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The Scandal of Jewish Rage in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*

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Scholars have suggested that William Styron's Nathan in Sophie's Choice is insane or depraved—a character whose motivations lack rationality at best and are unambiguously evil at worst. Elie Wiesel, the author of the famous Holocaust memoir Night, has been very critical of Styron's novel. Ironically, by using the Yiddish version of Wiesel's memoir Night, it is possible to demonstrate that Nathan's behavior is more "logical" than scholars have previously understood. This approach offers us a new way of reading and interpreting Styron's novel by clarifying how Nathan's character functions within a well-established tradition of sociopolitical outrage about racial oppression, which is best exemplified in James Baldwin's The Fire Next Time, a text that Styron strategically references in Sophie's Choice.

Keywords: William Styron / *Sophie's Choice* / anti-Semitism / rage / racial oppression

In *Sophie's Choice*, William Styron commits an unpardonable sin. He creates Nathan Landau, a Jewish character that verbally and physically abuses the protagonist Sophie, forces her to engage in fellatio, kicks her so hard while she is on the ground that he breaks one of her ribs, and tries to urinate in her mouth.

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Given that *Sophie's Choice* is, as Cynthia Ozick dismissively observes, supposed to be a “Holocaust novel” (12), Styron’s decision to make a Jewish character an insane perpetrator who victimizes a Polish Catholic survivor of Auschwitz can only be characterized as an egregious violation of a cardinal rule of fiction, which is to give readers a “representative truth” (13).¹ Ozick, of course, is not the only critic to question Styron’s creation of Nathan. Gloria Steinem describes Styron’s Nathan as a “sexual fascist” (8), while Barbara Tapa Lupack likens him to the Nazis in that he “extends the more routine, legitimized, efficient sadism of the camps” (190).

In the criticism, the most consistent critique of Nathan is that he is insane, a character whose motivations cannot be clearly explained. Indeed, this interpretation has become so commonplace that scholars generally take it as one of the novel’s axioms. Therefore, to account for Nathan’s brutal treatment of Sophie, John Lang says that “Nathan’s violence can be attributed to insanity” (223); Barbara Foley claims that Nathan “is a psychotic sadist” (357); Carolyn A. Durham references “Nathan’s drug-induced madness” (449); Gwen L. Nagel mentions “Nathan’s pathology” (506), and Ozick claims that “Nathan is Jewish and mad” (12). All these critiques have led Vice to note: “critics point out that its main Jewish character, the sadistic and insane Nathan Landau, can be seen as an embodiment of antisemitic fantasy” (118).

Different from these scholars is Rhoda Sirlin, who tries to provide an account for Nathan’s behavior. Sirlin argues that “Nathan is quite literally mad with the knowledge of Auschwitz and is determined to make those around him as obsessed and demonic as he” (23). Based on this approach, Nathan’s bizarre behavior is “a necessary response to the excruciating horrors the twentieth century has wrought” (23). Sirlin’s interpretation is useful because, instead of simply dubbing him insane, it provides a potential motivation for Nathan’s behavior. But valuable as it is, it still does not explain why Nathan perpetrates specific forms of violence on Sophie. If Nathan were so distraught about twentieth-century atrocities against Jews, why would he choose to violate a psychologically traumatized and physically ravaged survivor of Auschwitz? Why didn’t he direct his rage against Germans at a pub in a German-populated area of New York City? Why not target a German diplomat? Why Sophie? And why violate her in such a gruesome and sexual manner? These are the questions the novel invites readers to answer.

As it happens, the most compelling answer comes from an unlikely source. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has been a staunch critic of Styron’s work. In a *New York Times* article that discusses his response to both the film and novel versions of *Sophie's Choice*, Wiesel wonders if he and some of his wartime-companions have “made a mistake” in communicating the history of the Holocaust (130). The problem is that the Holocaust, as represented by people such as Styron, has been converted into a metaphor for general and/or universal suffering, and as a consequence, “[t]hose who seek to universalize it are dejudifying it in the process” (131). Stated more concretely, by making the heroine of his novel a Polish Catholic, Styron has subtly transformed the “Final Solution” into an event that destroyed

not just Jews but “victims everywhere,” an approach that loses sight of the fact that the Nazis targeted Jews, which is why “all Jews were victims” (131).² Wiesel’s interpretation carries considerable weight, because he authored the famous memoir *Night*, which was originally published in Yiddish and is now a canonical work in Holocaust studies. Ironically, it is the first version of *Night* that can be used to make some sense of Nathan’s character.

I

In 1996, Naomi Seidman published “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage,” an article that examines the complicated publication history of *Night* from Yiddish (1956) to French (1958) to English (1960) and is the obvious inspiration for my title. The translation history of this text is certainly interesting, but what has occasioned controversy are some of the radical and contradictory changes that Wiesel made. The most striking are found in the conclusion. In the final section of the English version, Wiesel briefly documents how he and his fellow survivors responded immediately after their liberation:

Our first act as free men was to throw ourselves onto the provisions. That’s all we thought about. No thought of revenge, or of parents. Only of bread.

And even when we were no longer hungry, not one of us thought of revenge. The next day, a few of the young men ran into Weimar to bring back some potatoes and clothes—and to sleep with girls. But still no trace of revenge. (*Night* 115)

The Yiddish version, which is titled *Un di velt hot geshvign* (*And the World Remained Silent*), is significantly different, as Seidman so skillfully notes. Here is her translation:

The first gesture of freedom: the starved men made an effort to get something to eat.

They only thought about food. Not about revenge. Not about their parents. Only about bread. And even when they had satisfied their hunger—they still did not think about revenge.

