

Auschwitz and Hiroshima in *Sophie's Choice*: Reading William Styron through Giorgio Agamben

Akio Kimura

Introduction

We often refer to Auschwitz and Hiroshima side by side. But we don't know exactly what this coupled use of Auschwitz and Hiroshima as metaphors represents. Both Auschwitz and Hiroshima remind us of absolute evil. But in this study we will see how Auschwitz and Hiroshima synchronize with each other as they represent absolute and necessary evil alternately. Such synchronicity of absolute and necessary evil is what is implied in the relationship between Sophie and Stingo in William Styron's 1979 novel *Sophie's Choice*.

We begin with Styron's use of the coupled metaphors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, in particular, his metaphorical use of them in the exergue at the beginning of *Sophie's Choice*. As the author of *Sophie's Choice*, a novel about Auschwitz, and a former marine who believes he has been saved by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Styron provides us with a model case in which the coupled, or synchronized, metaphors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima rewrite Adorno's challenge to contemporary thought that questions the possibilities of literature after Auschwitz. In *Sophie's Choice*, the possibilities of literature after Auschwitz and Hiroshima are split between Sophie, the witness to Auschwitz, and Stingo,

the novelist who lives in the post-Hiroshima era.

I find in Giorgio Agamben's argument on the relationship between the *Muselman* and the survivor the clue to connecting Sophie and Stingo. From Agamben's perspective, Sophie, the true witness, is the remnant of Auschwitz, not the survivor. At the end of the novel, she fails to survive her painful memories of Auschwitz and chooses death. However, Sophie's testimony lives on in Stingo. Stingo is the survivor in the sense that he lives with Sophie's memories of Auschwitz. Stingo serves for Sophie as a medium through which Sophie's testimony, the unsayable, is heard. In this sense, Stingo is what Agamben calls the "archive" that "is situated between *langue*, as the system of construction of possible sentences—that is, of possibilities of speaking—and the *corpus* that unites the set of what has been said, the things actually uttered or written" (Agamben 143-44).

I

In 1993, Styron wrote an essay entitled "The Enduring Metaphors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima" for *Newsweek*, in which he writes: "[World War II] left us with, if nothing else, two prodigious and enduring metaphors for human suffering: Auschwitz and Hiroshima. History has carved no sterner monuments to its own propensity for unfathomable evil" (Styron, "The Enduring Metaphors" 163). Here Styron equates Auschwitz with Hiroshima and uses both of them as metaphor for the general human "propensity for unfathomable evil." However, in the same essay, Styron also uses Hiroshima as a metaphor for hope for the achievement of eternal peace in the future, saying that "Certainly the bomb did nothing to eliminate war and aggression, and I am still amazed at the memory of myself, a boy optimist returned home after Hiroshima, firmly convinced—for one brief and intoxicating moment—that the future held out the hope of illimitable peace" (166). Styron admits that he was just a "boy optimist" when he believed that Hiroshima signaled the hope of peaceful world. Styron gradually changes his view of Hiroshima, however, and by the time he writes this essay, he has apparently come to believe that the atomic

bombs changed nothing. Yet Styron is still ambivalent. He also says: "it might be said that the sacrifice of its victims represented an object lesson and perhaps a priceless warning, preventing the future use of the weapon that achieved such destruction. If so, the many deaths and the suffering . . . may be justified . . ." (166). Here Styron no longer equates Auschwitz with Hiroshima. On the contrary, he treats them as opposites. For Styron, Auschwitz represents radical evil, while Hiroshima represents necessary evil, which means *de facto* not evil.

Styron's 1979 novel, *Sophie's Choice*, similarly reflects these two metaphorical uses of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: that is, Auschwitz as a metaphor for radical evil and Hiroshima for necessary evil. In the exergue at the beginning of the novel, Styron uses André Malraux's phrase "absolute evil (*le Mal absolu*)" to represent the former: "I seek that essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood" (iii). Apart from what Malraux meant by the phrase, Styron uses it to describe the central episode of the novel: Sophie's choosing of her daughter as one who should be sent to Birkenau, that is, to death. In an interview with Gideon Telpaz, Styron says:

What is absolute evil? Absolute evil, to my mind, as a metaphor, is, or can be, or must be, an act in which a woman is forced to murder her own child, whether she be Jewish, Gypsy, Pole, Russian, French, or whatever. This seized me as being a metaphor for absolute evil as represented by Nazism. That is what impelled me more than anything else to write about the Holocaust. (Telpaz 233)

