Sophie’s Choice: On the Pedagogical Value of the “Problem Text”

R. Clifton Spargo

Among the most widely read of all Holocaust fictions, William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* (1979) is a risky choice for any course on the Holocaust if only because it has evoked from Jewish critics, much as his previous novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* did from African-Americans, grave consternation about its justness and accuracy as historical representation. Styron’s public statements about the Holocaust, both preceding publication of his novel and after its sensational success, revealed an agenda that, while ostensibly humanitarian, nevertheless relied on a discourse of universalism almost willfully deaf to the cultural territorial issues evoked by such history. As historian Deborah Lipstadt has shown, for a variety of reasons—including strategic focus on the war effort, a scepticism about atrocity stories from the previous world war, and governmentally cued fears about provoking reactionary sentiment in an American public that was strongly anti-immigrant and at least partly anti-Semitic—the American press only minimally covered the Nazi genocide during the war, consistently obscuring reference to the Nazis’ central victims, the Jews. When reports of the mass killings did find their way into American newspapers, more often than not Jewish victims were referred to by nationality (as Poles, Czechs, Russians), or mentioned as Jews only alongside Catholics or other Christians who were enduring purportedly similar persecutions. Even liberal organizations friendly to the Jewish refugees avoided mention...
of Jews as the centrally persecuted people under Hitlerism, so as not to aggravate conservative or utilitarian sentiments against the refugees. Styron’s novel, no matter how one reads its temporally layered, convoluted plot, encourages from both Jewish and objectively historicist perspectives some continuation of the dynamic of displaced reference presiding over the initial American response to the Holocaust as well as many subsequent formulations of its significance in United States culture.

I often teach Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* because it directly evokes this tendency in American cultural memory to overlook historical specificity for a peculiarly bland understanding in which political oppression is taken as a sign of universal evil. I include the novel in a course I regularly teach on “American Literature and Cultural Memory of the Holocaust,” frequently varying my selections from among a vast canon of literary responses to the Holocaust in United States literature, many of which—including works by figures such as Randall Jarrell, Flannery O’Connor, Sylvia Plath, Reynolds Price—are by non-Jewish writers. By placing works about the Holocaust by these non-Jewish writers alongside momentous works of Jewish-American Holocaust literature, by Edward Lewis Wallant, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Cynthia Ozick, I draw students’ attention to the pervasive response to the Holocaust in American literature and to the different stages of that response. Indeed, by covering a great many fictional works prior to that era now conventionally designated as predicative of the Holocaust’s ascendency in United States culture (late 1960s to early and mid 1970s), I suggest that the persistence of an imaginative encounter with the Nazi genocide reveals the Holocaust to be peculiarly an American memory and not simply a strangely imported one. Though it did not happen on American soil as did other injustices with which it purportedly competes for our attention, the frequency and fullness of the American imaginative response to the Holocaust indicate something much more than a responsibility imposed by the memory of a minority ethnic group on the general American public.

My choice to include *Sophie’s Choice* in a course on American memory of the Holocaust offered at a Jesuit Catholic university is deliberately designed to elicit some of the cultural assumptions and ideological premises that inform the cultural encounter with the Holocaust by non-Jewish, mostly Christianized Americans. In some of the early lessons for the course, I ask students to recall how they