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Slavery Old and New: Styron's *Sophie's Choice*

If Percy in *Lancelot* connects the extremes of Southern traditionalism with Nazi ideology, exploring his own rejection of traditionalism and his turn instead to Catholicism, Styron in *Sophie's Choice* explores the legacy of white guilt over the horrors of slavery by connecting that legacy to that of the Nazi concentration camps. *Sophie's Choice* follows in the long line of Southern novels, most of which were written between the early 1920s and the mid-1940s, portraying characters agonizing over their Southern heritage, and particularly that of slavery and racial violence. Styron's narrator, Stingo, describes his early life as a young writer in New York, torn between his Southern and modern loyalties. It soon becomes clear that for the young Stingo to mature as an individual and an artist he must somehow integrate these two loyalties, finding a way to accept his heritage without being bound by it, thus remaining responsible to his Southern past (and identity) while pursuing his thoroughly modern aspirations. Styron complicates Stingo's psychological turmoil by connecting, at least through suggestion, the horrors of chattel slavery with those of the Holocaust. That connection comes in a narrative move positing that the logical end of Southern slavery in the nineteenth century is the Nazi concentration camp in the twentieth. As a result, the burden of Southern history for Stingo becomes in a sense the burden of German history; not only must Stingo come to terms with the transgressions of Southern slave-masters, but also with those of the Nazis.

Initially, however, Stingo's only burdens as a young man in New York are of the mundane sort – being short of money, being without a job, finding a place to live. That begins to change when he receives a letter from his father containing his share of a family inheritance – an inheritance, his father tells him, which had accumulated originally from the sale of a family slave, Artiste, who was accused, falsely

it turns out, of improper conduct with a white woman. The great-grandfather who had sold Artiste, Stingo learns from his father, had been wracked by guilt once Artiste's innocence had been discovered. "Not only had he committed one of the truly unpardonable acts of a slave-owner – broken up a family – but had sold off an innocent boy of 16 into the grinding hell of the Georgia turpentine forests," Stingo's father commented, adding that the great-grandfather had later searched desperately to find Artiste in order to buy him back, but had never found him.¹ In large part because he had already known his ancestors were slaveholders, Stingo initially has few misgivings about the origins of the inheritance; he feels more lucky than guilty for receiving the money. Over the course of his friendship with Nathan and Sophie, however, he grows more uncomfortable with the inheritance, particularly as he learns from Sophie about the Germans' use of slave labor at Auschwitz.

If he does not initially connect Southern and Nazi slavery, Stingo nevertheless certainly better understands the dark heritage of Southern slavery after hearing of Sophie's sufferings. The inheritance he had originally deemed a "phenomenal stroke of luck" (27), he thereafter deems as "blood money" (420); and when he is later robbed of what is left of the inheritance, he admits that it is a relief. Without the blood money in his pocket, Stingo feels freed from direct connection to his family's slave-owning heritage. But he quickly realizes how naive he is to think that his haunting guilt of slavery could be exorcized merely by simple theft:

Yet how could I *ever* get rid of slavery? A lump rose in my gorge, I whispered the word aloud, "Slavery!" There was dwelling somewhere in the inward part of my mind a compulsion to write about slavery, to make slavery give up its most deeply buried and tormented secrets, which was every bit as necessary as the compulsion that drove me to write, as I had been writing today, about the inheritors of that institution who now in the 1940s floundered amid the insane apartheid of Tidewater Virginia – my beloved and bedeviled bourgeois New South family whose every move and gesture, I had begun to realize were played out in the presence of a vast, brooding company of black witnesses, all sprung from the loins of bondage. And were not all of us, white and Negro, still enslaved? I knew that in the fever of my mind and in the most unquiet regions of my heart I would be shackled by slavery as long as I remained a writer. (420-21)

Stingo now sees, in other words, that his fate as artist is integrally bound up in the fate of Artiste.