Styron calls the evil of the Nazis represented by Auschwitz "absolute" because it targeted not so much Jews or other people in whole as something more fundamental, that is, the human reproductivity. By forcing a woman to kill her own child, the Nazis make the life of the child completely futile. If a mother can kill her own child, anybody can kill it, because its life can be regarded as having never existed. It is important

to note here that, in the novel, the Nazi officer, a doctor of medicine, who orders Sophie to choose which of her children will die is named Fritz Jemand von Niemand—Fritz Somebody of Nobody. As his name suggests, he creates a situation in which anybody can kill anybody. Dr. Jemand von Niemand forces Sophie not so much to choose which of her children will die as to behave just like him, that is, to behave like somebody who happens to be there to kill somebody who also happens to be there to be killed. With this episode, Styron suggests that the evil of the Nazis lies not so much in its selection of the people to be killed as in the anonymity of genocide.¹

While paying attention to the anonymity of the Nazi genocide, however, Styron fails to think of the anonymity of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. There is only one reference to Hiroshima in *Sophie's Choice*, a reference to the memory of Stingo, the narrator, who was in Okinawa after the last battle in which he never participated, whose memory of Japan is of walking in a “wrecked yet peaceful Oriental landscape . . . during the last few weeks before Hiroshima” (26). Stingo believes that the atomic bombs have saved his life, ending the war before he had to go fighting on the main land of Japan. Styron believed so, too, as he reveals in the 1993 essay. Given Styron’s experience as former marine, however, it is still strange that, in a novel about the anonymity of the Nazi genocide, the author remains silent about the anonymity of the atomic bombing. Atomic bombs were targeted at those who happened to be there, regardless of who they were. In an instant, the bombs erased all those in their path, including Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Australians, and others. The victims did not know who was attacking, nor who was the intended target.

In *Sophie's Choice*, while degrading Hiroshima by treating it as necessary evil, Styron tries to universalize the evil of Auschwitz by characterizing it as anonymous. However, Styron seems to be confusing universalization with Americanization. One method with which Styron tries to universalize Auschwitz is the narrator Stingo, a young American from the South and descendent of a slave owner. Stingo compares the

evil of Jewish genocide with that of American slavery.² Through Stingo, his persona, Styron transplants Sophie's experience at Auschwitz to the American soil. At the end of *Sophie's Choice*, however, facing Sophie's death, Stingo feels that her experience of Auschwitz is incomprehensible. Despondently, Stingo wallows in self-doubt, admitting that "No one will ever understand Auschwitz" (559). Apparently, Styron has failed to universalize Auschwitz; Stingo has failed to connect the Nazi genocide with American slavery. That is why, after spending a night on the beach buried in the sand, Stingo wakes up, feeling refreshed and revived, and says, "This was not judgment day—only morning. Morning excellent and fair" (562). The novel thus ends with hope. In the interview with Telpaz, Styron reveals that he also thought of ending the novel with Stingo's "scream of despair" (240), but finally decided to end as it is, that is, with hope for the future. After the comparison of the Nazi genocide and American slavery, this hope of Stingo's seems quite abrupt. Stingo's claim to hope for the future can only be attributed to his privileged position as young white male American, which stands in stark contradiction to Sophie, an exile who is haunted by the past. It Americanizes Auschwitz by turning it into a necessary phase in Stingo's development as narrator or novelist. In other words, just as Styron turns Hiroshima into a necessary evil in the story of his life, Stingo's Americanization of Sophie's story turns Auschwitz, the absolute evil of the Nazis, into a necessary evil in the story of Stingo, the young American would-be novelist.³

That the evil of Auschwitz cannot easily fit into the category of absolute is what Hannah Arendt—a friend of Styron's—implied with the phrase "the banality of evil" in response to the trial of the Nazi officer, Adolf Eichmann. While Arendt sees in Eichmann "sheer thoughtlessness" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 287), she rejects both the "protestations of the defense that Eichmann was after all a 'tiny cog' in the machinery of the Final Solution, and of the prosecution, which believed it had discovered in Eichmann the actual motor" (289). Here the defense represents the position of necessary evil and the prosecution that of absolute evil. While

rejecting both positions, Arendt rejects, in particular, the view inherent in both of them, that is, the view that, whether he is called a “cog” or “motor,” Eichmann “acted not as a man but as a mere functionary whose functions could just as easily have been carried out by anyone else” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 289). In other words, Arendt opposes the view that attributes the evil of Auschwitz to the anonymous nature of bureaucracy, or what she calls the “rule of Nobody.” Arendt explains that according to this logic, it is as if Eichmann “declared that he only did what was statistically expected, that it was mere accident that he did it and not somebody else, since after all somebody had to do it” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 289).