Early the next day Jewish boys ran off to Weimar to steal clothing and potatoes. And to rape German girls [un tsu fargvaldikn daytshe shiksas]. The historical commandment of revenge was not fulfilled. (qtd. in Seidman 5–6)

There are two separate changes to the narrative that I want to underscore. First, in the English version, the young men go to Weimar merely in order to sleep with women. But in the Yiddish version, the claim is stronger because the “Jewish boys” intend “to rape German girls.” Second, the English version has a more universal feel. Young men go to Weimar in order to get food and to sleep with women. By stark contrast, the Yiddish version is ethnically specific: “Jewish boys” intend “to rape German girls.”

It is my contention that if we interpret *Sophie's Choice* through the lens of Wiesel’s *Un di velt hot geschvign*, it will offer us a new and more compelling

way of reading the novel and effectively overturn much of the scholarship about *Sophie's Choice*. But let me be clear at this point: I am not saying that Styron secretly learned Yiddish, subsequently read *Un di velt hot gesbivign*, and then constructed Nathan's character in relation to Wiesel's Yiddish ending. My claim is that Wiesel's Jewish boys and Styron's Nathan have similar responses to the horrors of the Holocaust. This approach should not be seen as tacitly legitimizing Nathan's behavior or implicitly discrediting Wiesel's memoir. There has been an intellectual tradition that has documented how oppressed males retaliate by directing violence against women from the dominant class. The writers who have depicted this response have not sought to legitimize such violence. Rather, they have tried to expose how and why mass oppression leads some males to respond in sexually violent ways. Late in this essay, I will clarify how this particular tradition impacted Styron's construction of Nathan's enraged character.

But for now, let me state the nature of my interpretation. Central to this essay is a relational approach to Nathan and Sophie. There is a bizarre and overstated "logic" to Nathan's behavior, a logic similar to the one in Wiesel's *Un di Velt hot gesbivign*. But for that logic to "make sense," it is important to define it in relation to Nathan's escalating connection with his Jewish heritage and his increasing understanding of Sophie's antisemitism and complicity with the Nazis. As I will argue, if we understand this link, then Nathan will not seem nearly as insane, mad, or crazy as he is generally portrayed. Moreover, there would be something resembling a "logic" in his motivation and behavior.

II

In developing my argument, I position my work against two well-established approaches. The first is best articulated in Lisa Carstens's essay "Sexual Politics and Confessional Testimony in 'Sophie's Choice.'" Carstens builds toward her claim that "for Styron an unconscious cultural narrative operates beneath the writer's conscious plan," and that narrative is one in which a gendered ideology "translates female victims into incredible witnesses: men are seekers of truth, finding it sometimes even despite madness; women are ruled by their vulnerable bodies, which lead them into both temptation and deceit" (309). Carstens's interpretation is limited, because it too narrowly focuses on sexual politics, and it is flawed, because it presumes that Sophie is an innocent victim rather than a guilty perpetrator. As I intend to demonstrate, readers are invited to distrust Sophie and her story, not because she is a woman, as Carstens would have critics of Styron believe, but because there is considerable evidence to suggest that Sophie is an anti-Semite who contributed to the making of the death camps. To be more specific, Carstens faults Styron's novel because of "the truth that Sophie is, through her gender and sexuality, made incompatible with the position of a legitimate witness" (318). Let me frame my interpretation in the same language as Carstens: Sophie is, through her antisemitism and collaboration with the Nazis, made incompatible with the position of a legitimate witness. If we interpret

Sophie through the lens of her anti-Semitism and Nazi collaboration instead of her gender and sexuality, would that significantly undermine Carstens's approach to the novel and her critique of Styron? The answer, of course, is yes.

To justify my approach, let me mention just a few textual facts. Sophie collaborated with her father in preparing a document that makes the case for demonizing and ultimately exterminating Jews; distributed that document to faculty members at her father's university; flaunted her anti-Semitic credentials and work to a commandant of a concentration camp in order to secure her freedom; and spewed a lengthy anti-Semitic rant that condemned first a particular Jew and then all Jews and concluded that the Jews got what they deserved from the Nazis. By most people's standards, these behaviors would qualify a person as an anti-Semite. However, one could easily object that I have strategically ignored the context in which these claims were made or actions occurred and that, were I to take into account the way Sophie was coerced (by her father) into specific actions or the nature of her intentions (she pretended to be anti-Semitic in order to save her children and/or herself), I would draw a much different conclusion about her. But let me put these objections to the test.

Since Nathan's perspective is of central importance to this essay, I take my definition of anti-Semitism from him. In an explosive rage, Nathan tells Sophie a story about hundreds of Jews who escaped the death camps and subsequently sought refuge in the homes of Polish citizens. Instead of sheltering these Jews, the Poles murdered most of them. Based on this event, Nathan asks Sophie: "did a similar anti-Semitism guide your own destiny, help you along, *protect* you, in a manner of speaking, so that you became one of the miniscule handful of people who lived while *the millions died?*" (227; Nathan got this story from Harold Schoenthal, which I will discuss later). For Nathan, those who specifically target Jews or use a negative image of Jews in order to advance their own agenda are anti-Semites. Within this framework, intentions and beliefs are irrelevant. What matters most is one fact: did a person use a negative representation of Jews or hurt Jews as Jews for personal gain? If so, then that person is an anti-Semite. When Nathan asks Sophie if "a similar anti-Semitism" helped and protected her, he is asking whether she made use of or harmed Jews as Jews for her benefit.

And there are, of course, many examples of Sophie using Jews to advance her cause. For instance, in a conversation with Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, Sophie tries to persuade him to liberate her. With regard to her rhetorical strategy, she has a choice. Should she use Jews in order to make her case for freedom? Or should she not use Jews? At first, she decides to argue on the basis of her relative innocence; she confesses to the misdemeanor of smuggling meat for the benefit of her ailing mother. To this Höss responds neither negatively nor positively. He just listens. Therefore, in the next paragraph, Sophie decides to flaunt her anti-Semitic heritage. Asking him to consider the nature of her "background" and "upbringing," Sophie says: "I am originally from Cracow, where my family were passionate German partisans, for many years in the vanguard of those countless lovers of the Third Reich who admire National Socialism and the

principles of the Führer. My father was to the depths of his soul *Judenfeindlich*—” (294). To Sophie’s anti-Semitic declaration Höss responds with frustration and anger: “*Judenfeindlich*. When will I cease hearing that word ‘anti-Semitic?’” Höss did nothing to solicit any mention of Jews. This is clearly Sophie’s idea.