It is not only Sophie who prods Stingo toward confronting the darker aspects of his Southern identity and heritage. Indeed, the more

visible and vocal challenge to Stingo's complacency comes from Nathan, who repeatedly both belittles the South and its history of racial violence and accuses Stingo of shirking his responsibility, as a privileged white Southerner, for the South's shameful treatment of black people. When he is really worked up, Nathan goes even further, claiming that racial violence is the bedrock of Southern culture, not the work of a demented few but of the entire society, in which racism has been institutionalized. Southern racial violence, Nathan concludes, mirrors that of Nazi Germany, with lynchings as barbaric as the death camps. Early in the novel, Nathan zeroes in on a recent and gruesome lynching of a black man, Bobby Weed, asking Stingo if he agrees that Weed's emasculation and death "at the hands of white Southern Americans is as bottomlessly barbaric as any act performed by the Nazis during the rule of Adolf Hitler!" (70). Stunned, shocked, but most of all offended as a Southerner, Stingo lashes back at Nathan's characterization of Southern barbarity, voicing allegiances that he typically rarely acknowledges out loud and maybe even to himself. "I'm *Southern* and I'm *proud* of it, but I'm not one of those pigs – those *troglydites* who did what they did to Bobby Weed! I was born in Tidewater Virginia, and if you'll pardon the expression, I regard myself as a gentleman!" (70). Nathan then continues his attack:

Aren't you able to perceive the simple truth? Aren't you able to discern the truth in its awful outlines? And that is that your refusal to accept responsibility in the death of Bobby Weed is the same as that of those Germans who disavowed the Nazi party even as they watched blandly and unprotestingly as the thugs vandalized the synagogues and perpetrated the *Kristallnacht*. Can't you see the truth about yourself? About the South? (71)

Although convinced of what he sees as Nathan's irrational error, Stingo is so shaken by his accusations, his once unquestioned identity challenged as it has never been before, that he is reduced not merely to silence but to gibberish, responding to Nathan with only "an odd chirping sound in the back of my throat" (71).

Later, Stingo is likewise stymied by Nathan in a conversation about Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo. While waiting for a meeting with Nathan, Stingo reads an article about Bilbo's declining health, thinking to himself how appropriate it is that the man whose mouth had spilled forth so much vileness should now be suffering from cancer of the mouth and, furthermore, how glad he is that the U.S. Senator who had become an embarrassment to many in the South would in all likelihood soon be dead and gone. Among other things, as Stingo points

out, Bilbo publicly railed against blacks and Jews, deeming blacks “niggers,” “coons,” “jigaboos” and Jews “dagos” and “kikes,” even when addressing the likes of New York Mayor LaGuardia. Despite his feelings about Bilbo, Stingo later refuses to join in Nathan’s toast to Bilbo’s impending death, saying he would never toast anyone’s suffering and demise. Enraged, Nathan asks him if he would toast the death of Hitler, a question that ignites Stingo’s Southern partisanship. “*Of course* I would toast the death of Hitler,” Stingo responds. “But that’s a fucking different matter! Bilbo’s not Hitler!” (205). Stingo then launches into a fierce attack on what he sees as Nathan’s uncalled-for attacks on the South and his willful blindness about the region. He concludes with a rousing defense of Bilbo’s achievements as populist governor of Mississippi, achievements which include, Stingo points out, the creation of highway commission, the opening of a tuberculosis program, and the institution of a tick eradication program to fight Texas fever in cattle. Nathan’s fiercely-directed interruption stops Stingo dead in his tracks: “You fool, you silly klutz. Texas fever! You clown! You want me to point out that the glory of the Third Reich was a highway system unsurpassed in the world and that Mussolini made the trains run on time?” (207). As before, Stingo collapses in the face of Nathan’s charges, crumbling, as he says, in “the shambles of my defeat” (207). Nathan’s seemingly irrational tirade linking the South with European fascism once again not only flushes out Stingo’s cherished Southern allegiances but exposes *their* fundamental irrationality – which is why Stingo is speechless when he tries to reason with Nathan and why he later says that he had defended Bilbo in the heat of fury, after “semi-hysterical energy” had propelled him “into regions of deep asininity” (206).

This last judgment comes from Stingo as the narrator of the novel, some thirty years after his conversation with Nathan. The young Stingo would never have suggested that his Southern loyalties resided in “regions of deep asininity,” and indeed he characteristically rebounds quickly when Nathan is no longer present, reasserting his Southern self and deflecting Nathan’s charges as merely the ravings of a self-righteous, arrogant Yankee Jew. That Stingo’s deep-seated Southern attitudes remain fundamentally unchanged (even while he is more self-consciously aware of them) from his experiences with Sophie and Nathan becomes absolutely clear when, near the end of the novel, he and Sophie head South toward the family farm where Stingo envisions he and Sophie settling. Stingo is utterly awash with

