

## NOTES AND REVIEWS

### The "French Face" of William Styron

The ongoing "Critical Essays on American Literature" series, under the general editorship of James Nagel, is one of the major occasions in recent scholarly publishing. Although its scope is not as broad as Prentice-Hall's "Twentieth Century Views"—which moves across Western literature from Homer to Bellow—the Nagel enterprise seems to me more usefully structured, more judiciously conceived. Donald Pizer's *Theodore Dreiser*, Richard Pearce's *Thomas Pynchon*, Joseph Waldmeir's *John Barth*, and Linda Wagner's *Joyce Carol Oates*, for example, compare very favorably with anything I have seen in the Prentice-Hall series.

The Casciato-West Styron collection is a model of its kind. (Arthur D. Casciato and James L.W. West III, eds. *Critical Essays on William Styron* [Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982], pp. ix + 318.). The wisdom and tact of its editors are everywhere in evidence. The volume offers a nice blend of biography, criticism, textual study, and literary reception. (There are no structuralist, phenomenological, deconstructionist, or reader response interpretations offered, probably because Styron's best critics have tended to be sober close readers rather than theorists.) *Critical Essays on William Styron* contains sections on all five of the author's extended works of fiction and his single play as well as a concluding part entitled "Styron en France." Reviews mingle with lengthy critical essays. All but two of the sections contain statements by Styron himself which "relate, in each case, to the composition, publication, or reception of the particular book" (p.ix). Casciato and West, in sum, have offered us an exacting and privileged glance at the development of a major contemporary writer, using his own words as well as those of his commentators.

*Critical Essays on William Styron* emphasizes the positive. In a certain sense it offers implicit denial of James Nagel's accurate characterization of Styron (in his general editor's note) as "America's most controversial living writer." But there is justification surely for the direction taken by Casciato and West: much of the controversy surrounding Styron has resulted in the *least* critically incisive essays and reviews; Styron has indeed been fortunate in the quality of his detractors' work. Which is not to say that *Critical Essays on William Styron* is completely without dissent. The editors do reprint Mike Thelwell's blistering attack on *The Confessions of Nat Turner* but are careful to follow it with Eugene D. Genovese's thoughtful and responsible *riposte* to Thelwell and the other contributors to *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. This is as it should be as Genovese clearly wins the argument by insisting that the blacks' "criticisms are historical and ideological, and only rarely aesthetic" (p.202), and by pointing to Styron's role in focusing uniquely valuable attention on the central hero of American Negro slave revolts.

Several of the reprinted reviews, although not outright dismissals like Thelwell's essay, are less than favorable. Thus Elizabeth Janeway warms to *Lie Down in Darkness* by characterizing it as a "fine" first novel, but finally sees it as "less satisfactory" than another first novel of 1951, *Catcher in the Rye*, which is "a really extraordinary accomplishment" (p.22). (Janeway's piece, with its predictable reviewers' language and somewhat questionable judgments, reads occasionally like pastiche.) Casciato and West skillfully balance Janeway's responses with the more incisive and more positive early reactions of Howard Mumford Jones, Malcolm Cowley, and Robert Gorham Davis to *Lie Down in Darkness*. Arthur Mizener's review of *Set This House on Fire* expresses disappointment at the "melodramatic quality," at the "straining

after tragic significance," and at "a commonplace quality that underlies much of the surface brilliance of the writing" (pp.76-77). His demurrers, however, are somehow canceled out by the enthusiasms expressed by Abraham Rothberg, Charles A. Fenton, and Louis D. Rubin (for whom "Mr. Styron is the most impressive writer of fiction of his generation" [p.94]). The reviews of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice* follow a similar pattern—with the affirmative setting the dominant tone.

