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Writing in Darkness and Light

By Edward Kosner

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William Styron, the author of "Lie Down in Darkness," "The Confessions of Nat Turner" and "Sophie's Choice," among other books, died at 81 in 2006, devastated by a second long siege of the depression he had chronicled in "Darkness Visible." His most poignant book, though, might be the just-published compilation of hundreds of letters that he sent over a half century to kinfolk, teachers, lovers, editors and fellow writers. "Selected Letters"—which would be better titled "The Confessions of William Styron"—lets the reader glimpse what his widow, Rose, calls "his secret life."

SELECTED LETTERS OF WILLIAM STYRON

Ed. by Rose Styron & R. Blakeslee Gilpin
Random House, 672 pages, \$40



William Styron in 1981. SOPHIE BASSOULS/SYGMA/CORBIS

Styron occupies a slightly blurry place in the pantheon of post-World War II American writers, perhaps a half-step shy of the masters Bellow, Mailer and Roth but secure in his achievement. Through talent, persistence and a tireless gift for friendship and literary politicking, he propelled himself from a dozy village near Newport News in Tidewater Virginia to the quality-lit nirvana of best sellers, lush movie deals, Paris, Ravello and Martha's Vineyard. Styron was present at the creation of the Paris Review in the 1950s. Jack and Jackie Kennedy took him sailing off the Vineyard on a presidential yacht. He campaigned with the poet Robert Lowell for Eugene McCarthy in 1968 and had the Clintons over for dinner 30 years later. He palled around with the war novelist James Jones, Frank Sinatra, and playboys Porfirio Rubirosa and the Aga Khan, feuded for decades with Mailer, drove a Jaguar XJ6, and was married to the same woman for more than 50 years.

For a writer who painfully extruded each sentence in his novels, he was an amazingly prolific and conscientious correspondent, as this selection, edited by Rose Styron and R. Blakeslee Gilpin, amply demonstrates. And he was something of an epistolary ventriloquist, with distinctly different voices—and degrees of candor—for different pen pals.

Barely 22, Styron wrote to his father in 1947: "Writing for me is the hardest thing in the world, but also a thing which, once completed, is the most satisfying." Four years later, he had finished "Lie Down in Darkness" and proclaimed to his father: "Some people . . . will . . . think the book is filled with a sense of needless despair. I don't much care what they think. . . I've done what the true artist must do: paint life honestly according to his vision."

Despite this prideful passage, Styron's tone in 35 years of letters to his father, an engineer, was modest and respectful. He struck the same note in the dozens of letters to William Blackburn, his writing mentor at Duke, with whom he stayed in touch for more than 20 years after graduating in 1947. But to others he was ribald and convivial. Writing to James Jones in 1965, he describes a weekend visit to the Vineyard by Jackie Kennedy: "We swam around quite a bit on the ocean beach and I rubbed a good deal of Sea n' Ski foam on the widow's thighs. . . I hate to make it sound like such a sexy weekend . . . but our baby sitter got laid by one of the Secret Service."

And Styron could sometimes be two-faced when ridiculing competing writers, often pals whose work he later slavishly praised. "I wonder if Jim Jones knows how really bad he is," he writes early on to Mailer, and later confides to Jones that Mailer "has fipped his lid." He calls J.D. Salinger "a pr—k," Irwin Shaw, eventually a dear friend, "something of a jerk," and sneers at Gore Vidal, "that talentless, self-promoting, spineless slob." After appearing on a panel with poets Allen Tate, W.H. Auden, Lowell and Stephen Spender, and the Chicago novelist James T. Farrell, he pronounces them all "terrible bores."

Reading Styron's correspondence in the 21st century can be jarring when racial, religious and sexual slurs surface without visible irony in letters to chums. Still, he could be a solicitous friend, generous with suggestions and constructive critiques to fledgling writers seeking his help. He almost reflexively invites Prof. Blackburn and literary pals like Jones, Peter Matthiessen, Carlos Fuentes, Robert Penn Warren, their wives and countless others to visit the Styrons in Roxbury, Conn. and Vineyard Haven or to meet up on European getaways. Styron's social life as cataloged in these pages is so strenuous that it's a wonder that he had the energy to turn out so many novels, magazine essays and columns and handwrite all that correspondence.

