

LÁSZLÓ DÁNYI

THE ECCENTRIC AGAINST THE MAINSTREAM:  
WILLIAM STYRON, 75

William Styron (1925– ) has simultaneously been considered as one of the most controversial and the most admired authors in the United States. He has always resisted swimming with the current of postmodernism, and even during the heydays of that ephemeral mode of writing he achieved unprecedented recognition by the reading public. Styron will celebrate his 75th birthday in 2000, and the coincidence of the two significant figures instantly invites the question of appreciation. The latest approach to Styron's work and life has been provided by James L. West III, who meticulously explored the multitude of dimensions that reveal the meaning and significance of Styron's art. So the unavoidable questions are: what comprises the Styron legacy for the generations of the 21st century, and what is the definition of the author's place, and what is his contribution to American literature? In the search for the answers to the questions, first, I will identify the major thematic patterns in Styron's works, then I will summarize major critical approaches to his oeuvre and explore the Faulknerian heritage in his novels.

What are the social icons that can be traced in Styron's works, and what are the major thematic patterns that constitute his novels?

The first of the novels is his poetically written *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951) which portrays a Southern family crumbling into bits in the shadow of the mixed Southern ethical inheritance. The characters who act out the tragedy of this family are Peyton Loftis, the daughter, whose suicide commences the meditation over the estrange-

ment of the family members from one another; Helen Loftis, the pious mother, who wastes all her love over her crippled daughter, Maudie; and Milton Loftis, the weak and alcoholic father adoring his daughter, Peyton.

*The Long March* (1953), a novella set on a Carolina marine base, juxtaposes men like Captain Mannix of more than average intelligence against the high-ranked authoritative representatives like Colonel Templeton of the senseless oddities of the military machine. Styron explores the role of moral authority in the military machine which oppresses the individual's desire to be free.

Styron's characters revolve around murder, rape and suicide in his *Set This House on Fire* (1960) which provides a Dostoevskian insight when seeking the source of evil in a universe without either God or the devil. An Italian village after World War 2 accomodates a Southern alcoholic painter, Cass Kinsolving, a naive Southern lawyer, Peter Leverett, and a cruel aristocrat, Mason Flagg, who embodies pure wickedness. Kinsolving's killing Flagg initiates the dilemma over crime, punishment and oblivion.

Styron has always had a strong commitment to the issue of slavery, and to the relationship between history and fiction. Stemming from the weltanschauung of a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant writer in the 1960s, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) encapsulates the humiliations, cruelties and idiocy that constituted "the peculiar institution" which scars the common awareness of both blacks and whites. Through depicting Nat Turner's transformation into a self-conscious and visionary leader of blacks Styron discusses the issue of historical fiction versus fictional history.

Attempting to conduct the reader in the world of chaos and death, *Sophie's Choice* (1979) endeavors to speak about the unspeakable and the unimaginable. It introduces the reader to the horrors of the concentration camp machinery of Nazi Germany through the revelations of a Polish Catholic survivor, Sophie, whose tormented soul is unable to come to grips with the memory of having had to spare one of her children in the gas chamber, and who interacts with Nathan, a schizophrenic American Jew helping her in need, and with Stingo, the American Southerner striving to write his first major novel. Finally,

the novel sweeps us into the self-destruction of Sophie and Nathan, and leaves Stingo alive with the burden of the two characters' suicide.

The reminiscences of Styron's past experiences sound in *A Tidewater Morning*, (1993) which is a recollection of events in Paul Whitehurst's life during the Great Depression and World War 2. The three short stories set in Virginia's Tidewater country apotheosize the power of memory, and are haunted by the themes of race, death, authority and faith, and they recuperate the themes discussed in Styron's earlier works.

Three other works must be mentioned as being parts of Styron's oeuvre. The first is the author's non-fiction prose, *This Quiet Dust* (1982), which is a collection of previously published essays encompassing Styron's moral engagement. The second work is a play entitled *In the Clap Shack* (1952), which places a young recruit in the wretched world of a Navy hospital; and *Darkness Visible*, which addresses the effects of depression.

In interviews Styron speaks about a novel which he started writing before *Sophie's Choice*, and has not finished yet. *The Way of the Warrior* will intertwine two themes: the nascent fascism at a personal level, and the latent homosexuality in male individuals, and the dilemma of the novel will explore what happens when these two appear explicitly.