Only with *In the Clap Shack* do negative soundings emerge triumphant. Clive Barnes's *New York Times* review of the Yale Repertory Theatre's performance of Styron's play strikes a note of sadness: "Unfortunately, and as I admire Mr. Styron this is not easy to say, the play comes out resembling a pilot for a TV series. Of course, on TV the ward would be a casualty ward, but that is the level of the writing, plotting and characterization" (pp.231-32). Indeed Styron's small failure as a playwright is part of a cruel historical pattern which has rarely allowed the best novelists to succeed as dramatists; the frustrations experienced by fiction writers like Flaubert, James, Joyce, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway when they tried their hands at drama are well known. The best of Styron's contemporaries who went through this baptismal rite, like John Hawkes and Saul Bellow, failed quite as honorably. Even this single lapse places the author of *In the Clap Shack* in august company.

*Critical Essays on William Styron* strikes the right balance, it seems to me, in emphasizing Styron's strengths as a fiction writer, his less obvious talents as a playwright. The reviews which Casciato and West have gathered together offer not only a history of the reception of Styron's work, but also a sense of his place in contemporary letters. The longer essays which follow the reviews in each section deepen our understanding of the oeuvre and occasionally give us privileged glances at the writer's workshop. Thus in the section devoted to *Set This House on Fire*, the editors allow five reviewers to have their say. Then they offer essays on the Kierkegaardian dimensions of the main character, Cass Kinsolving; on the confrontation in the novel between the Arcadian and the Gothic; on the transplantation of Greek myth to American soil, with the *Oedipus at Colonus* as central text. They conclude their gathering with a knowing look at the discarded opening of Styron's 1960 novel, followed by the jettisoned pages themselves. (The strategy here is to move from contemporary reception, to full-blown analysis, to textual considerations, to Styron's own words.) The less-than-skillful beginning of *Set This House on Fire*, which Styron wisely chose to suppress, is an intriguing document which reveals an author too taken with the rhythms of Nick Carraway's narrative at the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*. In fact, reviewers of the published novel were quick to introduce Fitzgerald's name when discussing certain of its verbal and narrative stratagems. By the way, Styron's excising of the opening of *Set This House on Fire* makes me think of the crucial role Fitzgerald played in the shaping of the beginning of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.

The sections devoted to Styron's three other full-length novels follow more or less the same format. *The Long March* and *In the Clap Shack*, rightly, are given briefer treatment: the novella is represented by two essays and by an afterword which Styron wrote for its Norwegian translation; the play is represented by two reviews, one by a drama critic, the other by a literary critic. The "Styron *en France*" section, which concludes the anthology, contains two essays, one of which assesses the writer's relationship with the *nouveau roman*, the other of which establishes his reputation in France.

It is difficult to imagine a more skillfully managed gathering of material about and by Styron. Casciato and West have taken their editorial assignments seriously. Both are gifted textual critics with sensitive bibliographical antennae. (West is in

fact the author of *William Styron: A Descriptive Bibliography*; no living writer, to my knowledge, has had his literary career so imaginatively charted or been served so faithfully by a bibliographer as has Styron.)

Everything in the collection is reprinted material with the exception of the final essay, Valarie M. Arms's "William Styron in France," and a headnote which John Gardner wrote especially for this occasion as a 1981 afterthought and corrective to preface his *New York Times Book Review* consideration of *Sophie's Choice*. The two French pieces, Michel Butor's "Oedipus Americanus" and Roger Asselineau's "Following *The Long March*," appear here in English translation for the first time. This coupling is interesting because one rather glaring mistake, made by Philip W. Leon in his otherwise valuable review of *Sophie's Choice*, has both authors as practitioners of the *nouveau roman* (see p.266). Butor was certainly a major *nouveau romancier*, with such novels as *L'Emploi du temps* and *La Modification* to his credit, but Asselineau has always held fast to his chair in American literature at the University of Paris—never, as far as I know, venturing into novel-writing.