the agrarian dream of the traditional South: he imagines an idyllic life of self-sufficient farming with Sophie his happy wife overseeing their home and children. While a part of him recognizes that he is wallowing in rose-colored escapism, he refuses to accept that his plans could go astray – until, that is, during one of his conversations with Sophie about the happy life he foresees for them on the farm, she pulls away from him, shaken and distraught. “Oh, Stingo, I need a drink so bad,” she says, responding to Stingo’s agrarian vision (493). Sophie’s words burst Stingo’s bubble, his Southern pastoralism overwhelmed by her sufferings during the Holocaust. So crushing is the moment that Stingo feels as if he is one of the European refugees, torn from home and dead to the world. Once Sophie’s suitor and savior, he now sees himself *as* Sophie, psychologically mangled by Auschwitz. “I had identified so completely with Sophie that I felt Polish,” Stingo comments, remembering the experience, “with Europe’s putrid blood rushing through my arteries and veins. Auschwitz still stalked my soul as well as hers. Was there no end to this? No end?” (493).

There is actually an end to Stingo’s despair, and it comes at the conclusion of the novel when, in an emotional outburst, he gives himself over to his deep grief, shedding tears not only for the deaths of Sophie and Nathan, but for the other people he has known, either personally or through others, whose lives had also been crushed (including Artiste and Bobby Weed), people he describes as “a few of the beaten and butchered and betrayed and martyred children of the earth” (515). It marks the beginning of his emergence into maturity, with the novel ending with Stingo’s rebirth of sorts, as he awakes from a night of sleeping on the beach, having been staggered the evening before by his grief. But with the new day, he is ready to start anew, wiser and more responsible, and he recites to himself words that announce his emergence from the dark depths of his recent life: “*Neath cold sand I dreamed of death | but woke at dawn to see | in glory, the bright, the morning star*” (515).

It is significant that during his emotional breakdown the previous night, Stingo had shed tears for those he held dear, but not for those lost in the Holocaust, “the six million Jews or the two million Poles or the one million Serbs or the five million Russians.” He was, he explained, “unprepared to weep for all humanity” (515). Thirty years later, as narrator of the novel, the elder Stingo is much better prepared to weep for the Holocaust victims and indeed for all humanity. He is not merely older and wiser; he is much more informed about the

Holocaust and its significance, for both the history of the American South and of Western culture. Comments throughout the novel indicate that since the startling events of 1947 Stingo has pondered and read deeply about the Holocaust; writers he comments upon, characteristically to thicken his understanding of Sophie's narrative, include among others, Hannah Arendt, Bruno Bettelheim, Richard Rubenstein, George Steiner, and Elie Wiesel. By the time that he writes about his experiences with Sophie, Stingo is a successful novelist, a writer on both the contemporary South and Old South slavery. His work about the events of 1947 is Stingo's attempt to understand himself and his Southern vision, we now see, in the larger scope of all humanity, which for the writer of the late twentieth century, Stingo clearly feels, entails encompassing and accepting the burden of the Holocaust. Early in the novel, Nathan tells Stingo that Southern writing is a "worn-out tradition" and that "another genre is going to have to appear to take its place" (115). Stingo may not have believed Nathan in 1947, but the novel he writes much later indicates that he has finally come around to something close to Nathan's perspective.

As narrator of the novel and commentator on the Holocaust, Stingo is clearly a stand-in for Styron himself (a connection that Styron all but announces by patterning Stingo's literary career so closely on his own²), and certainly Stingo's musings on Southern and Nazi oppression voice Styron's own probings of what he called elsewhere "the most compelling theme in history, including the history of our own time – that of the catastrophic propensity on the part of human beings to attempt to dominate one another."³ These words come from Styron's 1978 essay-review of Richard Rubenstein's *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future*, and specifically from a discussion comparing Rubenstein's work on the Holocaust with Stanley Elkins's on slavery in the South. Both Elkins and Rubenstein stand as guiding lights for Styron in the making of *Sophie's Choice*, for it was largely through their work that he came to see a historical continuum linking Southern slave plantations with Nazi concentration camps, a continuum in the novel that Stingo the narrator in the 1970s understands but that Stingo the aspiring novelist of 1947 does not.