Given his irritation at her mention of Jews, Höss shifts the conversation to the events that led Sophie to gain employment in his house. After Sophie briefly details her story, Höss mentions his imminent transfer to Berlin, which leads him to marvel at the number of Jews in Europe. It is at this point that Sophie realizes that she can use the Jews to her advantage, so she reintroduces the topic. In the ensuing conversation, she mocks and denounces “the chosen people” (299), flaunts her collaboration in producing an anti-Semitic document advocating extermination (*Vernichtung*), fabricates an outrageous story about a Jew who raped her fictional sister, and praises the editor and publisher of the most effective and rabidly anti-Semitic newspaper in Nazi Germany.³ Important here is not so much the content of her anti-Semitic claims. It is the fact that she decides (it is Sophie’s choice) to use Jews to make her case for liberation. She, not Höss, presses and pursues the anti-Semitic approach for her own advantage. What makes her situation even more troubling is the fact “that for three years she had carried on her person a copy of” her father’s final solution document. “And for what reason? For what unspeakable reason? To use it as a small wedge, an instrument of possible negotiation with the Nazis, should the loathsome occasion ever arise?” (405). To Sophie, using a document advocating the extermination of Jews may be a “small wedge” in order to save her children. But to a Jew like Nathan, that document would be a blueprint for Auschwitz. To put the matter bluntly, Sophie is a pamphlet-carrying anti-Semite. And it is worth noting that she will deploy the rhetorical strategy of using anti-Semitism to try to advance her cause in her diatribe with Stingo (383–5) and when she makes her horrific choice on the platform (526–29)—in each case, she uses anti-Semitism in order to establish a connection with a non-Jew.⁴ That the rhetorical strategy doesn’t always work is not important. Significant is the fact that she uses it, which clearly qualifies her as an anti-Semite according to Nathan.

That she freely and sometimes without provocation uses antisemitism for her benefit is simply indisputable, thus confirming Nathan’s suspicion. But does she actually hold anti-Semitic beliefs? This question has occasioned some confusion among Styron scholars. For instance, Lang claims that “Sophie detests her father’s anti-Semitism” (104), while Sirlin says that “Styron feels that her [Sophie’s] character is not anti-Semitic” (22). But in an interview with Michel Bradeau, Styron actually claims that it would be inconceivable for someone like Sophie to be untainted by her father’s and country’s anti-Semitism. When discussing Sophie’s anti-Semitic outbursts, Styron says: “You must consider the antisemitism of her environment, of her father, and, to be honest, of Poland at that time. One cannot conceive of someone totally untarnished by antisemitism within that context” (247). Styron’s claim certainly conflicts with Stingo’s, for when discussing Sophie’s anti-Semitism, Stingo says: “her attitude in regard to

the Jews, the greater part of whom were in the Cracow ghetto, wraiths barely visible, was at most one of indifference. Sophie insisted on this; I still believe her" (262). In love with Sophie, Stingo all too readily believes her when she claims to be indifferent to Jews. But as for Styron, who focuses throughout the novel on the overwhelming power the environment plays in indoctrinating people with an ideology of hate, it is implausible to think that Sophie could be untouched by her culture's anti-Semitism.

Styron gives the reader specific insight into the nature of Sophie's anti-Semitism through her response to her father's magnum opus, which makes the case for exterminating Jews. To understand the different types of anti-Semitism, it is important to take into account the claim of Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg that "[s]ince the fourth century after Christ, there have been three anti-Jewish policies: conversion, expulsion, and annihilation" (3). While many Christians throughout the ages have been quite comfortable imposing conversion on and forcing the expulsion of the Jews, as James Carroll so skillfully and intelligently documents in his book *Constantine's Sword*, only in the most extraordinary of circumstances are many Christians willing to take deadly action towards the Jews, for many Christians consider murder to be inconsistent with their Christian faith. Sophie's father is clearly one of the most extreme types of Christians, for he makes the case for eliminating Jews from all walks of life. Because Sophie objects to her father's exterminationist version of anti-Semitism, scholars such as Lang and Sirlin conclude that she is not anti-Semitic. But a close look at her response indicates that she does not oppose his anti-Semitism; she only opposes her father when he makes the case for killing Jews.

When narrating how she collaborated with her father in composing his exterminationist manifesto which is titled "*Poland's Jewish Problem: Does National Socialism Have the Answer?*" (261), Sophie suggests that she was merely fulfilling her daughterly duty. At this point in her narrative, what irritates her is the forced submission to "a household tyrant" (262). In short, she does not object to the anti-Semitic content of her father's document. Rather, it is his authoritarian behavior that upsets her. With regard to her father's manifesto, it is only when Sophie notices the word extermination (*Vernichtung*) that she expresses reservations about his work: "she was smitten with horror at what he had said and written and what she, in her complicity, had done. '*Vernichtung*,' she said aloud. He means, she thought with stupid belatedness, they should all be murdered" (264).