*Critical Essays on William Styron* has an intentionally French look. Asselineau concludes his essay on *The Long March* with the intriguing notion that Styron is "a writer who is more French than American" (p.59). Indeed *Lie Down in Darkness* was on the *agrégation* list for the academic year 1973-74—a rare honor for a living writer—which Styron capped off with an invited lecture tour of the universities of Paris, Rennes, Nantes, and Bordeaux in April 1974. He once even admitted to an interviewer that France was his "spiritual home."

This should be kept in mind when one approaches Styron's *This Quiet Dust*, a selection of essays and reviews he wrote mainly over the past two decades. (William Styron, *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings* [New York: Random House, 1982], Pp.xii + 305.). A reading of it may suggest something of the order of Camus's *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*. It has the same sense of *engagement* and of commitment to public life—which Styron shares with a large number of French writers, including Camus, Sartre, and Malraux, and with virtually none of his American contemporaries.

*This Quiet Dust* (the title offers "chilling" words borrowed from Emily Dickinson) places the author's raw nerves on display as he confronts extra-literary as well as literary problems. The contributions to the volume engage the political and social dilemmas of our time—political conventions, the death penalty, the uncomfortable heritage of the American South, the Holocaust, pornography, and the military—as well as the belletristic. The enemies of *This Quiet Dust* are people like Mayor Richard J. Daley, General Douglas MacArthur, Lt. William Calley, and David Susskind. Its heroes are too numerous to mention, but they include a gathering of writers from Wolfe, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Warren down to James Jones, Peter Matthiessen, and Philip Caputo; a group of prisoners with names like Benjamin Reid, Peter Reilly, and James Blake (who also happens to be a writer); historians and theologians who have confronted the larger issues—of the dimensions of slavery and the Holocaust—with a sense of "moral responsibility" like Stanley M. Elkins and Rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein.

It is clear from reading *This Quiet Dust* that Styron has appreciable talents as an essayist. The "occasional prose" which fills these pages offers elegant witness to the fact that he could handsomely earn his keep as a reviewer and journalist. Indeed this expository habit is much more than a mere addendum to his fiction; it has its own distinct rhythms and rhetorical strategies.

Among the considerable values of this collection is its ability to serve as an entryway to his fiction, especially *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice*. One understands *Nat Turner* better and appreciates the untenable position of Styron's black adversaries after going through the pieces in the first section of *This Quiet Dust*, entitled simply "South." A number of items offer essential background (and even foreground) reading for *Sophie's Choice*. The review of Richard Rubenstein's *The Cunning of History*, which Styron originally wrote for *The New York Review of Books*, seems to offer the foundation stones for his 1979 novel, especially a sentence like the following: "But among the qualities which I find so powerful about Rubenstein's book, as opposed to a great deal which has been written about Auschwitz, is how, despite the foregoing, he has acquired a perspective—a philosophical and historical spaciousness—that has allowed him to anatomize Auschwitz with a knowledge of the titanic and sinister forces at work in history and in modern life which threaten *all* men, not only Jews." (pp.103-04). Styron reinforces this position in a later section of *This Quiet Dust*: "To take such a narrow view of the evil of Nazi totalitarianism is also to ignore the ecumenical nature of that evil. For although the unparalleled tragedy of the Jews may have been its most terrible single handiwork, its threat to humanity transcended even this. If it was anti-Semitic, it was also anti-Christian" (p.304). *Sophie's Choice*, with its heroine being a Polish Catholic survivor of the Holocaust, makes good these claims of a larger tragedy. Styron seems to be insisting that he has the same right to this material as a Christian that Elie Wiesel has as a Jew.

Of course, the implicit notion that writing about slave insurrections was not the exclusive province of Negro intellectuals brought about the contentious aftermath to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*—during which the author was accused of having "a vile racist imagination" and of being "morally senile" by his black antagonists. Styron, fortunately, was not similarly victimized following the publication of *Sophie's Choice*; one might have expected a polemical volume with a title like *William Styron's Sophie's Choice: Ten Jewish Survivors Respond*, but it was not forthcoming. Nothing more damaging than Pauline Kael's dismissal of the novel as "William Styron's Holocaust Gothic" (in her ill-tempered *New Yorker* review, December 27, 1982, of the movie version) has muddied the waters.

