

The banality of writing about evil

A correspondent called my attention to a literary blog by Edward Champion touting *Sophie's Choice*, allegedly one of the top one hundred novels of the 20th century, and thereby waved the red cape in front of the raging bull. I can't stand William Styron and I especially can't stand *Sophie's Choice*. Saying someone is like Faulkner without the talent is sort of like saying someone is like Einstein without the brains, but there you go: Styron is a purple writer who isn't able to make the purple passages sound like anything except very bad writing. Did he really pen the words "her moist mossy cunt's undulant swamp"? You can't do that unless you are doing a parody of William Styron. Is he characterizing Stingo with that line? Don't even go there – it doesn't matter if he is or not. That line cannot exist in serious fiction. If Styron were a movie, he would be Bad Movie Night, forever.

Okay, he can't write, *at all*, and the book is four thousand pages long, and really, we don't care about *any* of the characters. And, true, the story of Stingo's Coming of Age, or Lesson in Life, or First Time Ever, or Strange Encounter with Mental Illness, is both boring in itself and the cause that boredom is in the other stories of the novel, even a story about Auschwitz. Well, never mind. *I forgive all that*. But I haven't even gotten *started*.

Styron said in an interview that he thought maybe he remembered having read in passing a possible mention of a Gypsy woman who may have been forced to make Sophie's choice – to pick which of her two children would be sent immediately to the gas chamber:

I suddenly realized that this had to be the metaphor for the most horrible, tyrannical despotism in history, that this was a new form of evil, an evil so total that it could cause a woman to murder one of her own children. . . . It summed up the absolute totalitarian nature of this evil, which we really had not seen, certainly in civilized society, since history began to be recorded.

Point: it didn't sum up anything. Point: it was not a new form of evil; we *have* seen evil of this nature before. Point: yes, in civilized society. Point: since history began to be recorded, also yes. In fact, that's how I know that every word just quoted including "this" and "that" is wrong. *How* do I know this? I've *read* history. Genocide is as common as rain. Infants have been impaled on bayonets in front of their mothers time immemorial. Starving the workers slowly to death? – the stone quarries near Syracuse, where the Athenian captives were kept in a hole in the ground, crowded together standing up in the open air, when they weren't schlepping rocks. Cf. Thucydides, *A History of the Peloponnesian War*, where we also read about a band of mercenaries who broke into an elementary school and killed every child in the building, then slaughtered the livestock just for the good rowdy fun of it. And, point, *she* didn't murder one of her own children, even if, to make her Styron's idea of interesting, she thinks she did; the *Nazis*, or rather, one particular Nazi, murdered one of her children.

Styron with his customary self-absorption: "It seized me so poignantly that I was

compelled to write a book about it."

William? *William!* Get. Over. Yourself. The world's libraries are now full of works of fiction, and we do not need any more of them written by people who are seized by a feeling of poignancy and whose very next thought is that they are compelled to write a book about it.

I have not only made a study of bad writing, and a study of history, I have also made a study of evil. "No one will understand Auschwitz. . . . Auschwitz itself remains inexplicable." This pronouncement, at the end of *Sophie's Choice*, drives the blood to my brain, and it doesn't help that it is the default position of a *lot* of self-styled intellectuals, all of whom should know better. Before I even take it up, notice Styron's claim: *no* one will understand it; if *he* can't explain it, then it must be *inexplicable*. It is incomprehensible *in principle* – on his say-so.

Short version: *IF* the 19th century "racial biology" that was considered scientific not only in Germany but in most of Europe and America had been true; *IF* the races of the earth were in a Darwinian competition for the planet's dwindling resources, such that if all survived, none would survive; *IF* the Jews, having been deprived, whether by accident or divine judgment, of the nationhood that would bind their blood to a particular soil, were rootless cosmopolitans whose identity as a people could only play out in their parasitism on genuine cultures and their loyalty to each other; *IF* they could thrive only by attaching themselves to a healthy host and sucking the lifeblood out of it; *THEN* the Holocaust would have been justified on utilitarian grounds, ratified by the same philosophers and evolutionary psychologists who have set up the "trolley problem" to show that the sacrifice of one person to save five is always moral –

because nothing changes if you have to sacrifice one million people to save five million, or one hundred million to save five hundred million. The Nazis "understood Auschwitz" and would have been glad to explain it to anyone who cared to listen: "It's either us or them." Hitler thought gassing was an easy death compared with being burned alive by incendiary bombs, which was the fate of many German citizens under attacks by the Royal Air Force; and he congratulated himself for executing the Jews without malice. Working people to death? If they are subhuman, and they are marked for extinction anyway, why shouldn't the master race get some value from them first? Slow starvation? How could it be justifiable to give food to vermin who won't live long anyway instead of giving it to good Aryan families that are suffering privation because of the unconscionable British blockade? The picture painted by Nazi Germany is dreadfully familiar. The Bible gleefully records several successful genocides. King Leopold of brave little Belgium came near to annihilating the native population of the Congo. Inexplicable? Give me a break.

Now to Edward Champion. If he defends a usage found in William Styron by pointing to its appearance in Alice Sebold, then we need to stick a fork in him because he's done.