From Sophie's description of her father, we know that he was heavily influenced by Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who is generally regarded as the founding father of Nazi ideology.⁵ Chamberlain argues that Jews, by nature, are inferior to Aryans, because they are pure materialists who are totally determined, in both a moral and intellectual sense, by their environment. In other words, Jews cannot act as autonomous moral or intellectual agents. Given their materialistic nature, Jews could infect Aryans, which is why the Nazis made the case, in point 24 of their party program, to oppose and even extirpate the materialistic Jew:

“The Party as such represents the standpoint of a positive Christianity, without tying itself to a particular confession. It fights the spirit of Jewish materialism within us and without us” (qtd. in Steigmann-Gall 14). The Nazis’ phrasing comes right out of Chamberlain’s *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, which, as Sophie tells Stingo, is what her father used “in the essay everywhere to support his own philosophy” and is filled with “this very bitter hatred of the Jews” (265). This philosophy set the stage for the Nazis’ Nuremberg Laws, which effectively divested Jews of state rights and led Sophie’s father to hope for similar legislation in Poland: “The Professor was therefore straining at the bit, so to speak, when after the death of Pilsudski in 1935 the laws guaranteeing Jewish rights were relaxed, exposing Polish Jews once more to the terror” (260). Like so many anti-Semites before her, Sophie obviously has no objections to demonizing Jews or supporting their banishment. She, like many Christian anti-Semites, only objects to exterminating Jews.

Therefore, in terms of actions (as Nathan suggests) and beliefs (as Styron suggests), Sophie is an anti-Semite. That she opposes her father’s exterminationist anti-Semitism does not render her un-anti-Semitic. It merely suggests that she is not as fanatical an anti-Semite as her father. It is worth noting that Stingo, just after Sophie abandons him, realizes that her father impacted her far more than he was willing to admit. As he says about the note she wrote to him:

Scrawled in pencil, it was testimony indeed to the imperfect command of written English of which Sophie had so recently lamented to me, but also to the influence of German, which she had learned from her father so many years before in Cracow and which until this moment I had not realized had embedded itself with such obstinacy, like cornices and moldings of Gothic stone, in her mind’s architecture. (544–45)

It is not just the father’s German language that has partially formed the architecture of Sophie’s mind; it is also his German-adopted anti-Semitism, which he got from the Englishman-become-German Chamberlain.

III

Imagine for a moment what Wiesel’s young “Jewish boys” in *Un di velt hot gesbivign*, who intended to “rape German girls,” would have done to Irma Grese had they encountered the SS-guard on their way to Weimar. As is well known, Grese was a blond beauty who sadistically humiliated, brutalized, tortured, and murdered an untold number of Jews. To make matters worse, even after the court sentenced her to death, the unrepentant Grese wrote letters to her parents and siblings, telling them not to mourn because she had no regrets. In fact, she insists that she faithfully fulfilled her duty to her country and has a clean conscience.⁶ Defiant and unapologetic to the bitter end, Grese and two of her female comrades (Juana Bormann and Elisabeth Volkenrath), who were also condemned to death, “sat up during their last night alive and sang almost nonstop the standard Nazi hymns” (Brown 86).

Imagining how Wiesel's "Jewish boys" would have responded to Grese is important for my interpretation of Nathan, for Nathan calls Sophie "Irma Griese" (364). There are, of course, problems with this comparison.⁷ Both women are described as incredibly beautiful, but Sophie comes from a cosmopolitan and well-educated background, which is why she is multi-lingual, while Grese is a farm girl, who struggled academically to do well in her own language. Sophie may be anti-Semitic, but she never physically harms any Jews, while Grese devised twisted strategies to physically assault her victims, which included mostly Jews. Both girls had tyrannical fathers, but Sophie is painfully subservient to her father's will, while Grese defied her father by joining the Nazis' *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (League of German Girls) and becoming an SS-guard.⁸ Therefore, when Nathan calls Sophie Irma Griese during the brutal scene in Connecticut, he is clearly overstating the case, a hyperbolic response that is one of the defining features of Nathan's character.

And yet, as the text consistently suggests, there are core truths contained in Nathan's overstatements. It is at this point that I want to clarify how I position my interpretation against another well-established approach to the novel. According to Lupack, Nathan is, by virtue of his behavior, more like a Nazi than a Jew. As Lupack claims: "Despite his strong assertion of his Jewishness—'As a Jew, I regard myself as an authority on anguish and suffering' (83)—he is all too often Nazi-like in his brutality toward" Sophie (192). Given Nathan's violent behavior and overstated claims, one can certainly understand why so many critics have interpreted his character in this way. But I want to clarify why we should reject the Lupack approach and instead adopt the following one: it is as a Jew that Nathan sexually brutalizes Sophie. This is certainly not to say that all Jews responded in the same way to the Holocaust, nor is it to legitimize Nathan's behavior. My argument is this: if we understand Nathan's discoveries about Sophie's anti-Semitism and complicity with the Nazis, then we can understand why he would have had a response similar to the "Jewish boys" in Wiesel's *Un di velt hot geshvign*.

As the character most aware of and sensitive to human suffering, Nathan is profoundly disturbed by all forms of oppression and yearns to understand the psychological and political conditions that make such violations possible. Nathan's approach bears a striking resemblance to James Waller's in *Becoming Evil*, which seeks to identify and expose the common psychological and political structures that make crimes against humanity possible. This obsession explains Nathan's four violent episodes, for as the novel progresses, Nathan reads all that he can about the Holocaust, and the more he learns, the more he finds Sophie's story implausible. This is a problem for Sophie. We know that Nathan initially introduces Sophie to Stingo as a Holocaust victim. In an early conversation with Stingo, Nathan draws a connection between the sufferings of Southern blacks and camp victims. His point is that he is particularly sensitive to what Southern blacks have experienced because he, as a Jew, has been targeted for oppression and therefore identifies with those who have also been targeted. Moreover, he loves a woman who suffered unimaginable horrors in the concentration camps:

“I say this as one whose people have suffered the death camps. I say this as a man who is deeply in love with one who survived them” (75). At this point, Nathan treats Sophie as if she were a female Tadeusz Borowski, a non-Jewish Pole who was incarcerated in Auschwitz and documented the soul-scorching tribulations of victims in his collection of short stories *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.⁹ But given Nathan’s exceptional intellectual capacity, his internal drive to understand the Holocaust, and his broad reading on the topic, he begins to draw the stunningly accurate conclusions that Sophie used anti-Semitism in order to save herself and that she harbors anti-Semitic beliefs. And when he finally gathers some necessary information to support his view, he begins to realize that in the concentration camp world, Sophie bore more of a likeness to Irma Griese than Tadeusz Borowski. In short, Nathan begins to see her more as an anti-Semitic perpetrator than an innocent victim.¹⁰

To see specifically how this approach illuminates Nathan’s explosive rages, it is important to understand Nathan’s first violent episode, which is presented as the third eruption in the narrative. At a party, Nathan begins to suspect Sophie of being an anti-Semite. Before this party, Sophie had no fear “with Nathan” (353), which suggests that this is the first time Nathan explodes. What sends Nathan spiraling out of emotional and psychological control is his obsessive attention to the Nuremberg Trials, and specifically the executions, which Nathan and his friends listen to on the radio at the party. After the radio is finally turned off, Nathan and his friends discuss the political psychology of the perpetrators. But Nathan’s friend Harold Schoenthal offers a critical interpretation of the Nuremberg Trials, claiming that they are a sham because they prohibit us from identifying the real perpetrators. Instead of focusing on Nazi elites, Schoenthal uses an everyday-person approach, which holds that it “is the German people who should be themselves exterminated—they who allowed these men to rule them and kill Jews” (357). In the next paragraph, Schoenthal shifts his focus to Poland for its rampant anti-Semitism, and specifically the way Poles killed a score of Jews who escaped from a concentration camp. This is the point at which Nathan begins to suspect that Sophie might actually not be a Polish victim of Nazi atrocities, but rather an anti-Semitic collaborator with the Nazis.

Styron strategically underscores this link between Schoenthal’s everyday-citizens approach to the Holocaust and Nathan’s new way of seeing Sophie by having Nathan call Sophie Irma for the first time in the same sentence that he mentions Schoenthal. When describing Nathan’s sexual violation of her in Connecticut the day after the party, Sophie tells Stingo what Nathan said: “Schoenthal is one hundred percent right, it is pure sentimental rubbish embedded in the Judeo-Christian ethos that makes suicide morally wrong, after the Third Reich suicide should become the legitimate option of any sane human being on earth, isn’t that right, Irma?” (Why was he suddenly calling her Irma?)” (363). By shifting the focus from elite Nazis to ordinary people, Schoenthal inspires Nathan to question the logic of Sophie’s story. How did she escape Auschwitz when so many others died? What is the significance of her flawless German? How could she

avoid the taint of anti-Semitism in a country known for its hatred of Jews? These are just a few of the questions that lead Nathan to cast suspicion on Sophie, and it is through Schoenthal that Nathan begins to conclude that Sophie is probably more an Irma Griese than a Tadeusz Borowski.

It is when Sophie lies to a police officer that Nathan gets the crucial evidence he needs to justify his suspicions. A police officer stops Nathan in Connecticut for driving at a reckless speed. Sophie notices that the officer is Polish, so she first establishes a connection with him by speaking to him in Polish and then quickly concocts a story about Nathan's dying mother in order to persuade the officer to let them go with a warning. The ruse works. But Nathan now realizes that Sophie is an excellent liar, which leads him to thunder: "Poland. Anti-Semitism. And what did *you* do, baby, when they burned ghettos down?" (366). Sophie realizes that Nathan is on the verge of exposing her lies of omission, so she concocts another story, this time about her father risking his life to save Jews. But Nathan now knows that her Holocaust story does not make sense and that she is an incredibly skillful liar. Therefore, Nathan, the outraged Jew, takes Sophie into the Connecticut woods in order to violate a Nazi perpetrator, his Irma Griese.

To prevent any more interrogations about her Holocaust past, Sophie finally tells Nathan about her son. This is important, because it functions to silence Nathan. Earlier in the novel, readers learn precisely what Nathan wanted to know from Sophie after Schoenthal's comments about the Poles' brutal treatment of the escaped Jews. Nathan specifically asks Sophie if she used anti-Semitism to save herself. Sophie simply cannot reveal to Nathan the answer to this question. But more importantly, Sophie does not want Nathan to pursue a Holocaust line of questioning at all, for as she can readily surmise, Nathan is perceptive, and can easily expose her lies and discover what she really did. As Sophie tells Stingo, Nathan is "right about so much" (54). Moreover, she confesses to Stingo that she feels horribly guilty about the very thing that Nathan accuses her of doing. After telling Stingo about the Jews she saw in the Warsaw ghetto, Sophie goes on to claim that she realized

that as long as the Germans could use up all this incredible energy destroying the Jews—superhuman energy, really—I was safe. No, not really safe, but *safer*. Bad as things were, we were oh so much safer than these trapped, helpless Jews. And so as long as the Germans were draining off so much power destroying the Jews, I felt safer for myself and for Jan and Eva. (510)

There is, of course, a problem with the way Sophie frames this situation to Stingo. It is one thing to note that non-Jews are safer so long as Germans center their attention on Jews, but it is an altogether different thing to use anti-Semitism in order to establish a connection with Nazis and then urge them to expend their energy persecuting Jews in order to save one's non-Jewish self. Given the way Sophie uses Jews in her conversation with Höss, readers know what Sophie has done.

