The
Sewanee Review

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Elizabeth Spencer: A Tribute to Walker Percy
An Interview with William Styron

Summer 1991

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Interviewer: In your books we frequently find a strong affinity for classical music—you mention Scarlatti, for example, in *Set This House on Fire*. How did this interest of yours come about?

Styron: My mother was deeply into music. She wanted to be a singer, and actually studied in Vienna. Living in Newport News, Virginia, you didn’t have too many concerts, but we did have those old-time shellac records. And there were radio broadcasts: the Sunday Philharmonic, the beginning of the Texaco Opera Programs on Saturday, the Ford Sunday Evening Hour, and the Longines Symphonette, which played every day for a half hour or so. All of these were pathetic attempts to bring highbrow music to the public.

Interviewer: Did you happen to be listening to the Sunday Symphony when news of Pearl Harbor interrupted the program?

Styron: I was up in Middlesex County, Virginia, having lunch with some kids from prep school. Someone had borrowed a car, and we were in this tiny little restaurant in a town called West Point when the waitress came up to the table and told us about a radio report of the Japanese attack. She thought Pearl Harbor was in South Carolina, and this scared her.

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Interviewer: Does your volunteering for marine duty imply that you were desperately anxious to get into the war?
Styron: You might say that. I joined the marines soon after I turned seventeen, mainly because I didn’t want to be in the army, which lacked glamor.

Interviewer: When you were first at Duke University with the marines, was the Marine Corps’ objective just to have better educated officers?
Styron: I think it was a rather enlightened concept. They wanted officers to have an education, yes, but also to grow seasoned, so to speak, in a university environment. I think it was a pretty good idea that they wanted more cultured officers.

Interviewer: It was a little like ROTC before its time?
Styron: That’s right. It was a version of ROTC. Duke was a military campus during the war, and they also had an Army Finance School then. The marine base actually was Duke University. My return address and my mail was Marine Detachment, Duke University. They had a commanding officer who was a major in the Marine Corps and they had sergeants and corporals. You went to school every day like any other student except that you wore your uniform and had to be quite military in your appearance. And in the morning there was reveille. In good weather we were all told to fall out in gym clothes. We would run about three miles every morning, and then we would go to the mess hall in the Union and then go to classes. On the weekend we learned how to do close-order drill with imaginary rifles. We were permitted to go off the campus only on weekends and then we had to sign out, just as you would on a military base. These guys who were supervising us were pretty tough, and you had to keep up a very high academic level of grades.

Interviewer: Your idea of *The Long March* only came with the second tour of duty?
Styron: That was when I was called back into service for the Korean war. I was stupid enough to stay in the reserves and that was a very bad mistake. The idea was that we will advance you in rank from second to first lieutenant; you don’t have to do anything except be in the reserves. And it was kind of a stroking of your ego. Advancement. I was made a first lieutenant with no responsibility, and then all of a sudden here five years later was another war—another standard stupid war.

Interviewer: But you didn’t actually go to Korea.
Styron: I went down to Camp Lejeune and trained there for about eight and a half months. The reason I got out was that I had a defective eye. I had cataracts on my eye. It was interesting because I was desperate to get out . . . I didn’t want to go to Korea and get killed. I knew I had these cataracts—for which I incidentally have recently been operated on, and I can see perfectly now with the lens implant. It’s a
wonderful operation. But I was born with these cataracts, and all during World War II I was always going into contortions to get waivers, exceptions made for me, in order to stay in the Officer Candidates School. In my right eye I had seriously defective vision, which I made up for in binocular vision because my left eye had much better vision. So I didn’t have to wear glasses, but when it came to shooting a rifle I was very, very defective, and I had to do all sorts of things—almost get an act of Congress—to get the marines to let me stay in during World War II. I wanted to fight the Japs, as everyone called them then. I really wanted to stay in and be a marine officer, and that’s what I did. They gave me these exceptions and waivers, and I stayed in.

Then came the Korean war, which I did not want to fight in, and the first thing I did when I went to have my physical exam was to point to my eyes. They said, forget it, we are accepting you; and so I went to Camp Lejeune with this severely defective vision and was in an infantry battalion just ready to go to Korea when all of a sudden I conceived of a strategy. Every year, whether you are an officer or an enlisted man, you have to qualify for marksmanship on the rifle range. I went out to the rifle range, and I began to spray bullets all over everyone else’s target except my own. Then I went to the rifle coach and said Look, I am having trouble with my vision. He said Well, lieutenant, I suggest that you go to the regimental dispensary and have your eyes checked out.

