the experience. *Set This House on Fire*, I decided, surely has something to do with the complex interaction of life and artistic endeavor. There was not just the mysterious splendor of Rome in a time unimaginably long ago, but the unreality of Ravello "aloof upon its precipice." Ravello is certainly a place for a writer to create a world; a musician to compose an opera; a failing painter to wallow in self-pitying dissolution; a playboy to barricade himself with fantasies and indulge his appetites. The artist can shut himself away, up there against the sky with the sunless valley far below, but the passage of time will be no less inexorable. In fact in Ravello, as in many an elevated setting, it's heightened. You are the first to see the morning sun and the last to see the sunset. Like art, the town is inherently quixotic; its magnificence hints at the absurd. Given that, I thought, maybe it's no bad thing for a novelist to create, along with his best works, something strange and awkward, standing witness to the effort and uncertainty that led to it. The writer of a neglected novel has, after all, built something capable of grandeur in its evident futility.

As I returned to my car for the winding journey down and back along the Amalfi Coast, and eventually back to Rome and home, I concluded that *Set This House on Fire* is not a great novel but a novel in search of something, a novel concerned with the notion of building—of why we create. Ravello resembles art in being at once an expression of human heroism and pretension. Both the town and the novel are worlds constructed away from ordinary life. But I also saw that to travel through the actual landscape depicted in a novel affects what you look for and what you see, both in the landscape and in the novel. I saw Ravello through *Set This House on Fire*, and came down seeing *Set This House on Fire* through Ravello. The same was true with the novel and Rome. In time, Styron would build his Colosseum of the imagination in the form of *Sophie's Choice*. But you have to master the trade before building your actual monument to time's attrition, and Styron was making progress toward this. *Sophie's Choice* would not be the way it is had he not written *Set This House on Fire*. The creation and experience of art affects not only our worldview but also our actions. I might never have traveled from Rome to Ravello if not for *Set This House on Fire*, nor seen those parts of Italy in the same way when I did, nor in turn understood that novel quite as well had I not journeyed through the landscape with it in mind. Nor might I have thought along the way of Dickens, Hayes, Steinbeck and the rest, and of a flickering old monochrome movie that, despite being made by Huston and starring Bogart, is not a film many recall, or would watch. *Set This House on Fire* has its place, therefore, as a marker on Styron's artistic journey, but my main lesson was that to take a journey associated with bygone art can lead us to contemplate that journey, and specific places, and a particular country, and life itself, in a new and rewarding light.