It would seem that Sophie's disclosure about the loss of her son in Auschwitz enables her to successfully deflect any more of Nathan's uncomfortable questions about her Holocaust past. But there is a consistent pattern to Nathan's character and explosions, which explains why he ultimately cannot respect Sophie's wishes. On the surface, it seems that Sophie's supposed affairs lead Nathan to question her truthfulness. But even the young Stingo, who is not very perceptive, realizes that there must be "some deeper meaning" and "some deeper cause" to Nathan's rage than Sophie's alleged infidelity (334). That cause is Nathan's hatred of social injustice, his rage against perpetrators, and his sensitivity to the suffering of others. When readers first encounter the couple, Nathan is on a rampage. Initially, it seems that Sophie's infidelity is the cause of Nathan's rage. But after Nathan reconciles with Stingo the next day and the two lovers tell Stingo about how Nathan helped to restore Sophie's health, readers are finally given the "deeper cause" of Nathan's seething anger. As Sophie declares: "All week he's been talking about Bobby Weed. I can't get him to stop" (74). This explains Nathan's vicious comments to Stingo when they first encountered each other. Nathan has heard that a Southerner moved into the Pink Palace, so he tells Stingo what they could have discussed had he decided to stay in Yetta Zimmerman's house: "We could have talked about sports. I mean *Southern* sports. Like lynching niggers—or *coons*, I think you call them down there" (52). This comment seems to come out of nowhere. But if we take into account something we learn more than twenty pages later, that Nathan has been obsessed with the Bobby Weed story, in which a sixteen-year-old black boy is lynched in Georgia for supposedly assaulting a white girl, it makes perfect sense. This, however, still does not explain the link between Weed and Sophie.

It is only when Nathan draws a connection between Southerners and the Nazis that readers can finally understand what governs Nathan's thinking. Keep in mind that Nathan has already heard and accepted Schoenthal's ordinary-people thesis, which places as much blame on the general population for racial oppression as the governing elites. Therefore, Nathan says to Stingo: "You Southern white people have a lot to answer for when it comes to such bestiality" (74). For Nathan, there is an all-pervasive political psychology that enables barbaric forms of racial oppression to flourish from one culture to the next. Therefore, Nathan says: "I say that the fate of Bobby Weed at the hands of white Southern Americans is as bottomlessly barbaric as any act performed by the Nazis during the rule of Adolf Hitler?" (75) Nathan's extensive thinking about the psychological and political conditions that made Weed's lynching possible is what actually causes him to explode at Sophie. And for Nathan, these conditions are similar to the ones that obtained in Nazi Germany, thus implicating an ordinary Southerner like Stingo. Because of Sophie's effective silencing technique, Nathan cannot directly ask her if she was in the position of the black victim or the white Southerners when she was in Auschwitz. But he clearly suspects the latter, which is why he uses the charge of infidelity to justify his verbal and physical assault of her.

The cause of Nathan's next rampage is the racist Mississippi Senator Theodore G. Bilbo. The issue in this section, however, has more to do with retribution than oppression. Bilbo made a political name for himself through "his straightforward promiscuous public use of words like 'nigger,' 'coon,' 'jigaboo'" (205). Having written in college about Bilbo, Stingo knows the Senator's racist rhetoric, but he also learns that early in his career Bilbo "had as a public servant produced reforms and contributions that had greatly advanced the common weal" (206–07). During his explosive rage at Sophie, Nathan notices that Stingo has an article about Bilbo, which mentions that the Senator has cancer of the mouth. To be expected, Nathan says that he "read that article just a while ago on the subway" (221). Believing in revenge, Nathan proposes a toast to "the slow, protracted, agonizing death of the Senator from Mississippi, Mushmouth Bilbo" (222). But Stingo refuses to toast anyone's death. It is at this point that Nathan exposes Stingo's hypocrisy by asking if he would toast the death of Hitler. Stingo says that he would, but then he makes a distinction between Bilbo and Hitler. Ironically, his supposed distinction is no distinction at all. Stingo says that Bilbo instituted major reforms that significantly improved the quality of life in the South, which is, as Nathan rightly notes, exactly what Hitler did in Nazi Germany. Stingo realizes that Nathan exposed him: "He had me cold" (225). Inadvertently, Stingo demonstrates that there are substantive parallels between Hitler and Bilbo. Therefore, by Stingo's own logic, if he were willing to toast Hitler's death, he should be willing to toast Bilbo's.

The point is that there is "logic" to Nathan's behavior. He is not an insane perpetrator who resembles the Nazis. Rather, he is an outraged Jew, who has a commanding grasp of the subtle political psychology that makes racial injustice (against Jews and/or blacks) possible, who empathizes with innocent victims, and who gladly sees perpetrators punished for their crimes. Given his character structure, the more he discovers about Sophie's cultural context, personal history, and subconscious antisemitism, and the more he discovers about the magnitude of the atrocities committed against the Jews in the concentration camps, the more does he become an unforgiving agent of revenge.¹¹ This is not to say that my reading of the novel justifies his treatment of Sophie in Connecticut. There is no legitimate rape. But my reading does provide an explanation for his behavior.

IV

To conclude, let me locate Nathan's character within a specific tradition of rage. Styron's friendship with James Baldwin had an enormous impact on him. In the fall of 1960, Styron heard that Baldwin was low on money and needed a place to live, so he invited the black author to stay in his writing studio, where Baldwin lived for more than six months. According to Styron's biographer James L.W. West, "the two men settled into a comfortably open relationship that would ripen, over the next six months, into close friendship" (315–6). Baldwin's biographer David Leeming concurs with this assessment, claiming that the "Connecticut stay

[. . .] was remarkably successful,” as “Baldwin and the Styrons seem genuinely to have enjoyed each other’s company” (185).

So important was the friendship that Styron wrote an essay on the occasion of Baldwin’s death to indicate that the black writer had shaped and defined his “work and its moral contours” (“Jimmy” 102). Specifically, Styron claims: Baldwin “told me more about the frustrations and anguish of being a black man in America than I had known until then, or perhaps wanted to know. He told me exactly what it was like to be denied service, to be spat at, to be called ‘nigger’ and ‘boy’” (“Jimmy” 98). From Baldwin he also learned “that black people regarded *all* Americans as irredeemably racist, the most sinful of them being not the Georgia redneck (who was in part the victim of his heritage) but any citizen whatever whose de jure equality was a façade for de facto enmity and injustice” (“Jimmy” 97).