These are the works that are considered by Styron's critics, whose pendulum is continuously swinging between the iconic and the iconoclastic elements of the literary work when appreciating the author's oeuvre. Consequently, some praise the iconic elements and marvel at the beauty how the work fits into traditional thematic patterns, or the mainstream of the mode of writing of the given age, whereas some others despise the literary work for the same reason. William Styron's critique is no exception to this rule. The writer could not escape being compared to his Southern literary predecessor, William Faulkner, who left a heavy burden behind to the forthcoming generations of authors, as it is impossible for a Southern writer to avoid being contrasted to the Faulknerian mode of writing which established the Southern Literary Renaissance in the first half of the 20th century. In the summer of 1995, while on a study tour in the United States I conducted a conversation with Thomas Inge, the well-

known Faulkner critic, related to Faulkner's legacy in the writings of Southern authors, and he jovially remarked that Faulkner was like the Dixie Limited train—you had to get out of its way, otherwise you would be run over.

When Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness (LDD)* was published in 1951 the Southern literary mode had been a distinguished tradition for some thirty years. Therefore when the book appeared it seemed to fit into this tradition. Critics thought that there was another good writer in the familiar Southern style, with another novel about Southern decay. They were eager to point out the Southern characteristic features in the novel, and they tried to prove that Styron followed Faulkner's footsteps and continued his legacy: "This guy was influenced by Faulkner: this guy is trying to write the way Faulkner tried to write. This is a burden ... it is a real burden" (Core 58–59). So Styron had to bear the weight of being called an heir to the Faulknerian heritage, and had to labor in the shadow of the colossus, however, there were critics like Malcolm Cowley who favorably reviewed Styron's usurping the Faulknerian style, rhetoric and concerns (Cowley 19).

In one of his essays Gunnar Urang finds Styron's fiction derivative and imitative because it sticks to the old-fashioned models of conveying characters and describing them through their interactions with each other and placing them into a traditional plot. He writes that Styron cannot delete his commitment to an ancient enthusiasm about character and story (Urang 183–209), and in his thematic structuring of stories he is a successor of great 19th century novelists like Flaubert and Melville. Flaubert had affected Styron's attitude to life, in his workroom he wrote the following quotation by the great French novelist: "Be regular and orderly in your life, like a good bourgeois, so that you may be violent and original in your work" (West 277).

In an interview by Esquire magazine Styron admits that most people think he writes "just a bunch of derivative trash", and he tries to deny this supposition and to escape Faulkner's shadow: "You can't spend your life living with a monument. If you're going to be a writer, you become a writer on your own terms and totally set yourself free from that influence" (Caputo 150). Interestingly enough, in another interview Styron asserts that it was not only Faulkner who inspired his

writing, but his writing, *LDD*, also had an impact on Faulkner's *The Mansion* (Cologne-Brookes 227).

Not only was the writer marked as a Faulkner follower, but he was also regarded as being akin to almost everyone except himself: "In his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), Styron seems strikingly derivative. He had read his Fitzgerald, his Warren, his Wolfe. Above all, he had read Faulkner, and so strong was that influence that on first reading it very nearly swamps the novel" (Lawson 479–480).

Most of the comparisons with the Southern literary mode have raised the issue of the relationship between imitation and originality, or tradition and innovation. For example, Styron's *Sophie's Choice* has been criticized for thematic weaknesses (Durham 449), and Richard Pearce also argues based on the aforementioned premises when he writes that Styron's heroes cannot reach the core of the problem in their search for meaning (Pearce 285).

These critics tend to see the novels as either too general or too specific and they tend to ignore the shift from the particular to the universal. The labels of parochialism, provincialism, regionalism, topicality, universality and cosmopolitanism have all been used and abused related to Styron's works. When esteeming *LDD*, Lewis A Lawson argues that "[o]n the personal level, it is certainly a Southern novel, but like any good Southern novel it is universal" (480), others like the Ten Black Writers who responded to Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in the 1960s disparage the author's novel for the same reason.