*This Quiet Dust* not only gathers together Styron's essays of two decades, but also offers a series of introductions and aftermaths—written especially for this occasion—which bring a variety of matters up-to-date. We find in these statements the willingness of the author to rethink his position on a number of concerns, "to put my thoughts in order" (p.3). *This Quiet Dust* nicely balances Styron's judgments on the seminal issues of the past twenty years with a lower-keyed, more personal series of vignettes. Some of these take the form of obituaries, such as the splendid piece of Faulkner which originally appeared in *Life* (July 20, 1962); this essay belongs in the company of Zola's famous account of Flaubert's funeral. Others are testimonials to writers who matter to him, like Robert Penn Warren and Peter Matthiessen. Still others are responses to places and circumstances. All are compellingly personal.

Styron remarks rather tellingly in his "Note to the Reader": ". . . I have applied as much effort and have spent as much time, proportionately, to the crafting of these pieces as I have to the writing of the novels." Indeed *This Quiet Dust* is more than just a random gathering of essays and reviews; it has its own special integrity and forthrightness. It brings to mind the essayistic contributions of European modernists, like Mann, Unamuno, and Valéry, who more than earned their keep as writers of nonfiction. Asselineau's claim that Styron is "more French than American" seems once again very much to the point.

The reviewers are already queuing up in their efforts to diminish *This Quiet Dust*. Thus the reviewer in *The New York Times Book Review* (November 21, 1982) suggests that novelists who have frequently turned to nonfiction, like Mailer, Vidal, and Didion, “needn’t feel threatened” by Styron’s collection. He goes on to say: “One also sees that his [Styron’s] powers are largely rhetorical, that he often calls on eloquence and passion to do the work of thought.” It seems, once again, that Styron may have to wait for the French translation before he is properly appreciated.

This least parochial of contemporary American writers, then, appears fated to have each of his books underestimated and misunderstood at home and then warmly accepted abroad, especially in France. *This Quiet Dust* will surely one day have a place next to Mann’s *Essays of Three Decades*, Valéry’s *History and Politics*, and Camus’s *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*—where it belongs.

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## Robbe-Grillet’s *Projet pour une révolution à New York*: Hegelian Dialectics as Generator of Revolution

In the pages inserted in the French edition of *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, Alain Robbe-Grillet announces a possible new organizing force for fiction, originating in the experiments of the *nouveau roman* and its descendants. Calling his method the theory of “generative themes,” he explains that the themes of a novel—its objects, events, and words—can engender both the architecture of a narration and the events that take place within it.<sup>1</sup> If we look at the initial scene of *Projet* we see, following the gaze of a first-person narrator, a surface painted to resemble wood, the nearly parallel lines that are traced upon it surrounding knots that are “round or oval and sometimes even triangular” (p. 8; p. 2).<sup>2</sup> Like a surrealist frottage, the network of painted lines generates in the eyes of the narrator first a nude young woman, bound and unconscious, and then the objects and other persons involved in what becomes the first event of the novel.

In our attempt to follow the development of characters and events from a painted network of lines, it is easy to ignore the description of the painted knots on the surface of the false wood. Yet it is the shape of these knots, I propose, and the order in which these shapes are listed that generate many of the characters and events of this novel, and also distinguish the structure of this novel from that of Robbe-Grillet’s earlier fiction. The knots are first described as “round or oval”; the circular form of several of Robbe-Grillet’s earlier novels has often been noted. In

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<sup>1</sup>Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (Paris: Minuit, 1970); translated by Richard Howard as *Project for a Revolution in New York* (New York: Grove, 1972). The *prêtre d’insérer* is not included in the published English translation.

<sup>2</sup>Page numbers within parentheses in the text are given first for the French edition and then for the English translation. I am responsible for the translated quotations, but have relied heavily on Richard Howard’s published translation.