So I went to the ophthalmology section of the regimental hospital, and there was a young ophthalmologist there of about my own age—mid-twenties—who had also been called back to navy service and was bitter and angry, and he took one look with that little scope and said You have a cataract problem and I am going to write you up a recommendation for discharge. He did, right that very minute, and he sent it to his superior with the stamp OK. Two weeks later I was out. I was saved. Otherwise I was ready to go to Korea and fight.

Just by chance my discharge coincided with the publication of Lie Down in Darkness, so I came back to New York from Camp Lejeune, and it was wonderful because the book was quite successful.

Interviewer: Indeed it was. You credit Professor Blackburn of Duke as a catalyst for your talent, but if you had never gone to Duke, don’t you think you would have probably written the novel anyway?

Styron: I suppose I would have. That’s one of those imponderable questions, but I don’t know if I could have been a writer without Duke.

Interviewer: Blackburn gave you the confidence that you could do the job?

Styron: He was a wonderful mentor.

Interviewer: Hiram Haydn also was very important at that time?
Styron: He was my teacher in New York at the New School for Social Research. He came along at an important moment. I think that this mentor relationship is very important for young men.

Interviewer: Blackburn sent you up to Hiram Haydn, and then Haydn helped you get published?

Styron: Well it wasn’t just that. In fact Haydn was at that time editor-in-chief of Crown Publishers, which at that time published mostly coffee-table books and sports books. But Hiram persuaded the publisher, Nat Wartels, his boss, to move the company in the direction of fiction, and to give contracts to promising young writers, of which I was one. So I remember getting as my first advance on the contract what seemed to me an enormous amount of money—$100. It was an option.

Interviewer: Along with Haydn and Blackburn there is a lot of influence of your own father. We find many references to him in your work.

Styron: Oh yes. He was a very intelligent man, very sensitive. He was not particularly literary, but he knew and valued language. He was well spoken, he used language well. He wrote letters that were very pleasing.

Interviewer: Did he have you learn Bible verses and such things?

Styron: Nothing so direct as that. He was religiously observant, I guess you would say, but he was not a devout person. He valued the Bible, but I think he valued it largely for literature.

Interviewer: You show a thorough knowledge of the Bible yourself.

Styron: I think I got that when I went to Davidson, where I was forced to take two years of study in the Bible. It helped to form my religious background. But the value of the King James Bible has been watered down in other translations.

Interviewer: I believe your novel about Nat Turner gets its ultimate power from biblical analogies.

Styron: I think I wouldn’t have been able to write about the figure as I did had I not been fairly grounded in biblical lore.

If the language of the Bible were to die out, it would mean we have no use for the language anyway, that we are all down the drain, because I think that the great achievement of the Renaissance was the language. Actually it was the language in its modern creation. The King James Version coincided with the creation of what we now call our modern English and that’s what makes it so powerful. I think if we lose the effect of its power and poetry, it means that we are abandoning language.

Interviewer: What we have left is technology.

Styron: We have Dan Rather. But I think as long as the language stays alive, the Bible, the King James Version of the Bible, will always have its meaning. I just can’t imagine it disappearing overnight.

Interviewer: Is there any reason that leads you to write in the tragic mode? Because, from Lie Down in Darkness to Sophie’s Choice, I often
see you compared with great masters of tragedy like Sophocles and Dostoyevski and Faulkner.

Styron: I guess I was just attracted to literature of that sort, so I suppose I responded in the same way.

Interviewer: You also display quite a strong comic sense at times. The story about the seduction of Leslie in Sophie's Choice is high comedy. I had a Jewish student at the time who said if ever a girl actually deserved to be raped, she is the one.

Styron: She was based on a Duke girl. There were girls like that of that generation whom males of my generation still resent deeply.

Interviewer: Was there a chance you might have fallen in love with the real Sophie?

Styron: I don't think that would have been possible because, for one thing, she was about ten years older than I was, so therefore she was not really available. A woman of 31 is still young, but is markedly older in the eyes of a 21-year-old.

Interviewer: Was there any connection between meeting Sophie and Lie Down in Darkness? Between her and Peyton's tragedy?

Styron: I don't think there's any direct connection. I don't actually know what happened to the real Sophie. I mean, that was fiction. I stayed in that house where the real Sophie lived only, I would say, about six weeks, and then I left. I left in the middle of the summer of 1947 and moved up the Hudson River.