In *Sophie’s Choice*, Fritz Jemand von Niemand is characterized exactly as the man who obeys such a “rule of Nobody.” As we have seen above, Styron attributes the essence of the evil of the Nazis, or what he calls “absolute evil,” to Dr. Jemand von Niemand’s creation of the situation in which a mother can kill any of her children, or, in other words, anybody can indiscriminately kill anybody. Through Stingo, Styron analyzes the situation:

It had to do with the matter of sin, or rather, it had to do with the absence of sin, and his own realization that the absence of sin and the absence of God were inseparably intertwined. No sin! He had suffered boredom and anxiety, and even revulsion, but no sense of sin from the bestial crimes he had been party to, nor had he felt that in sending thousands of the wretched innocent to oblivion he had transgressed against divine law. All had been unutterable monotony. All of his depravity had been enacted in a vacuum of sinless and businesslike godlessness, while his soul thirsted for beatitude. (*Sophie’s Choice* 532)

As his name suggests, Dr. Jemand von Niemand is nobody and, at the same time, anybody. Living in “sinless and businesslike godlessness,” Dr. Jemand von Niemand can be a God who can kill anybody, and can

also be an anonymous officer—nobody—who can order any mother to send any of her children to any officers at Birkenau. Not only because of “the absence of sin and the absence of God,” but also because it is his business to eliminate the harmful population, Dr. Jemand von Niemand believes that what he does is justified. He is not without an inner conflict, though. He does his job, always telling himself that his present job and the way to “beatitude” are two different things. In his job, he is simply functioning as nobody, that is, as a “tiny cog” in the machinery; in his own life, on the other hand, he is filled with aspirations for “beatitude.” In this sense, unlike Arendt’s thoughtless Eichmann, Dr. Jemand von Niemand is thoughtful. While Arendt sees in Eichmann a thoughtless man who equates Kant’s practical reason with Hitler’s will (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 137), Styron sees in Dr. Jemand von Niemand a thoughtful man who separates this world from that—the world of God—and chooses to live in this world as a “tiny cog” in the machinery while maintaining the world of God as a separate preserve. While Arendt rejects the “whole cog theory” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 289) as the explanation for the evil of the Nazis, Styron tries to elevate the act of such a “tiny cog” or bureaucrat named Jemand von Niemand to absolute evil.

Dr. Jemand von Niemand’s evil, however, is absolute only for Sophie, who is finally destroyed by Auschwitz. When Stingo outlives Sophie, Dr. Jemand von Niemand’s absolute evil turns into a necessary evil and is absorbed into Stingo’s life. The absolute evil for Sophie has now become a necessary part of the education of Stingo, the American. We can see here how Auschwitz has come to represent only the beginning of a whole process in which Stingo, the American, becomes a novelist in the age haunted by the nuclear catastrophe.

II

In spite of his failure to coherently maintain the difference between the absolute evil of Auschwitz and the necessary evil of Hiroshima, Styron leads us to rethink about the coupled use of Auschwitz and Hiroshima

as metaphors. This coupling or comparison is in itself a metaphor for something. As we have seen, in his 1993 essay, Styron thinks that both Auschwitz and Hiroshima are metaphors for “human suffering,” or “propensity for unfathomable evil.”

We can find a classical expression for this in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: on the one hand, Hobbes says that war is not so much a battle as a condition or a time in which “every man is Enemy to every man” (186); but, on the other hand, Hobbes calls all other time peace. Just as Styron considers Auschwitz an example of the general human “propensity for unfathomable evil,” Hobbes considers war as consisting “not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto.” For Hobbes, war is the constant human condition and peace is achieved only temporarily by covenants. This bears remarkable similarity to Styron’s return home from Okinawa, when he was “firmly convinced—for one brief and intoxicating moment—that the future held out the hope of illimitable peace.” For Styron, the atomic bombs functioned like a Hobbesian covenant; they achieved peace temporarily through the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The devastation of these two cities was a necessary evil, without which the world might return to the condition in which “every man is Enemy to every man.”

