THE STATE OF LETTERS

AN ACCIDENTAL BOSWELL

WRITING THE LIFE OF WILLIAM STYRON

JAMES L. W. WEST III

I became William Styron's biographer more or less by accident. During the summer of 1985 I was spending time in Newport News, his home city on the James River in Virginia. I was looking into the history of his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, published in 1951. That book, something of a roman à clef, was set in a fictional version of Newport News called "Port Warwick." I wanted to look at the places Styron had fictionalized—the C&O railway station where the novel begins, the James River Country Club where some of its scenes are set, and the huge shipyards that are present throughout the book. I was curious to see Styron's boyhood home in Hilton Village, a planned community built for shipyard workers just after the First World War. I also wanted to talk to people, to Styron's teachers and boyhood friends and to residents of Hilton Village who had known his father and mother during the 1930s.

My plan was to write a short book about the making of *Lie Down in Darkness*—a study of its sources, surviving drafts, bowdlerization, publication, and textual history. I quickly became aware, however, that I was gathering information for a much bigger project—a full-length biography. This information, I could see, would probably vanish in a few years. Newport News was then (as it is now) a busy industrial town with only a passing regard for its history. By 1985 the C&O station had been abandoned; the James River Country Club was undergoing renovations; and the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company, modernized and expanded, no longer resembled the industrial workyard that Styron had known as a boy. The people I was interviewing were growing older, and their memories were beginning to fade. But biographical information about Styron was there to be gathered. Should I be the one to do the gathering and, later, the one to write the life?

I had no experience as a biographer, but during that period in Newport News I found that I liked the work. Most of my scholarly labors until that point had been performed in rare-book rooms and manuscript collections, quiet places in which I sat for hours and studied the literary remains of long-dead authors. Biographical work on a living writer was different; it involved maps and photographs and local histories, telephone calls and inquiries, lunches in cafés and diners, afternoons of interviewing and nights during

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which I tried to collate and organize my notes. I liked the unpredictability of the work—never knowing exactly what might turn up or where it might lead. I also enjoyed the interviews—listening to people tell their stories and offer their insights.

Later in that summer of 1985 I visited Styron on Martha's Vineyard, where he and his wife, Rose Burgunder, maintained a summer home in the town of Vineyard Haven. I told him about my trip to Newport News and about the kinds of information I was turning up. "I seem to be working on a biography of you," I said. "If you want me to stop, I will. Otherwise I'd like to keep going." He thought for a few moments, then answered as I had hoped he would. "Why don't you just go ahead," he said. "I'll be curious to know what you find." We talked for another half-hour and came to an understanding. I would proceed, asking only for permission to examine his literary papers. I would check in from time to time and tell him how the investigations were going; he would not ask to see the chapters as I wrote them. ("You and I are working the same territory," he said.) He would wait until I had finished the manuscript and would then read it to be sure I had not made factual errors. Otherwise I was on my own.

Colleagues have since told me that this was an extremely loose arrangement. A lawyer friend all but insisted that I have a series of documents drawn up for Styron to sign, guaranteeing me the right to say whatever I wanted in the biography and to quote anything I found in the letters and manuscripts. I gave this matter some thought but decided that the lawyer was wrong. Styron trusted me and did not appear to be worried about what I might find. Our gentlemen's agreement seemed to be sufficient for him. "Write your book," he told me. "I've never done anything I'm truly ashamed of."

After that summer in Martha's Vineyard, I gathered and wrote for twelve years. Styron kept his word: he never asked to read anything I had written and allowed me full access to his papers. He gave me permission to quote whatever I wanted to quote and even passed along documents from his college years and from his stints in the Marine Corps. I made a habit of visiting him two or three times a year; we would have sessions in which I told about the old girlfriends and schoolmates and fellow writers I had been interviewing. I would give him a lead, often no more than a sentence or two, and his memory would kick in, sending him off on flights of recollection. I listened and later wrote down his words; later still I verified the accuracy of what he had said. After I had begun to compose the chapters I would telephone him occasionally. "I married you off the other day," I would tell him, or "You and Rose visited Jim and Gloria Jones in Paris last week." He would laugh and talk about a tour of the Greenwich Village bars that he and Jones and the actor Montgomery Clift had made in 1951, just after *Lie Down in Darkness* had appeared; then he'd recall a scene from ten or twelve years later, with him and Jones sitting on a beach somewhere in Europe, at Biarritz or Deauville, telling stories and playing their harmonicas.