Interviewer: Stingo's friend Nathan looks very real to me. Did you meet someone like that?

Styron: No. He's really a composite of a lot of guys I've known with all sort of antics—a romantic sort like some Jewish friends I've had.

Interviewer: Nathan is a familiar sort of fanatic about baseball. I remember that was the time the Dodgers had their great Boys of Summer period.

Styron: There are plainly autobiographical elements in that book, but most of it is fiction. Imagined.

Interviewer: Well, not only that, but wasn't reading a very important source of material for Sophie's Choice? You studied the Holocaust very intensely?

Styron: I had to read a certain amount. I am not a scholar, but I have a fairly retentive mind and I did read many books to absorb what I felt was basic information about the Holocaust.

Interviewer: Was your primary source Raoul Hilberg's The Destruction of the European Jews?

Styron: I never read that, as a matter of fact. I know about it, of course.

Interviewer: You did read about Rudolf Hoess.

Styron: I read his autobiography. One of the important things in mak-
ing Sophie was actually going to Auschwitz. In 1975 I felt a strong need to see the place. So I went there. Among other things I remember they were selling English translations of the autobiography of Rudolf Hoess. There were other books about the camp, about Hitler, and various things. A very important book for me was Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem.

I didn't read a great deal. In fact I consciously tried to avoid that, because I wanted to be accurate but I didn't want to get so deeply into it that I would smother myself. I think when you write about historical matters you can give the unfortunate impression of too much research. It shows through.

Interviewer: Like a dictionary.

Styron: Exactly. A dictionary is a very good example. It looks like a catalogue. You want to avoid that. There is a great essay by Sir Walter Scott on writing historical fiction. He says that a person who writes about history must try to avoid writing so that it becomes, I suppose you could say, costume melodrama. He was in effect saying that writing about history must have a resonance in the modern time. An example would be a book about Queen Elizabeth I. Unless you can make that experience meaningful in the twentieth century, you might as well write a nonfiction book. Otherwise it becomes historical romance. It has no resonance for us. The thing I was lucky with in Nat Turner was I was writing about a subject that has incredible resonance for our time. When I began to think about writing that novel back in the 1940s, when I was a kid, I had no inkling of how it would play out in terms of the events of 1967 and 68 when the whole country was inflamed. This resonance is what the writing of history must have. George Lukács emphasizes over and over how necessary it is for the writing of historical fictional narrative to have meaning for the writer's period of time.

Interviewer: You did call Nat Turner "A Meditation on History."

Styron: I think I must have been lucky or intuitive about Sophie and Nat.

Interviewer: Set This House on Fire was well received by the French, partly perhaps because it implies a real picture of Bill Styron when he was a young writer in France and Italy. In that novel again you allude to Sophocles and other Greek tragic writers. How can you put Greek tragedy and modern tragedy in a comparative perspective?

Styron: I am still fascinated, I must say, by the Greek view. What interests me, among other things, is how the concept of tragedy is related to the concept of a nation. The Greeks defined tragedy—along with comedy too—but they thought of tragedy as a necessary function in the enactment of cultural events. This belief our culture has either subconsciously avoided or escaped. In many ways that avoidance diminishes us. It prevents us from maturing as human beings. I think the comic
sense is marvelous. It's a wonderful thing if it happens, but what bothers me is the spirit of a culture which in effect values not so much the comic but the frivolous. I suppose that one should strive for a philosophy that embraces a variety of emotions. This does not mean that we should seek to be somber. We need relief, and that's wonderful, but the conscious turning away from the tragic aspect of life diminishes us.

**Interviewer:** We are not really experienced in tragedy as a nation. We have had two national civil wars, if you count Vietnam. They did force us to experience tragedy, but we try to expunge the memory.

**Styron:** I think so. I remember essays by D. H. Lawrence in which he said that what the United States needed—what Americans needed—he used the phrase "death happening." He said we had never experienced a death happening. He was aware that the Civil War had been a terrible event, but I think he was saying that we had never on our own soil experienced catastrophe. We've never had an invasion by foreigners. We've never been subjected to bombardment. We have had plenty of natural disasters—that is something we are versed in—but that's the universal factor. As a nation we've never had the horrible catastrophic invasions such as the Russians suffered over and over again or even as the British suffered during World War II with the incredible bombardment. The South did suffer that sort of experience, and that's why I think it fostered more of a tragic sense than other regions.