The analysis of the motifs and the dimensions dominating the novels proves that the conventional requisites of particularity and universality convey new and different meanings. The novelty of Styron criticism has been to combine the regional and parochial Southern influences with the recognition of a "desire for a more complete literature to arise out of the South. That completeness, in this instance, relies on breaking away from the confines of the South" (Metress 309). Recent criticism broadens the scope of observation from the contemporary ideas of existentialism to the French "nouveau roman", and it focuses on the universal implications and dimensions of Styron's themes. The critics who are convinced that Styron's Southern commitment can be extended to universal aesthetic concerns

usually argue by considering a certain period of the writer's life, for example when he travelled to France, where he founded the Paris Review, and where he established his reputation as an American writer whose stature has been esteemed as highly as that of Victor Hugo, Balzac and Flaubert. Valerie Meliotes Arms writes the following about those years in the author's life:

He was pilloried at home when his third novel seemed to forsake the southern tradition, but abroad he was accepted as a serious writer. Gallimard published *Set This House on Fire* and reissued *Lie Down in Darkness*. The existential trappings of French philosophers, the intricate plot and well-developed characters made *Set This House on Fire* quite popular in France. (Arms 48)

While he received acclaim for his *Set This House on Fire* in France, in America Styron's decision to live and to write outside the South has perhaps fueled critical disagreement over how closely his fiction should be linked to a regional context.

In spite of the diversity of critical approaches to Styron's content and form, when trying to define Styron's place in contemporary fiction I share Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's opinion. His appreciation delineates the writer's oeuvre in relation to the multitude of influences that affected his writing. The critic concludes that Styron's style and mode of writing can be characterized by the traditional realistic approach to characterization traced in the works of Bellow, Malamud, Roth and Updike. He is an innovator of form concerning time-, perspective- and consciousness-techniques, and he inherited a lot from modernism and the stout representatives of Southern literature: Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe and Robert Penn Warren (Abádi 490).

Although I accept that in most cases what an author confesses about the way he writes, or why he writes, or why he employs certain elements in his work, or when he explains the meaning of his works is not a trustworthy clue to grasp the meaning of, or to interpret an author's oeuvre, a brief recollection of what Styron thinks about his art might provide a more shaded picture of his art. In a TV interview William Styron himself mentioned William Blackburn and Hiram Hayden as those two people who had had a great impact on his career by giving him advice, and the latter one by encouraging him to turn

towards the novel form instead of the short story. Styron was a promiscuous reader, and he read almost everything and everybody, but his favorites were Dickens, Melville, Flaubert and Faulkner, and he had not read any Henry James. He regarded *Madame Bovary*, *Moby Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn* as the three colossal works of world literature (Writer's Workshop).

In another interview conducted by Gavin Cologne-Brookes Styron asserts that Malraux, Orwell and Koestler dealt with issues similar to his, and he refutes his presumptuous opinion on Henry James assumed in the previous interview, and says: "your art will have some tiny but meaningful effect on this whole blindly mysterious process that we are all caught up in" (Cologne-Brookes 229). He also reveals that he does not care whether the literary work is postmodern, or not, the most important factor for him is to find some enjoyment in it, further on, when discussing John Barth's writing related to postmodernism he pronounces: "John Barth, to my mind, is a totally self-preoccupied writer, to the extent that he virtually lacks any interest for me" (Cologne-Brookes 214). He admits that reading Kierkegaard's, Camus' and Sartre's works contributed to shaping his existentialist views that provided a philosophical background to his novels.

So the question still remains: what is William Styron's place in contemporary fiction? What are those shades on the palette of contemporary American literature that show Styron's uniqueness? The long list of appreciation and Styron's remarks about his own art, and his comments on the influence of other authors and philosophers on him show compellingly how complex the question is and how difficult it is to esteem the writer's oeuvre. To find an answer to this question is even more complicated in the case of a contemporary writer, because it is always easier to judge an author in retrospect. The Styron oeuvre is still open, as for decades he has been working on a novel entitled *The Way of the Warrior*, which he started before *Sophie's Choice* and has not finished yet.