What is important to note here is the synchronicity of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, or that of war and peace, which is also implied in Hobbes’ description of war. Calling war a condition or time, Hobbes suggests that war and peace are not necessarily diachronically separated; they are synchronized and regarded as existing at the same time. In this sense, the condition in which “every man is Enemy to every man” stays always with us.⁴ In *Sophie’s Choice*, Styron represents such synchronicity of Auschwitz and Hiroshima by letting Sophie, who has been turned into a living dead by Auschwitz, and Stingo, who has been saved by Hiroshima (so he believes), coexist. Although Sophie dies, her influence survives her death and lives on in Stingo. In this sense, Stingo’s life is in itself a metaphor for the peace poised over the condition in which “every man is Enemy to

every man." Even if he lives a happy American life, Stingo can never erase the memory of Sophie's choice. When Dr. Jemand von Niemand orders Sophie to choose a child, the relationship of mother and child collapses and Sophie becomes the killer of her child. Here the name Jemand von Niemand sounds like the Hobbesian condition in which "every man is Enemy to every man." He is the creator of the situation in which anybody can be the killer of anybody or even a mother can be the killer of her child, that is, "every man is Enemy to every man."

Now we turn to Agamben. In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben points out that the experience of Auschwitz can be understood or overcome neither by referring to Nietzschean ethics of the acceptance of the eternal return (*amor fati*), nor to Jean Améry's anti-Nietzschean ethics of resentment that refuses to accept what has happened. It is Primo Levi, instead, who gives Agamben the clue to understanding Auschwitz. In Levi, Agamben sees an attitude in which "One cannot want Auschwitz to return for eternity, since in truth it has never ceased to take place; it is always already repeating itself" (Agamben 101). Agamben also points out that "This ferocious, implacable experience appears to Levi in the form of a dream" (Agamben 101). For Agamben, Auschwitz represents what Hobbes described as the condition in which "every man is Enemy to every man." Like Hobbes, Agamben thinks that Auschwitz is always with us. Moreover, drawing on Levi, Agamben suggests that once you experience Auschwitz, you live the rest of your life in the recurrent dream of Auschwitz, in which you wake up only into another dream of Auschwitz:

The camp, the absolute situation, is the end of every possibility of an originary temporality, that is, of the temporal foundation of a singular position in space, of a *Da*. In the camp, the irreparability of the past takes the form of an absolute imminence; *post festum* and *ante festum*, anticipation and succession are parodically flattened on each other. Waking is now forever drawn into

the inside of the dream: “Soon we will again hear / the foreign command: / *Wstawac!*” (Agamben 128)

“*Wstawac!*” means “wake up!” That is the voice Levi heard every day in the camp. Even after he was liberated, he keeps hearing it in his mind. In the life after Auschwitz, Levi wakes up every morning only into the dream of Auschwitz. Auschwitz, in this sense, is not so much a historical incident that took place only once in the diachronic time frame as a memory of evil that is repressed in Levi’s psyche and synchronizes with his time of peace.

This is exactly what happens at the end of *Sophie’s Choice*. Stingo wakes up on the beach and declares that it is “Morning: excellent and fair.” As we have seen, this is supposed to be a happy ending. But what if he wakes up only into a dream? In fact, when Styron quotes Malraux’s sentence in the exergue at the beginning of the novel, he suggests that Auschwitz and peace coexist in our psyche: “I seek that essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood.” Stingo’s encounter with Sophie is in itself a metaphor for such an “essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood.” Sophie survives Auschwitz. But, like Levi, Sophie is haunted by the memory of Auschwitz, waking every morning into the dream of Auschwitz. On the other hand, Stingo survives Sophie. Just as Sophie was haunted by the memory of Auschwitz, Stingo is haunted by the memory of Sophie. Although the ending of the novel suggests that he wakes from a bad dream, he is still in a dream, the dream of Auschwitz that Sophie has transplanted into his psyche.

It is in this context that we read Agamben’s argument on the survivor’s shame. Shame is a very important concept for Agamben, because it lays a foundation for ethics after Auschwitz. For Agamben, what constitutes shame is the double movement of subjectification and desubjectification. Agamben’s idea of shame is based on Emanuel Levinas’s analysis of shame as “our being’s incapacity to move away and break from itself” (Agamben 104-105). Unable to flee from itself, the subject is “consigned to something that cannot be assumed. But what

cannot be assumed is not something external. Rather, it originates in our own intimacy; it is what is most intimate in us (for example, our own psychological life)" (105). Hobbes called this "something that cannot be assumed" the condition in which "every man is Enemy to every man." It is hidden deep in our psyche but is always with us. Being desubjectified means being subject to what is hidden in our psyche.