**Interviewer:** The South is more conscious of its history than other regions, but there is some controversy whether Styron is a southerner or not.

**Styron:** A lot of things form your sensibility. I have much in me that is very southern. I wrote an essay that was in the *Sewanee Review* in fall 1990, called "A Voice From the South," in which I tried to identify myself in many ways as a southerner by virtue of the fact that my father was profoundly southern, and my grandmother suffered privation during the Civil War and told me about it. I have very distinct, solid links with the South. On the other hand, my mother was a northerner from western Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh.

**Interviewer:** One thing that does seem distinctively southern in your books is a strong sense of guilt, reminiscent of Faulkner.

**Styron:** Yes, guilt toward social injustices.

**Interviewer:** It's probably stronger in people like you and Faulkner than it would be in a northerner who doesn't feel implicated in social injustice or is likely to turn it more toward a superficial social protest.

**Styron:** The legacy of slavery has made the difference. On one hand, I think it is ridiculous to feel guilt over something you had nothing to do with. But you can feel responsibility, which is another thing about the legacy of something like slavery, and that legacy as we all know is around us to this day in the form of all the social injustices that are hap-
pening. I always was bothered by social injustice. I think I have an instinctive reaction against misuse of authority. I have been strongly rebellious in a personal way against authority, and have at times gotten myself into deep trouble. It was very hard for me to be a marine.

**Interviewer:** So there is a lot of you in Captain Mannix?

**Styron:** I was that way as a kid. I remember I couldn’t stand it when, let’s say, a minister would push his weight around. One time I got very violently rebuked by a preacher on a picnic. I was plainly taunting him, something about him bugged me. I couldn’t have been more than about eleven or twelve, but there was something about him I hated—this smugness, the idea that he had the key to things. That may be one of the reasons I’ve been always antiecclesiastical or anticlerical.

**Interviewer:** That helps explain the Reverends Eppes and Whitehead in *Nat Turner*, as well as the Anglican divine in *Lie Down in Darkness*. But one puzzle to me is the role of Daddy Faith. He’s a wonderful figure, and he is necessary in *Lie Down in Darkness*, but I’ve never been sure how to judge Daddy Faith. He’s clearly a con man, but he does fill a real need in his followers.

**Styron:** When I wrote that novel I was mature enough to be aware that the persons I based him on were con men. Newport News, where I grew up, had a huge black population. Because of the shipyard there were a lot of black laborers, with about 35 to 40 percent black people in the city. In those days there were not many southern cities that had a large population of blacks, partly because the blacks were still rural. But Newport News was an exception, and to satisfy the religious needs of this large number of black people we had two grandiose ecclesiastics. One was called Bishop Grace and the other one was called the Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux. And they were at each other’s throats all the time because they were rivals. Each had claim on a certain membership.

And they had these magnificent baptisms. I mean they really had thousands and thousands of the faithful being baptized in Hampton Roads, there in the salt water. And so I saw these baptisms as a kid, and it made a tremendous impact on me. At the same time then these characters were con men, but there must be something in faith which inspires con men. Why do people follow these cult leaders as they do?

**Interviewer:** Look at Jim Bakker. Or Marion Barry in Washington.

**Styron:** I think it comes from a cultural heritage. The devotion is extraordinary. What’s so astounding about mob psychology is that over and over and over again the figure—whether it’s secular, political, or religious—can demonstrate total wickedness and he will still have followers. Someone like Jimmy Swaggart is demonstrated as a liar, an adulterer, a creep, a hypocrite, a pervert; and he gets more followers. He emerges victorious because he is made to look like a martyr.
Interviewer: In the Daddy Faith episode somehow I thought there was something positive about it—the vitality here in the power of belief. Was I mistaken?

Styron: No, I think that there is definitely a positive effect here. I was perhaps trying, unconsciously maybe, to contrast the kind of strength of the primitive religion against this kind of corruptive, anemic Christianity of the white minister.

Interviewer: So that’s what you got from your upbringing of sermons every Sunday—and Sunday School!

Styron: Not exclusively. We who had that carried away, I think, at least the language. We got the gifts of the language from that teaching and perhaps a sense of history.