These conversations were pleasant for Styron at a time when he needed distraction. He had experienced a serious psychic depression in the late fall and winter of 1985, not long after he had agreed to let me write his life. He had recovered and written *Darkness Visible* (1990), an account of his temporary madness. Most of the time now he was functional, but his depression would return occasionally, especially during the winters. There were periods when he did not want to see anyone; during those months I kept reading and traveling and writing. Eventually he would become himself again, and I would pay a visit—either to his place in Vineyard Haven or to his winter home in Roxbury, Connecticut. I was always impressed by his mental toughness and his will to recover.

On a few of these visits I went along with the Styrons to social events—dinners and parties and receptions—and I saw what kind of company they kept. Sometimes Styron would introduce me as his Boswell, an announcement that evoked complicated reactions from his literary friends. Mostly, though, I was not identified and was able to circulate anonymously. I remember having a conversation with Walter Cronkite about the bank robbers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, whom he (as a cub reporter) had interviewed a month or so before they were shot to death in Louisiana. I had a discussion with Mia Farrow about F. Scott Fitzgerald's life several years after she had played Daisy Buchanan in a movie of *The Great Gatsby*. I made Arthur Miller laugh with a mildly scurrilous joke. For the most part, though, I stayed quiet, listened, and observed.

After much more interviewing and research, writing and travel, I finished the manuscript. Composing the chapters was pleasurable: it involved storytelling instead of argumentation and exegesis. It also involved the blending of testimony—from the people I had interviewed, from members of Styron's family, and from Styron himself. I kept my own voice neutral. Much of what I did was stitching together evidence from letters, manuscripts, and published sources into a continuous narrative, a story of Styron's personal and professional life. I completed the manuscript in the fall of 1997 and sent it to Styron in Roxbury. He read through the chapters and made a list of what he thought might be errors. I checked and found that sometimes he was right, but sometimes I was correct. This amused us both.

The next spring Styron and I traveled together to an event in Richmond. He was to give a reading at the Library of Virginia, and I was to introduce him. The biography was in press. The night before the reading, Styron and I were taken out to dinner by a young man from the library. This fellow was pleasant company; he had read Styron's writings and had sharp observations to make. At one point it emerged that Styron had read my biography in manuscript and that the book was scheduled to come out soon. The young man thought of a question for me: "Mr. West," he said, "what did you do when you came to a place in Mr. Styron's life where you didn't know what happened—where the record was bare?" "Oh," I answered, trying for a

laugh, "I just made something up." Styron, sitting across from me, paused a beat and then added this remark: "Yes," he said, "those were the parts of the book that I enjoyed the most."

The biography, called *William Styron, A Life*, was published in the spring of 1998. Styron seemed pleased with it but never told me that he was. I visited him occasionally and appeared with him a few times at book signings and on college campuses. He kept busy with various writing projects. Most of the items he produced were short—introductions, prefaces, and opinion pieces for magazines and newspapers. He had a novel in the works that he was calling "The Way of the Warrior," a narrative about service in the Marine Corps during the Second World War. I knew that he was having difficulty with the manuscript. Some years earlier he had read parts of the novel aloud to me, and I was curious to know how it was progressing. After asking him about it once or twice, however, I learned not to bring up the subject. Styron had always been a slow methodical writer. He had not rushed himself in the composition of his novels, taking several years to complete each one. He had rarely composed more than a thousand words a day; he had also rarely missed a day of work. Now, however, these habits of doggedness and self-discipline began to work against him. He found himself unable to recast writing that he had already set to paper and was derailed more than once by recurrences of his depression. The regimen that had served him well in his best years, when he possessed focus and stamina, failed him at the end.

At some point after the publication of the biography, an incident took place that epitomized Styron's problems with "The Way of the Warrior." He had been working on a draft of the novel in an upstairs room of the Roxbury house, a bedroom that he had converted into a study. He had arranged the parts of the novel-in-progress in discrete piles of manuscript and had laid them out on a double bed that sat next to a window. Also on the bed were some other manuscripts, including an unfinished memoir of his father's last days and a beginning for a short story based on his freshman year at Davidson College. The stacks of paper were not secured by paper clips or clamps.