With regard to *Sophie’s Choice*, the most important things Styron inherited from Baldwin were his explosive rhetoric and his cross-cultural analysis of political oppression. Styron mentions how Baldwin would sometimes go on the lecture circuit during his Connecticut stay, and “with his ferocious oratory, he began to scare his predominately well-to-do, well-meaning audience out of their pants” (“Jimmy” 96–7). Some of Styron’s liberal friends were subjected to Baldwin’s shocking and explosive rhetoric. For instance, Baldwin said to Styron’s liberal friends that blacks want to and will one day burn down American cities, which led the liberals to say that he certainly could not mean what he is saying. In response, as Styron says, “Jimmy’s face would become a mask of imperturbable certitude. ‘Baby,’ he would say softly and glare back with vast glowering eyes, ‘yes, baby. I mean *burn*. We will *burn your cities down*’” (“Jimmy” 100). While living at the Styrons’ home, Baldwin was just starting a book that contained such “ferocious oratory,” his 1963 work *The Fire Next Time*. In his essay, Styron says that this work “would shake the conscience of the nation as few literary documents have ever done” (“Jimmy” 98), and he specifically references it in *Sophie’s Choice*. Nathan uses a “ferocious oratory” to skewer Stingo for his complicity, as a Southerner, in the murder of Bobby Weed, and, immediately after Nathan’s tongue-lashing, the older Stingo—not coincidentally—reflects on Baldwin’s work, the publication of which signaled and brought about a dramatic shift in an American sensibility (77). Put succinctly, Nathan and Baldwin reject the measured cadences of stately reason for the ferocious oratory of political outrage.

Explosive rhetoric, however, is not the most extreme response to oppression. There has been a tradition of marginalized men responding to their suffering by expressing a desire to rape women from the oppressor’s class. For instance, in Arna Bontemps’s *Black Thunder* (1936), the character of Criddle, who holds a “scythe-sword” and feels “the thing getting stiffer and stiffer in his hand” (106), briefly considers raping a young white woman during the 1800 slave insurrection in Virginia.¹² In *Soul on Ice* (1968), Eldridge Cleaver says, “it was of paramount importance for me to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women” (25). For Cleaver, this ruthless attitude manifests itself as an act of sexual violence, which Cleaver considers a meaningful political symbol: “Rape was an

insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women" (26). Politically, this act sends a direct and specific message to the white community: "From the site of the act of rape, consternation spreads outwardly in concentric circles. I wanted to send waves of consternation throughout the white race" (26). It might seem that this is merely an aberrant experience of a sick man, and Cleaver confesses that he is perhaps "sicker than most" (27). But after describing his inner experience, he cites Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)'s poem "Black Dada Nihilism," published in 1964, which reads: "Come up, black dada nihilism. Rape the white girls" (26). After claiming that he has lived what Baraka expresses in his poem, Cleaver submits that this experience is no anomaly. "There are, of course, many young blacks out there right now who are slitting white throats and raping the white girl" (26). But Cleaver cautions readers not to think that blacks are doing this "because they read LeRoi Jones' poetry" (27). Rather, readers should understand that Jones accurately expresses in his poetry some of the "funky facts of life" (27).¹³ In other words, there is a cultural and psychological law that Cleaver and Baraka are trying to communicate to the larger community of oppressors, which goes something like this: extreme forms of racial oppression can lead some of the oppressed to respond by brutally and sexually violating females from the oppressor class.

This twisted response to injustice and oppression explains why Styron's Nat Turner, who totally opposes rape ("raping white women" is something that Styron's Turner "could not abide" [362]), entertains fantasies of raping the young Margaret Whitehead in the novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* ("Suddenly, despite myself, the godless thought came: I could stop now and here, right here by the road and in this meadow, do with her anything I wished. There's not a soul for miles. I could throw her down and spread her young white legs and stick myself in her until belly met belly and shoot inside her in warm milky spurts of desecration" [367]). Obviously, Styron was aware of this twisted cultural "law" of oppressed males wanting to violate females from the oppressor class. That there has been a tradition of oppressed males desiring or turning to sexual violence does not legitimize the act. But what it does do is to indicate how some people will respond to their oppression. In other words, Bontemps, Baraka, Wiesel, Cleaver, and Styron are not supporting or legitimizing rape by describing how some oppressed males responded to their situation. They are merely describing one of the most twisted and horrific responses to oppression.

We get additional insight into Styron's construction of Nathan's character if we attend to Baldwin's cross-cultural form of political analysis in *The Fire Next Time*, which figures so prominently in Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*; Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*; Richard Wright's *White Man, Listen!* and *The Outsider*; and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*. For instance, after explaining how "White people were, and are, astounded by the holocaust in Germany" (52), Baldwin says that he doubts "whether black people are astounded" (53), for as he goes on to claim: "I could

not but feel, in those sorrowful years, that this human indifference, concerning which I knew so much already, would be my portion on the day that the United States decided to murder its Negroes systematically instead of little by little and catch-as-catch-can" (53). For Baldwin, Nazi Germany and the United States share a common political psychology that has justified the violation of the countries' culturally designated "inferiors." The task, therefore, is to identify and define that common political psychology. This is precisely what Nathan does throughout *Sophie's Choice*.