Interviewer: Well, it’s more than that, I’d say. I read one sentence years ago in the New York Times which said: Western civilization has a Greek mind, a Roman body, and a Jewish soul. And it is the Jewish soul of Western civilization that’s paramount. Any time I teach Nat Turner I see in it the Jewish soul of Western civilization getting into this black Messiah figure through the Hebrew scriptures that his soul is filled with. All of which is verified by the original Confessions of Nat Turner.

Styron: I think there is a great deal of truth in the idea that the ethical view of Jewish culture has certainly pervaded, in fact it has been central to, the Christian view of things.

Interviewer: The biblical understanding of life really involves the sense of sacrifice, discipline, perhaps a certain amount of mysticism, but above all our ideal of justice, our struggle for a just society. That for me is where Nat Turner and the Bible and the Jewish soul of our civilization come together.

Styron: Yes. That’s a very interesting little paradigm.

Interviewer: Sophie’s Choice was sharply criticized as being anti-Jewish, antifeminist, and so on. It was almost like a replay of Ten Black Writers Respond to The Confessions of Nat Turner.

Styron: Mercifully, I think one of the effects that Sophie had in the novel was to alter subtly the view of a totally Jewish Holocaust. Even when you accept, as I do, the fact that by far the Jews were the chief victims, you have to put the others in there somewhere. They can’t be ignored: there are too many of them. And even if there are only a few, they would have to be recognized. I didn’t write Sophie to make that point, but there is a very great danger for the Jewish people if they conclude that only they are the victims. This is simply putting too much of a burden on their own victimhood. If for instance—as I described the actual facts in Sophie’s Choice—if literally several thousand little Polish kids died in that labor camp, ruthlessly murdered, that’s enough right there for the Jews to concede that other people were involved in the cause.
Interviewer: Do you find it unsettling when historians keep revising the numbers of victims?

Styron: The numbers situation seems to be in a perpetual flux. Recent Jewish scholars, French Jewish scholars, have had to scale down the number of Jews killed at Auschwitz. It doesn’t seem to be anywhere near two and a half million. It seems to be closer to 900,000, and the number of non-Jews has been scaled down from something like a million to about 100,000. But 100,000 is twice the number of Americans who died in Vietnam.

Sophie’s Choice has never been legitimately assailed as being historically inaccurate. That pleases me.

Interviewer: Were you pleased with the movie?

Styron: There was very little that violated the spirit of the novel. I didn’t have any official connection with the script, but I read it before Alan Pakula made the movie, and I made some suggestions. He had a right to do what he wanted.

I think because of the performance of Meryl Streep the movie will be around a long time. She studied for four or five months under a Polish voice coach, or language coach, until she learned the accents of the language perfectly. She has an amazing ear. In fact, I was told by a native speaker of German that when she spoke German, she was almost flawless in sounding like a Polish person speaking German.

Interviewer: Your depiction of the Holocaust in Sophie evidently stirred as deep a response in Europe as your depiction of slavery did in America with Nat Turner. Has France shown the most avid interest in Sophie’s Choice?

Styron: The French have given me honors far beyond what I would have imagined. When François Mitterand was inaugurated as the president of France, he not only invited me to Paris to participate in the festivities, but he actually placed me at his right hand at the banquet table. He also told me that during these three days which represented the apex of his political career he had spent all his free time immersed in Sophie, which was just then available in French. I still remember his term for this reading experience: “j’ai plongé”—“I plunged into” this novel. Europe in general, especially France, has been very receptive toward my work.

Interviewer: What about foreign countries in this hemisphere? Have you been to Cuba?

Styron: I have never been to Cuba. I was invited by Castro, and it is still possible I may go there. I’ve been told that he spent three nights reading Sophie’s Choice. It was given to him by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. And Garcia Marquez informed me that Castro told him I had an open invitation any time I wanted to go to Cuba.
Interviewer: You are happy about recent political events, aren’t you?
Styron: After what’s happened in Europe you can’t help but be optimistic. That doesn’t mean everything is solved. This young fellow who wrote that this is the end of history is a fool. There will be instabilities for decades to come. Still the incredible movement toward freedom in Eastern Europe certainly vindicates the sense that this impulse toward freedom is probably at the heart of all human action.

It’s so extraordinary, in South Africa the freeing of Mandela, and the turnaround in Chile. Two years ago I went to Chile with Arthur Miller to talk to students and tell them that freedom was right around the corner, not really believing it.