In explaining the double movement of subjectification and desubjectification, Agamben uses the Freudian model of the conscious and the unconscious, or the repressed and the return of the repressed: "It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement, at the expropriation of what is most its own" (Agamben 106). At the beginning of his essay "Repression," Freud says that the "ego cannot escape from itself" (Freud 35), suggesting that the ego cannot escape from its own engagement with the drive impulse repressed in the unconscious. Repression is in itself a means for the ego to escape from the drive impulse, which causes pain if it appears on the conscious. Repression, however, does not so much separate the conscious from the unconscious, but it rather ties them together. In other words, through repression, the conscious is involved in what Freud calls a "futile and interminable struggle" of compulsion neurosis (Freud 45), that is, an endless process of denying the return of the repressed.

An echo of this Freudian pessimism can be heard in Agamben. Agamben argues that the "*self* is what is produced as a remainder in the double movement—active and passive—of auto-affection" and that is why subjectivity appears as shame (Agamben 112). Shame is felt by Auschwitz survivors not because they have seen what they do not want to see, but because they are consigned to the view in which they are seeing what they do not want to see. Similarly, shame is felt not because they know what they do not want to know, but because they are consigned to such unfavorable knowledge. When consigned to such unfavorable knowledge, or desubjectified, the subject appears as what Freud calls a "reaction

formation,” the formation of the opposite of what should be repressed. Freud says, “as a substitute formation, there occurs an alteration to the ego, a heightened conscientiousness” (44). Agamben’s shame is similar to this conscientiousness, which is a substitute for what is repressed.

On the surface, Auschwitz survivors have subjectivity. This subjectivity, however, is a substitute for what is repressed, or what Agamben calls the remainder of the double movement of desubjectification and subjectification. Agamben’s argument on this double movement of desubjectification and subjectification is made in parallel with his argument on the survivor’s testimony, which is possible only at the threshold between the human and the inhuman. Agamben argues that the true witness to the inhumanity of Auschwitz is the one called the *Muselmann*. The *Muselmann* is the living dead in Auschwitz, or in Levi’s words, “he who has seen the Gorgon” (quoted in Agamben 53). In Agamben’s words, the *Muselmann* is the “one whose humanity is completely destroyed” (Agamben 133). The *Muselmann* cannot express what he has seen. The *Muselmann* can only represent the impossibility of seeing or bearing witness to the inhuman, although he is the only and true witness to the inhuman. Like the Hobbesian condition in which “every man is Enemy to every man,” the inhuman is thus repressed.

As the subject after Auschwitz appears as the product of the double movement of desubjectification and subjectification, the witness to the inhumanity of Auschwitz is made possible only through the paradox that

the human being is the inhuman; the one whose humanity is completely destroyed is the one who is truly human. The paradox here is that if the only one bearing witness to the human is the one whose humanity has been wholly destroyed, this means that the identity between human and inhuman is never perfect and that it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always remains. *The witness is this remnant.* (Agamben 133-34)

It is, therefore, only through the *Muselmann* that we can hear about humanity, because, paradoxically, the *Muselmann* is the "one whose humanity has been wholly destroyed." The *Muselmann* does not speak. However, what he has seen appears as something that remains from the humanity that has been destroyed. For Agamben, the remnant represents the humanity that has survived the paradox of Auschwitz, that is, the paradox that "*the human being is the inhuman*" (133). What Agamben calls the remnant is what Hobbes calls "all other time," that is, the time of peace. In Freudian terms, the remnant is the subjectivity that is formed in reaction to the return of the repressed. As we have seen, such subjectivity is what remains after Auschwitz and is expressed as shame.

Shame is an important element in *Sophie's Choice*, too. Sophie feels shame not because she has seen what she does not want to see, but because she has been consigned to the view of herself in which she is seeing what she does not want to see. Even after Auschwitz, day in and day out, she is consigned to the view of herself in which she is seeing her daughter being taken away by the Nazi aide. For Sophie, this view is most shameful not because she chose the daughter but because she was forced to do so. She was desubjectified and, as a reaction formation to desubjectification, feels shame. There is another important episode that consigns Sophie to shame. On the New York subway, in the darkness caused by an accident, Sophie is finger raped. While being raped, she sees—or feels, because it is dark—herself being raped. For Sophie, this was the "nightmare from which she was ever so delicately and slowly trying to retreat, but actually symbolized, in its wanton viciousness, the very nature of that nightmare world" (100). For Sophie, this experience is the repetition of the experience at Auschwitz. Like the nightmare at Auschwitz in which an anonymous Dr. Jemand von Niemand desubjectifies her, she is again desubjectified by an "anonymous stroke in the dark." This latter episode, the repetition of Auschwitz, tells her that she is still at Auschwitz. Furthermore, it tells her that wherever she goes, she cannot escape from the condition of Auschwitz, in which a mother can

be the killer of her child, that is, “every man is Enemy to every man.”