I cannot consider the opinion of posterity which usually boils down to throwing some authors into the box of the mainstream of literature by labeling them as 'major writers', and leaving some others on the shelf by attaching the label of 'minor writers' to them. I am convinced that the Southern background in Styron's works is not negligible. I do

agree with those critics who say that the South is a major source of inspiration for the writer. Elements of the culture of the South can be traced in all of Styron's works, as his novels are rooted in his southern soil, and the question here is how. Those critics who argue by saying that Styron is a universal writer also have the right to say so because I believe that Styron vocalizes general human concerns, general human needs that are expressed in a unique way from his pen, with his Southern background. So all in all my assumption is that Styron's books in their content are about these basic human conditions with general existential dilemmas of our 20th century living, however, his strong moral engagement, without implying that other writers outside the South cannot be morally engaged, links him to the very best traditions of the Southern Renaissance in literature, and to Faulkner. In all his novels there are characters who are from the South with all the cultural implications of this word. Then he, like most Southern writers, is concerned with a very strong sense of time, place, belonging to a culture and the endurance of the human spirit. These parallels with Faulkner are not only contextual, but formal as well. On the one hand his link to 19th and the beginning of 20th century writers, like Dostoevsky, Melville, Conrad and Flaubert is obvious, i.e.: there is a story line in his novels, the stories are inhabited by distinguishable characters holding character traits, having basic human striving to come to terms with the world around them and to find a *raison d'être*; his storyline is also similar to this traditional modernist way of writing, that is he wants to get from A to Z, he usually knows the beginning and the end, but he does not have a programmed plot. So the route between A and Z is not necessarily paved in alphabetical order and it makes it possible for Styron to use the stream of consciousness method, which is a link again to Faulkner too.

However, what differentiates Styron from the rest of the writers is that in his novels characters keep on struggling even after realizing the futility of quest for meaning, and enduring all hardships and manage to survive, and in novels where there are not Southern characters like *STHF*, *SC*, it is the Southern characters who survive. In Faulkner the stories are inhabited by Southerners and they are doomed to die, whereas here there is a palpably strong implication of optimism in the form of a survival for Southerners. And here we are again back at

Faulkner, and the Faulknerian heritage. In his form Styron goes back to Faulkner, because as I mentioned the modernist way of writing connects the two authors. Styron goes back to Faulkner in his rhetoric and style. The way he writes is also similar to Faulkner's in the way that he associates certain sensations with particular incidents. Images appealing to the senses—a smell, fragrance or vision or view—stir up memories and ignite the creation of the text.

So in spite of Styron's indebtedness to the Faulknerian decorum of writing there are differences as well between the two:

- the characters who inhabit the Styron novels are not only Southerners, or their background is not always Southern, they are not always linked to the South directly;
- in Faulkner's writing aesthetic formalism is the artistic means through which regional and social issues are conveyed, on the other hand in Styron's writing regionalism gains a different meaning;
- whereas in Faulkner's world the characters belong to dynasties and their lives can be traced for generations in the different novels, in Styron's novels the characters are not in a dynastic but in a familial relationship with each other;
- in Faulkner's novels the characters are doomed to failure because they try to act against the indifferent forces of history which crumbles and crashes them and they do not have any power to influence the monstrous and hostile powers of history, in Styron's novels history appears to be an inherent part of the characters' individual and personal stories, it is recaptured as the collection of personal histories, and Styron's characters are doomed to fall due to the failure of their personal histories. They are dangling characters who try to find links to each other and to their universe and they are on the run for trying to find the points of contact which is in most cases futile because of their tormented souls. However, Styron cannot fully escape from the image of the impersonal history, because in SC the military machine of Nazi Germany represents history but Styron realizes that the agents of that 'perfect' society are individuals.
- Faulkner created his imaginary Yoknapatawpha County and inhabited it with his own characters. Styron's regionalism is different from Faulkner's. His land is the Virginia Tidewater area,