Interviewer: One regrettable result of the new freedom has been a rise in ethnic friction. The difficulties you have experienced on that front reminds me of what Allen Shepherd said about Robert Penn Warren: if his Band of Angels (1955) had come out a dozen years later, it might have engendered its own Ten Black Writers Respond.

Styron: It is very hard to write about race in this society—even to speak about, or try to make the mildest joke about. At the Library of Congress, back in the seventies, I read a story of mine called “Shadrach.” It’s a story about growing up—a hundred-year-old black man coming back from Mississippi to Virginia to find a place to die, because he remembers being brought up in Virginia and wants to die there. After I finished the reading, a young Oriental man came up to me with a kind of sickly, sanctimonious grin on his face and said, Mr. Styron, did any critic ever say that what you have read to us was a very racist story? My crime was that I had written—out of historical necessity—the most paternal situation you can imagine: white people trying to find a place for an old ex-slave to die. But even when we tell the truths about our history, we are branded as racists.

Interviewer: “Shadrach” reminds me of that very sensitive poem by Robert Frost, “The Death of a Hired Man,” about an aged ex-servant who comes back to his former employer because there is no place else for him to go in his dying phase. The poem can’t be called racist, because they are all white, but I wouldn’t be surprised to come across a critique damning Frost for his classism.

Styron: I’ve probably been exposed to as much wicked criticism as any writer of our time, but one of the most poisonous—the most evil—pieces of criticism that I ever received was a feminist attack on Sophie’s Choice. It was by a woman writing in a French journal called Delta, and it will absolutely curl your hair. It was totally paranoid—some of the most amazing accusations. My friend Jim West wrote to the editor and said he couldn’t believe a responsible magazine would publish it. It tarred the people who edited the magazine.
Interviewer: A fair amount of recent criticism has given up any pretense of literary interest, and it comprises pure ideological fanaticism. The only permissible question is whether an artist propagates a radical enough degree of social change in the direction of the critic's choosing. Styron: This woman sounded like a spokesman for the communist party in about 1934.

Interviewer: I am anxious to get a collection of such essays. I think they will soon become wonderful period pieces in the Museum of Critical History.

Styron: The funny thing about this particular magazine is that the whole issue is one long attack on my work. One of its French writers accuses me of doing everything I have written as a result of fashion—that all of my books were clued to the trend of the moment.

Interviewer: His criticism is certainly clued to the trend of the moment. In recent years I've seen various writers fed into a meat grinder of hostile commentary. I think a big part of it is economics. For some eminent critics—especially European critics who set the example for American academics—this approach has been a lucrative way to get ahead in the profession.

Have you noticed that your imagination tends to center on materials from the time before you got married, as though the last four decades haven't registered?

Styron: My metaphors do spring from that period for some reason.

Interviewer: Is it a subconscious process that somehow leads you to your subject?

Styron: That's the only way I could explain why I homed in on Sophie's Choice in that almost totally realized way. I don't mean to say that when I had that particular inspiration that I saw the whole story. But I did see this particular moment. I woke up on a beautiful spring day with the complete idea for a novel in my mind.

Interviewer: Is that the only time it has happened like that?

Styron: Yes. The only time it has ever happened in that kind of blind flash. Plainly I had to work out the details that went into the tapestry of the book, but that was the process of creation. I didn't have a tenth of those details in my mind, but I had the basic concept of a story about a young man who goes to Brooklyn and meets a girl named Sophie who relates to him the secrets of her life in the concentration camp.

I went that morning right to my writing desk and began to write that stuff about McGraw-Hill, because I knew somehow that that was essential to bring the reader into the book, to establish his trust or confidence. I pretty much had the story worked out and never deviated much. I did have an interesting experience, though, about creating Sophie's father. As she began to tell Stingo about him, I initially believed her—that she was telling the truth about how wonderful he was.
When I got further into the book, it occurred to me that she was really lying. I didn’t realize it at first, which is a perfect example of a character taking over your imagination.

Interviewer: Another mysterious element is that white monument at the beginning and end of Nat Turner. I’ve seen one critic call it the Lincoln Memorial. Would you agree with that?

Styron: It was not the Lincoln Memorial, though it might look like it. Actually my daughter Polly gave me that inspiration. She described this dream she had about a white building on a hill, and it turned out that she realized what it was. It was the Masonic Temple over in Woodbury, which is a town nearby. It was just coincidence that she described it to me just about the time I was beginning to write Nat Turner—she couldn’t have been more than five or six years old. And I suddenly said, what a wonderful vision to have; I think I’ll have Nat Turner have a vision like that to start the book.