Styron paused to take a weekend trip with Rose. The spring weather had been warm; he left the window open in his work room. While he was away, a violent weather disturbance occurred in Roxbury, a microburst that blew down trees and shattered windows in the town and surrounding area. A powerful wind came through the window and into Styron's work room. It lifted the piles of handwritten sheets into the air, swirling them about and scattering them across the rug, into an adjacent hall, and down a flight of stairs. Pages from the novel were intermixed with manuscript leaves from the other projects; the drafts were jumbled and in disarray. Styron returned to find other damage—the room wrecked, his table upset, his lamp broken, and pictures from the walls blown to the floor. He spent the better part of two days trying to clean up the mess and put the manuscripts back into their

proper piles, but the task was beyond him. He found it thoroughly dispiriting to sift through the pages of so many uncompleted writing projects. He gave up the effort, gathered the loose sheets together, and put them into a large cardboard box. He gave the box to me later that spring, and I took it to the Special Collections Library at Duke University, Styron's alma mater, where the majority of his literary papers are kept. The curators there tried to put the drafts into a semblance of order, but some of the sections were incomplete. These manuscripts are still at Duke: several scenes are present in their entirety; others survive only in fragments. Styron was entirely aware of the symbolism of the storm. The powerful winds that had invaded his work room were like the storms of depression that had invaded his brain, leaving him disoriented, confused, and incapable of writing.

Styron's last years were difficult. He suffered a series of strokes, contracted cancer, and endured malnutrition and pneumonia. I visited him several times each year, but our talks were limited. He could carry on a conversation but could not initiate one; toward the end he was not capable of consecutive thinking. "I feel like my brain's been hijacked," he told me. For much of his life he had lived inside his mind, playing with language, testing out ideas, imagining and dreaming. To have these pleasures denied, to have his brain crippled and short-circuited—these were cruel blows.

During his last two years Styron underwent numerous medical procedures and endured long periods of hospitalization. He went through psychotic episodes, experienced hallucinations, and was sometimes suicidal. He endured these periods, always hoping for a day when he could resume his regular afternoon walks, a habit since the 1970s. Eventually he ceased to write and was unable to appear in public. On November 1, 2006, he died on Martha's Vineyard of pneumonia and various complications. Rose and all four of their children were beside him at the end. His ashes are buried on Martha's Vineyard in a small nineteenth-century graveyard not far from his house on High Hedge Lane.

William Styron attained most of his goals as a writer. He moved across racial, ethnic, and class boundaries and refused to accept limitations on voice or subject matter. He endured noisy criticism for *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice* but maintained to the end that it was his duty to imagine the world through the minds of others. He produced a short but formidable shelf of major works and enjoyed much critical and commercial success. Three of his books ascended to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller lists; he earned the Prix de Rome, the Pulitzer Prize, the American Book Award, the Howells Medal, and the Legion of Honor. He is also having an active posthumous career. Random House published a collection of his personal essays called *Havanas in Camelot* in 2008; *The Suicide Run: Five Tales of the Marine Corps* appeared from the same publisher in 2009. *Letters to My Father*, a collection of over one hundred letters from Styron

fils to Styron père, was published by Louisiana State University Press also in 2009. Styron's writings are being reissued as e-books, and a volume of his correspondence is in preparation, to be edited and introduced by Rose. Their daughter Alexandra has recently published an excellent memoir about Styron called *Reading My Father*.

In one of his notebooks F. Scott Fitzgerald characterized literary biography in three sentences: "There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people if he's any good." Styron's personality can be understood in this way. He was an intensely private man who wanted a public voice. He was keen to receive praise but uncomfortable when it came; he was apprehensive about the act of writing but handled language with confidence and panache. He disliked negative criticism but courted it in almost everything he wrote. He was a devoted family man but was uncomfortable within the bounds of marriage and fatherhood. Styron was indifferent to money but did not hesitate to spend it, punctilious in his professional life but prone to lateness and disorganization when he traveled, intellectually open but politically dogmatic. He could be ornery and pigheaded when aroused, gracious and charming when stroked. He loved his wife and children but was awkward in expressing affection; he was remote and abstracted around most people but was a steadfast and attentive friend. He formed his opinions slowly, from observation and study, but once he arrived at a position he would not back down from it. He did not appear to read personality well and was reluctant to talk about the behavior of others, yet he created complex unpredictable characters in his novels, figures that come to life on the page and stay in the memories of his readers. He had almost nothing to offer in literary discussions and rarely spoke of what he was reading, but he was broadly educated and could write capacious and penetrating criticism. He appeared to give little of himself to others but attracted loyal friends and defenders, people who were moved by his difficulties and who loved him. The inner workings of his personality were mysterious, the sources of his talent finally unknowable.

Toward the end of his life Styron came to feel that he had not written enough—that there were other subjects he might have addressed, other stories and novels he could have put into print. But, given his apprehensions about writing and his perfectionism, it is remarkable that he produced as much as he did. He performed at a consistently high level throughout his career. Styron was one of the major authors of his generation, not only in his native country but in Europe and the rest of the world. His work—meditative, complex, and stylistically brilliant—survives him and now takes its place among the most important writing produced during the twentieth century.

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