What Styron found so intriguing in the work of Elkins and Rubenstein, and what linked the two writers, was their positing that the Nazi concentration camp was best understood less as a death factory than as, in the words of Elkins, "a special and highly perverted instance of human slavery," a form of human mastery anticipated by the slave

system of the American South. In *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, Elkins uses studies of the crushing psychological trauma undergone by concentration camp inmates to explore what he believes was similar trauma experienced by Southern slaves as they adjusted to and, in some cases, resisted a system of absolute power. "The only mass experience that Western people have had within recorded history comparable in any way with Negro slavery was undergone in the nether world of Nazism," Elkins writes. "The concentration camp was not only a perverted slave system; it was also – what is less obvious but even more to the point – a perverted patriarchy."⁴ Elkins elaborates on the connections between the slave plantation and the concentration camp:

Both were closed systems from which all standards based on prior connections had been effectively detached. A working adjustment to either system required a child-like conformity, a limited choice of "significant others." Cruelty per se cannot be considered the primary key to this; of far greater importance was the simple "closedness" of the system, in which all lines of authority descended from the master and in which alternative social bases that might have supported alternative standards were systematically suppressed. The individual, consequently, for his very psychic security, had to picture his master in some way as the "good father," even when, as in the concentration camp, it made no sense at all. But why should it not have made sense for many a simple plantation Negro whose master did exhibit, in all the ways that could be expected, the features of the good father who was really "good"? If the concentration camp could produce in two or three years the results that it did, one wonders how much more pervasive must have been those attitudes, expectations, and values which had, certainly, their benevolent side and which were accepted and transmitted over generations. (128-30)

Styron, who first read Elkins when he was beginning work on *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, found *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* bold, arresting, and even courageous, shedding "fresh light on American Negro slavery" (95) by striking "violently through the obfuscations and preconceptions that had dictated, often self-righteously, the views of the apologists for slavery on the one hand and those of its adversaries on the other, and, in effect, demanded that the institution be examined from any number of new and different angles objectively, in all of its difficult complexity" (97).

Styron felt that Rubenstein's work on the Nazi concentration camp, which focused on Auschwitz and which drew upon Elkins' ideas, similarly opened up the debate on the complexities of the Holocaust, avoiding the thoroughly understandable emotional extremes that characteristically shaped interpretations of the Nazi camps. A para-

graph from Styron's essay-review neatly expresses the towering significance he found in what he saw as Rubenstein's groundbreaking (and groundclearing) work:

I am saying that, like Elkins, Rubenstein is forcing us to re-interpret Auschwitz – especially, although not exclusively, from the standpoint of its existence as part of a continuum of slavery which has been engrafted for centuries onto the very body of Western civilization. Therefore, in the process of destroying the myth and the preconception, he is making us see that the encampment of death and suffering may have been more horrible than we had ever imagined. It was slavery in its ultimate embodiment. He is making us understand that the etiology of Auschwitz – to some, a diabolical, perhaps freakish excrescence which vanished from the face of the earth with the destruction of the crematoriums in 1945 – is actually embedded deeply in a cultural tradition which stretches back to the Middle Passage from the coast of Africa, and beyond, to the enforced servitude in ancient Greece and Rome. Rubenstein is saying that we ignore this linkage, and the existence of the sleeping virus in the bloodstream of civilization, at the risk of our future. (97-98)

As Styron notes, Rubenstein's basic thesis asserts that with Auschwitz the Nazis created a society of total domination, one that took to their limits the cultural forces of secularization and rationality that had long been propelling the evolution of Western society toward ever more complicated manifestations of the modern industrial state and its intricate bureaucracy. In terms of the future of Western culture, Rubenstein thus finds Auschwitz's slave labor system more threatening than the camps that were solely extermination centers. "An execution center can only manufacture corpses," Rubenstein writes; "a society of total domination creates a world of the living dead that can serve as a prototype of a future social order, especially in a world confronted by catastrophic crises and ever-increasing, massive population redundancy."⁵

In his essay-review of *The Cunning of History*, Styron tipped his hat to both Elkins and Rubenstein, writing that "if slavery was the great historical nightmare of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Western world, slavery's continuation in the horror we have come to call Auschwitz is the nightmare of our own century" (95). Besides suggesting that *Sophie's Choice* might be read as a continuation of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, at least in terms of the exploration of slavery's psychological impact on the enslaved, Styron's comment goes far in explaining why he would write a novel about Auschwitz in the first place – it is the nightmare for all people of the twentieth century. It is that nightmare, of course, that Stingo in 1947 discovers in his relationship with Sophie, and it is that nightmare that

goes on to haunt him as he matures as a person and a writer. But, as Styron makes clear in the novel, attempting to grasp the significance of Auschwitz is only half of Stingo's challenge; the other half is understanding what the significance of Auschwitz has to do with his identity as a white Southerner and his responsibility to the South's benighted history.