For all the emotion animating the letters, Styron can sound as matter-of-fact as a cobbler totting up a day's heels and resolves when recounting his labors on a novel. He's constantly reporting how many typed pages he has amassed on a work-in-progress and when—invariably optimistically—he expects to be finished.

Styron rarely philosophized in his letters, but he opened up in an extraordinary way when his first-born, Susanna, then 17, wrote to him in 1972 about her existential "wrasling" with life's quandaries. In his reply, he introduces her to epiphanies—"instances of intense revelation (through love or a glimpse of transcendental beauty in the natural world) which gave such a sense of joy and self-realization that that they justified and, in effect, ratified . . . existence. In other words, the existential anguish becomes undone; through moments of aesthetic and spiritual fulfillment we find the very reason for existence. The creative act in art often approaches this, but it can work on humbler levels as well . . . I think I tried to render this quality of revelation—'epiphany' in a part of 'Nat Turner.'"

In more prosaic letters to others, Styron is routinely quick to point out flaws in his own fiction, but he seethes at criticism from academics and other snooty reviewers. Indeed, Styron's letters can be read as an aggrieved litany. "Lie Down in Darkness" was ignored by most highbrow critics, and his angst-ridden second novel, "Set This House on Fire," was mostly savaged. The French adored his work; the British couldn't have cared less. But the real trauma of his professional life was the assault on "The Confessions of Nat Turner" in 1967.

In the midst of the surge of black consciousness spurred by the civil-rights movement, Styron chose to reimagine the inner life and death of Turner, who led a murderous slave rebellion in 1831. The two leading black writers of the era, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, defended Styron, but other black intellectuals and left-wing whites vilified his presumption.

"Nat Turner" was Styron's first best seller—a huge critical and commercial success. He won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and sold the movie rights alone for the equivalent of more than \$4 million today. But nothing could assuage Styron's sense of betrayal, and he nursed his wounds and sought vindication until his death. He feared a similar uproar when he chose as the heroine of his next novel a Holocaust victim who was a Polish Catholic rather than a Jew. But the outcry never materialized. "Sophie's Choice" (1979) was an even bigger smash than "Nat Turner," especially after Meryl Streep and her perfect accent won the Oscar as Sophie.

Styron was now rich and more famous than infamous, but the shadows were closing in. Actually, his first mention of depression came in a letter to Mailer from Rome in 1953, in which Styron went on to lament: "Everything I write . . . is of the same rough pattern of my day-to-day life—that being one of caution, trepidation and cowardly fears." A year later, he talks of "writer's block" and tells Mailer: "I seem to finally have become gripped by [a] creeping paralysis." The year after that, he alerts his mentor, Blackburn, to his fight against "incipient and dreary alcoholism."

One way or another, Styron held off his nemeses for 30 years. But right after Thanksgiving in 1985, he began, as Rose described it, "going down the tubes" and finally checked himself into Yale-New Haven Hospital to be treated for suicidal depression. The next spring, he wrote to the novelist Phil Caputo: "Depression is a horrible and mysterious malady; the only good thing to be said about my form of the illness is that such depressions almost always resolve themselves for the better, even after forcing one to the very edge of the abyss."

He did, indeed, bounce back. In 1990, Styron published his memoir of Depression, "Darkness Visible," and began to lecture about his experience. But the illness recaptured him 10 years later, and he underwent shock treatments.

After a lifetime of correspondence pulsating with vitality, he sent a sad little note to his biographer, James West: "Jim, I'm having a very bad time. I hope to make it through but in case I do something to myself I trust you will make [this] letter public." Enclosed was this:

I hope that readers of "Darkness Visible"—past, present and future—will not be discouraged by the manner of my dying. The battle I waged against this vile disease in 1985 was a successful one that brought me 15 years of contented life, but the illness finally won the war. . . To all of you, sufferers and non-sufferers alike, I send my abiding love.

Enfeebled by strokes and a brush with cancer, his will and his pen drained, Styron died five years later.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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