"The objections over the book's sexual passages would suggest that all this exists independently from the book's take on the Holocaust." Well, yes, the objections do suggest that, because indeed the sexual passages have little or nothing to do with the Serious part. As I have already indicated, they are just bad writing, this time about sex, and as such depressingly similar to everyone else's bad writing about sex, only worse than everyone else's bad writing because they are by Styron. The book's take

on the Holocaust? It doesn't really have one, except to say that it was bad, it was very bad. It was so bad that it can never be understood. It is inexplicable.

Message to Champion posted on his blog by a young feminist: "You must have noticed there's a new generation of us younger feminists coming up who don't get our panties in such a twist over guys talking about their sexual thoughts, since we're pretty open about our own sexual thoughts too." My, aren't *you* something. But can I just point out to you that the problem isn't that Styron/Stingo talks about his book-length erection: the problem is what he actually *says* about it, and how very uninteresting it is.

Now my correspondent started his message to me by saying this: "I'm pretty sure I don't understand any single part of Edward Champion's essay about Styron's *Sophie's Choice*." He was being modest. I'm positive that he understood that Champion (1) thinks it is a great book that (2) has been unfairly tarred as being too sexually explicit, whereas (3) the sexual drivel is great writing and (4) intrinsic to the author's treatment of the Holocaust, because (5) it brilliantly illuminates young Stingo, a great character in a great book that (6) wrings its hands over the Holocaust. I know he understood that much. So what I assume he didn't understand was Champion's discussion of Styron's take on George Steiner's view of Jewish exclusionary attitudes toward something something something. I didn't either. I think it may be possible to understand it, but I am *so bored by this conversation*. Every bit of it tires me out: it's like Lyme Disease. The Jews: "We own the Holocaust. Why is Sophie a Polish Christian?" Gays: "We were also killed." Gypsies: "What about us?" The SS: "In a way, we too were victims . . ." I couldn't follow Champion's discussion, I started skipping, I wouldn't go back to re-read it if you paid me in gold bullion. Nothing is at stake. Steiner's non-fiction,

incidentally, is almost as bad as Styron's fiction, and in the same way: it is overwritten, it wears you to a frazzle, and at the end, you have only the fading memory of a high wind.

Finally, Sophie's damn choice. This brings us to ground zero of my antipathy. We have the Holocaust. Fine. Is it evil enough for you? It is evil enough for me. You can take tons of incidents that really happened, and they are all so over-the-top, your only problem will be to scale the material back emotionally so that it doesn't overwhelm the book. What does Styron do? He *invents* an incident, which he either thinks is even *more* evil and *more* emotionally compelling than any of the horrors that actually happened, or he thinks is the emblem and embodiment of all the collected horrors rolled up into a single mind-boggling acme of maleficence. But if such an incident did happen, and it may well have, it would not be the *ne plus ultra* of Nazi evil that Styron thinks it would be: it would be a one-off; it would be a single extravagant horror owing to the perversity and dementia of a single sociopathic monster – admittedly a monster who has been given free rein by this barbaric regime to run amok, but no different from the sociopathic monsters who run amok during every catastrophe. The incident as told by Styron would not encapsulate and summarize the system and the era – it is likely that Himmler, had he heard about it, would have had the fellow executed, because he didn't like fooling around. He was a stickler for the rules. The incident would be an isolated datum, appalling and terrifying, but signifying nothing. *Styron doesn't know this*. He seems to think that Auschwitz is the ultimate evil because at Auschwitz and only at Auschwitz, things came to such a pretty pass that his made-up anecdote is plausible, whereas most of us agree with Hannah Arendt that if anything is distinctive

about the evil of Nazi Germany, it is the banality found in tens of thousands, perhaps millions, of *completely ordinary* people like Adolf Eichmann who had no idea that they were wrong to follow the instructions of respected superiors when those instructions told them to facilitate mass exterminations. You don't get a genocide because the crazy guy at the gate is so depraved that he makes a mother kill one of her children; you get a genocide because, through a series of historical accidents, the thousand-and-one normal guys inside the camp – who, when they are off work, help little old ladies across the street and keep their lawns mowed – have come to believe the fantasized apocalyptic showdown preached by their paranoid leader. It does not help that they grew up agreeing with Martin Luther that disobedience to any order given by any person who socially outranks you is the Unpardonable Sin. *Styron doesn't know this*. His very belief that the Nazi evil is inexplicable, the work of incomprehensible psychopaths, tips us off that he cannot find anything in his own experience that can connect him to the Nazis. Well, I've gotten used to being the only person I know, at least among such moralizing writers on the Holocaust, who admits forthrightly that he might not have been a hero of the resistance in Nazi Germany. I wouldn't have joined the White Rose. I would have been afraid that I would suffer the fate of its courageous members. I think most of us have it in us to get along by going along, especially as an alternative to dying very quickly. The key to preventing genocide is to stop it before it gets started – and not by hunting down ahead of time the kinds of people who become the most sadistic guards at the concentration camps, but by resisting the siren song of demagogues who inhabit purely rhetorical worlds but believe their fictions to be hard truths and plan to act on them. Once we have voted the killers into power, it is too late.

Be that as it may, if Styron cannot imagine how Auschwitz happens, then he should stay away from Auschwitz as a subject for his writing. If, with such fullness in the historical record, he has to make up his own version of it, because he is of such purity that it is incomprehensible to him, then he will only be able to produce, as he has indeed produced, a suspiciously literary version of the iconically evil event of our time. And the last thing that a genocide needs is a novelized account concocted by a self-infatuated hothouse stylist who deploys his words like so many overripe exotic fruits.