And this brings us back to Theodore Bilbo. As we have already seen, Stingo at one point had justified Bilbo's political career by pointing to his achievements as populist governor while glossing over his disgraceful late years as U.S. Senator and suggesting that Bilbo's racist ranting and shenanigans were merely what his constituency demanded that he perform.⁶ From Stingo's perspective, which he had developed in a college term paper on Southern demagogues, Bilbo was less a villain than a victim of the South's racist system. Nathan's retort, pressing the comparison between Nazi Germany and the South, asserted that no matter what the social and political pressure to conform, people had to take responsibility for their acts, including their complicity, either active or passive, with the ruling regime.

Whatever Nathan's madness and paranoia, Stingo must come to understand his fundamental point about accepting responsibility, an understanding that he appears to be moving toward at the end of the novel when he weeps for, among others, Nat Turner and other black victims of the South's racist system. As Stingo's comments as narrator thirty years later make clear, his insight into Nathan's retort deepened over the years as he continued his study of the Holocaust, aided by the work of both Elkins and Rubenstein. So too did his understanding of Bilbo and the specific issue of the individual's responsibility within an oppressive and unjust system, aided by his reading of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann at Jerusalem*, which Stingo the narrator mentions favorably in his comments (and which Styron read closely when researching *Sophie's Choice*).

The youthful Stingo needs to see – but cannot yet see – that Eichmann had a choice and so did Bilbo. And so does he. In fact, in 1947 Bilbo himself issued a challenge to Stingo and other Americans to make a choice regarding America's future: either completely segregate blacks or witness America's destruction “by the slow but certain process of sin, degradation, and mongrelization.”⁷ Bilbo's manifesto for black repatriation to Liberia, *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization*, indeed eerily echoes the Nazis' initial plans for sending German Jews to Madagascar and their later decision to send them instead to

a divided Poland. And while Bilbo's plan, of course, differed crucially from the Nazis' in that American blacks would not be forced to move (after enough blacks moved of their own volition, Bilbo predicted, those remaining in America "will get lonesome and be more than glad to go" [290]) and while he nowhere advocated that blacks be sent to extermination camps, Bilbo's rhetoric is so apocalyptic that it does not take much imagination to foresee Bilbo, had he lived, later offering a Nazi-like solution if blacks refused to go. Certainly, Bilbo lays the groundwork in *Take Your Choice* for such a solution, announcing right off that "the writer of this book would rather see his race and his civilization blotted out with the atomic bomb than to see it slowly but surely destroyed in the maelstrom of miscegenation, interbreeding, intermarriage, and mongrelization" (np).

"Bilbo is not Hitler," the youthful Stingo says in the novel. Stingo is right – Bilbo was not a mass murderer – but what Stingo has yet to see, but will eventually, is that ultimately he must judge Bilbo not only in the context of populist governors but also in the context of the violent racism – and the slavery – of the South and Nazi Germany, a realization that will lead him to accept a further and more important insight with which Nathan had already challenged him: that as a privileged white Southerner, a Virginian gentleman, Stingo shares in responsibility for the South's racial violence, and that in the end he must judge himself not only alongside other white Southerners who did little to stop racial violence but also alongside the German populace who stood passively by while the Nazis led their nation from the street violence of *Kristallnacht* to the slave camp of Auschwitz.

Notes

- ¹ William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Random House, 1979) 32. Further citations will be cited parenthetically.
- ² For autobiographical elements in the novel, see particularly: James L. W. West III, *William Styron, A Life* (New York: Random House, 1998) 411-27.
- ³ William Styron, "Hell Reconsidered," *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings* (New York: Random House, 1982) 95. This essay originally appeared in the *New York Review of Books* 25 (29 June 1978): 10-14. Further citations are from *This Quiet Dust* and will be cited parenthetically.
- ⁴ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) 104. Further citations will be cited parenthetically.

- ⁵ Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 79.
- ⁶ It should be noted, in terms of Stingo's glossing of Bilbo's career, that only a few months before the time of the novel the U.S. Senate had refused to seat Bilbo, citing allegations of voter intimidation in his 1946 election campaign and of accepting bribes from defense contractors. "The way to keep the nigger from the polls is to see him the night before," Bilbo was reported to have said during his campaign. Bilbo's quote is from Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 250.
- ⁷ Theodore Bilbo, preface, *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* (Poplarville, MS: Dream House Publishing, 1947) np. Further citations will be cited parenthetically.