In sum, Baldwin influenced Styron by providing him with deeper insight into the subtle forms of oppression and racism that he had hitherto overlooked, enabling him to draw clear lines of connection between the political psychology that led people in both Europe and the United States to violate minorities with emotional and legal impunity, and bequeathing to him a ferocious oratory with which to denounce the prevalence of social injustice in the West. Put succinctly, the voices of Nathan and Baldwin may be shrill, but ignoring or dismissing them as mere hyperbole or total insanity would be a mistake. Sometimes a ferocious oratory is the only way to get the politically, psychologically, and emotionally deaf to hear what is oftentimes audible only at what Ralph Ellison's narrator from *Invisible Man* refers to as "lower frequencies" (581). The real scandal of Jewish rage in *Sophie's Choice* is that such rage has been considered scandalous.

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Notes

1. In "Melodrama: William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*," Sue Vice also takes a dismissive approach to *Sophie's Choice* as Holocaust fiction when she says that it is "a novel purportedly about the Holocaust" (117).
2. For examples of this critique, see Ozick (13), Alan L. Berger (33), and D.G. Myers (512). In "The Theological Origins of Nazi Anti-Semitism in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*," I challenge this interpretation, claiming that it is untenable and misguided because it presupposes that Styron portrays Sophie primarily and sometimes exclusively as a victim. By stark contrast, I argue that Styron actually portrays Sophie as more perpetrator than victim. As Stingo says, Sophie was an "accomplice, accessory—however haphazard and ambiguous and uncalculating her design—to the mass slaughter whose sickening vaporous residue spiraled skyward from the chimneys of Birkenau" (237–38).
3. Sophie specifically references Julius Streicher, the rabidly anti-Semitic editor of the journal *Der Stürmer*.
4. For the most extensive analysis of Sophie as an anti-Semite, see Lackey, *The Modernist God State* (281–331).
5. Generally considered "the 'spiritual founder' of National Socialist Germany" (Shirer 158), Houston Stewart Chamberlain published in 1899 *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, a book that

was subsequently hailed "as the 'gospel of the Nazi movement'" (Shirer 159) in the Nazis' official newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*. This two-volume work was immensely popular, selling more than a quarter of a million copies by 1938 (Shirer 156). Given Chamberlain's comprehensive vision of religion, politics, and Germany, Alfred Rosenberg, author of *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* and editor of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, "hailed him as a pioneer and spiritual forerunner and viewed himself as Chamberlain's true successor" (Field 1), which is why he felt so honored when he was commissioned to write a book about Chamberlain's work. In 1923, Joseph Goebbels read the *Foundations*, and when he met Chamberlain in 1926, he indicates in his diary how important Chamberlain was to National Socialism by referring to him as a "spiritual father," dubbing him a "Trail blazer, pioneer!" (83). Chamberlain's biographer, Geoffrey G. Field, notes that Hitler read the *Foundations* (452). But more importantly, Field indicates how crucial Chamberlain was by describing Hitler's response to the famous writer's public endorsement. After getting word of Chamberlain's support, members at the Nazi Party headquarters in Munich were euphoric, and Hitler was so giddy that he was supposedly "like a child" (438).

6. In an 8 December 1945 letter to her parents, Grese says: "*Wenn das Schicksal es so bestimmt hat, mich so jung aus dem irdischen Leben zu reißen, so sei eines gewiß: daß ich, als Deine Tochter, genau wie Du mich kennst, als tapfere und von den Deutschen als unbescholtene, deutsche Frau, sicher mit reinem Gewissen und vor allem stolz in das Ungewisse gehen werde! Keine Spur von Angst, noch von Verzweiflung lasse ich in meine Herzen eintreten!*" (138). "If fate has decided to snatch me out of this earthly life at such a tender age, one thing is certain: that I, as your daughter, will go into the unknown exactly as you know me, as a brave and blameless German woman to the German, secure with a pure conscience and, most of all, proud. I do not allow any trace of fear, nor any despair to enter my heart." She goes on to claim that her father need not be ashamed of her, because she has fulfilled her duty to the fatherland: "*Du brauchst Dich nicht meiner zu schämen! Denn ich erfülle treu für mein Vaterland meine Pflicht!*" "You need not be ashamed of me, because I faithfully fulfill my duty for my fatherland" (my translations 138).

7. I use two different spellings of Grese's last name. Grese signed her name Grese, but Styron spells it Griese. When I am referring to the historical figure, I spell the name Grese. When I am referring to the figure in the novel, I spell the name Griese.

8. In a short biography about Grese, Daniel Patrick Brown claims: "Irma's membership in the BdM caused the major break within the Grese family that would eventually see a daughter make her permanent departure from home and ultimately see a father disavow the existence of one of his children" (15).

9. I have chosen to refer to Sophie as a female Borowski for a number of reasons. Styron, who references *This Way for the Gas* in *Sophie's Choice*, clearly used Borowski's work to construct parts of his narrative and Sophie's character. Both Sophie and Borowski's narrator are forced to serve Nazis, both are non-Jewish Poles, both are well educated, and both Sophie and Borowski committed suicide. I could have likened Sophie to Olga Lengyel, whose book *Five Chimneys* also played a crucial role in the making of Sophie's character. But there are significant differences. Lengyel, whose husband was Jewish, was a Christian and remained so, while Sophie ultimately rejects Christianity. Lengyel is from Hungary, while Sophie is from Poland. And Sophie commits suicide, while Lengyel does not.

10. It would be too simple to suggest that Borowski portrays non-Jewish workers in the camps as totally innocent. What sickens Borowski, and what probably contributed significantly to his suicide, was the fact that he was forced to contribute to the horrors of Auschwitz, despite his intentions to the contrary. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi defines this situation of being simultaneously innocent and complicit as the gray zone, "where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge" (42).

11. The cause of Nathan's fourth and final rage is his study of Southern history. After getting engaged to Sophie, Nathan tells Stingo that the three of them will visit the South for the honeymoon. In preparation for the trip, Nathan studies the history of the South, which, predictably, leads him to explode.

12. Styron read Bontemps's novel, as West claims in his biography of Styron (340).
13. In an interview with Gavin Cologne-Brookes, Styron mentions that he read Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (219).

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