which, in most of his novel, has the role of a starting and firm base point for the characters, not necessarily for Styron, rather than a life long time link to the land as place, or physical terrain. It is more like a spiritual terrain of the land which is not necessarily the Tidewater region, but in a more extended form the South itself. Even in his collection of short stories entitled *A Tidewater Morning* the reader might think that the stories will take him to that region which is partly true, but in other novels the characters leave this area and they act against it and for it as a spiritual terrain with its distinct cultural patterns. For Styron as a writer, the South is the background, and his novels are rooted in that place, but he manages to look back upon the South from a vantage point which is not necessarily in the South as a homogeneous physical and spiritual terrain. The existence of this vantage point allows him a certain detachment from the South, which does not mean that he is isolated from it. In other words in his literary career he leaves the Faulknerian notion of the regional South, and this shift in perspective allows him to view the South, the same land that Faulkner belongs to, from another new angle. And it gives its uniqueness to Styron's writing, because he belongs "neither to the Deep South sunk in its archaic doom nor to the Yankee blend of purposefulness and inferiority complex" (Kretzoi 121). So the long list of the appreciation of Styron's works shows that the author's works have proven to be the targets for exploring Freudian aspects, existential perspectives, Bakhtinian textual questions, narrative devices, the time technique and Southern cultural elements.

From the abovementioned it is unavoidable to conclude that the Souther cultural elements appear in Styron's works with such weight that they are iconological creations of the Southern consciousness. The existence and the presentation and representation of icons related to the South, and their transformations and manifestations in Styron's works prove that Styron, by recollecting, recuperating and modifying but not rejecting the Faulknerian mode of writing, managed to preserve Faulkner's and the South's legacy for posterity by creating his own iconology of the South.

Styron identifies and explores the major distinctive cultural parameters and patterns of the American South as they are represented

by images, emblematical representations and figures, and shows how the contemporary American Southerners cultural awareness is related to the aforementioned Southern icons. Styron adapts, transforms and creates icons that are disposed towards or/and against the iconology of the South, a major part of which was created by Faulkner.

In the 21st century the uniqueness of the writer's achievement will be assessed in the light of his Southern background. Styron's novels are historically situated and his characters culturally conditioned, at the same time I concede that the American ingredients of Styron's prose cannot be fully deduced from the writer's Southern legacy, not to mention the impact of obvious international influences.

The greatest achievement of the author is that superimposed on the general themes, his work defines the constituent elements of the distinct quality of the South as a cultural region; it formulates the principles of the Southern content and form; and achieves the fictional creation of the Southern ethos; and it establishes new fictional space for the iconology of the South; consequently, Styron's art will keep the Southern literary tradition alive.

#### WORKS CITED

- Abádi-Nagy, Zoltán. *Mai amerikai regénykalauz (1970–1990)*. Budapest: Intera Rt, 1995.
- Arms, Valerie Meliotes. "A French View of William Styron: Topicality vs. Universality." *The Southern Quarterly*. Vol. XXIX. No. 1. Fall 1990.
- Caputo, Philip. "Styron's Choices." *Esquire*. December 1986.
- Clarke, John Henrik. ed. *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.
- Cologne-Brookes, Gavin. *The Novels of William Styron*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.
- Core, George, ed. *Southern Fiction Today: Renaissance and Beyond*. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1969.
- Cowley, Malcolm. "The Faulkner Pattern." *New Republic*. 8 October 1951.
- Durham, Carolyn A. "William Styron's Sophie's Choice: The Structure of Oppression." *Twentieth Century Literature*. Vol. 30. No. 4. 1984.

- Kretzoi, Charlotte. "William Styron: Heritage and Conscience." *Hungarian Studies in English*. 5. 1971.
- Lawson, Lewis A. "William Styron." Ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Blyden Jackson, Rayburn S. Moore, Lewis P. Simpson and Thomas Daniel Young. *The History of Southern Literature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985.
- Metress, Christopher. "'a new father, a new home': Styron, Faulkner, and Southern Revisionism." *Studies in the Novel*. Vol. 22. No. 3. Fall 1990.
- Pearce, Richard. "Sophie's Choices." Ed. Robert K. Morris with Irving Malin. *The Achievement of William Styron*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1981.
- Styron, William. *A Tidewater Morning*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Styron, William. *Darkness Visible*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- Styron, William. *Lie Down in Darkness*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- Styron, William. *Set This House on Fire*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice*. Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1988.
- Styron, William. *The Long March and In the Clap Shack*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Styron, William. *This Quiet Dust*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Urang, Gunnar. "The Voices of Tragedy in the Novels of William Styron." Ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. *Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968.
- West III, James L. *William Styron, A Life*. New York: Random House, 1998.
- Writer's Workshop*. Dir. Dave Smalley. *South Carolina Educational Television*