Interviewer: So your daughter’s subconscious left a mark in this instance.

Styron: Yes it did. But there can be no doubt that the subconscious feeds into the creative process in the most extraordinary way.

Interviewer: There’s one point in Nat Turner where God speaks two words, “I abide.” The rest of his visions Nat conjures up, but these two words supposedly he actually heard. Is this meant to be the intervention of the supernatural?

Styron: I’m not really sure. All I know is that that’s one of those things you think of sometimes. And I remember saying to myself that this is what God says to Nat Turner. It seemed to be so right, so appropriate. I remember when I wrote that; it happened about when Nat is sold back into slavery after being promised his freedom. That’s the context.

Interviewer: When he needed some encouragement.

Styron: Yes. And he got it.

Interviewer: Do you feel depressed when you finish a book?


Interviewer: You don’t feel ecstatic? I’ve done it, and it is the best I can do?

Styron: Well, I did after Sophie. I felt ecstatic. Incredible euphoria. I certainly had a good solid feeling about the book. Whatever its defects, I’ve laid it on the line, and that’s the best shot I can do. What else can you ask of yourself?

Interviewer: Would you say that your first novel was the toughest to do, or have they all entailed a terrific struggle with the material?

Styron: There’s not one of them that wasn’t tough, but I would say that Sophie was the least tough. It had terribly tough moments, but I always knew where I was going.
Interviewer: I have read that James Joyce never thought he could finish any of his books either.
Styron: I've given up on more books than I care to talk about, but with that one I knew that if I stuck with it, it would work.
Interviewer: Will you tell us something about your article on depression in the recent [December 1989] *Vanity Fair*? Didn't you win a prestigious prize for this essay?
Styron: Yes, I won the National Magazine Award for the best magazine article of the year. I was particularly pleased at the caliber of the competition: Cynthia Ozick and Tom Wolfe were two of the finalists, so I know the standards were very high. I wrote the essay as an aftereffect of a discussion organized by the editor of *Vanity Fair*.
Interviewer: The depression was dangerous enough to require hospitalization. Was this a longstanding condition or a surprise attack without previous warning?
Styron: Like anyone else I have always had times when I felt deeply depressed, but this was something altogether new in my experience—a despairing, unchanging paralysis of the spirit beyond anything I had ever known or imagined could exist. It turned out that it was chemical in its origin, relating to a pill I was taking for an old neck injury dating from my Marine Corps days. The injury had not bothered me much until it flared up sharply a couple of years ago. With most people the painkiller would have had no harmful side effects; I just happened to be the exceptional case for whom the pill proved dangerous.
Interviewer: Our final question touches upon another risk-laden consumable with some medicinal properties: alcohol. Your artist-persona, Cass Kinsolving in *Set This House on Fire*, appears to be an alcoholic. Has that ever been a problem with you?
Styron: I have sometimes been an alcohol-abuser, but I am not an alcoholic. As you saw earlier today, I had a couple of beers for lunch, but that was not the prelude to any further consumption. Alcoholism is something that you either have or you haven't. There is no middle way. I gave up my alcohol abuse some years ago, and have not gone back to it since.
Interviewer: William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, says that alcohol is a stimulant of genuine mystical experience, in that it opens the gates to the unconscious, or the “subliminal” as he called it. Have you sometimes experienced alcohol as a genuine stimulant to creativity?
Styron: Yes, beyond a doubt. At certain crucial points in my earlier career, it has helped me past a tough obstacle or a writing block. But I do not drink now, very little anyway.
If we are going to end the interview, I have a question for you: Is Clarence Gohdes still alive?
Interviewer: Yes, he's hale and hearty and pushing ninety.
Styron: Wonderful. That's great to hear. William Blackburn and he had a terrible running feud. Blackburn always thought of Gohdes as a sort of technocrat, and I think Gohdes thought of Blackburn as a kind of dreamy idealist, and they couldn't get along together at all. Once I wrote a rather good paper for Gohdes about Longfellow, I think, and he took me out to lunch and I'll never forget his advice. He said, you know a young man of your talent—I was about twenty-one years old—what you should do is exploit that talent and get on a news magazine like Time, get in their book-reviewing department. You know, they pay very well. That was his view. So I told Blackburn and he just howled . . .
Interviewer: Readers of your novels will always be in debt to Mr. Blackburn for that path not taken.