Sophie is a *Muselmann*, the true witness to the inhuman, because she is a living metaphor for the paradox that the “*the human being is the inhuman.*” She is also a remnant of Auschwitz, not in the sense that she has survived Auschwitz, but in the sense that her subjectivity is what remains after she was desubjectified by Dr. Jemand von Niemand. Her subjectivity, expressed as shame, is the reaction to such desubjectification. With this subjectivity, she spends the time of peace in America, but this peace exists only on the surface. Underneath, she still lives in the time of war. Her time of peace is the time spent with Stingo; her time of war, on the other hand, is the time with Nathan, a Jew, who constantly reminds her of Auschwitz by hitting and cursing her, that is, by desubjectifying her. At the end of the novel, however, Sophie returns to Nathan, giving up the life with Stingo. For Sophie, being desubjectified is the only condition in which she can retain her subjectivity. She would rather stick to it, even if it means, ultimately, to be killed by Nathan.

Now we can understand why this novel is not so much about Sophie as about the relationship between her and Stingo. By submitting herself to Nathan, Sophie finally fails to survive Auschwitz. She is the remnant of Auschwitz, not the survivor. By outliving Sophie, on the other hand, Stingo survives Auschwitz. As survivor, Stingo lives a life in peace that has been denied to Sophie. The coupled metaphors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, represented by Sophie and Stingo respectively, now represent the remnant and the survivor. It is only the remnant Sophie that can be the witness. Stingo himself admits that. After Sophie’s death, the young Stingo wrote in his journal that “*Someday I will understand Auschwitz*” (560). But now, the older Stingo takes back the words of his youth and writes that “No one will ever understand Auschwitz” (560). There is an unbridgeable gap between Sophie, the remnant, and Stingo, the survivor. However, Sophie lives in Stingo, the narrator-novelist. Agamben helps us to describe such an inseparable relationship between the witness and the survivor:

The witness attests to the fact that there can be testimony because there is an inseparable division and non-coincidence between the inhuman and the human, the living being and the speaking being, the *Muselmann* and the survivor. Precisely insofar as it inheres in language as such, precisely insofar as it bears witness to the taking place of a potentiality of speaking through an impotentiality alone, its authority depends not on a factual truth, a conformity between something said and a fact or between memory and what happened, but rather on the immemorial relation between the unsayable and the sayable, between the outside and the inside of the language. *The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak—that is, in his or her being a subject.* Testimony thus guarantees not the factual truth of the statement safeguarded in the archive, but rather its inarchivability, its exteriority with respect to the archive—that is, the necessity by which, as the existence of language, it escapes both memory and forgetting. It is because there is testimony only where there is an impossibility of speaking, because there is a witness only where there has been desubjectification, that the *Muselmann* is the complete witness and that the survivor and the *Muselmann* cannot be split apart. (Agamben 157-58)

Sophie and Stingo are the *Muselmann* and the survivor respectively, and after Sophie's death Stingo is the two in one. Before her death, Sophie has told Stingo about her dream of writing about Auschwitz in English. Now Stingo takes over her dream and writes about Auschwitz. However, Stingo rightly understands what it means to write about Auschwitz when he admits that "No one will ever understand Auschwitz." As Agamben points out, his authority lies in "*his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak—that is, in his or her being a subject.*" Of course, as Agamben says, this subject is that of desubjectification, which is Sophie's

experience, not Stingo's. However, that is exactly what the narrative structure of *Sophie's Choice* points to: Sophie and Stingo are one, just as subjectification and desubjectification are one. Stingo is the only way for Sophie's testimony, or language, to come out. In other words, only through Stingo's "impotentiality" can Sophie's "potentiality of speaking" take place.

Conclusion

What we have pointed out as the synchronicity of war (Auschwitz) and peace (Hiroshima) now comes out as the inseparable relationship between the remnant-witness and the survivor-narrator. This is exactly what the relationship of Sophie and Stingo in *Sophie's Choice* represents. The initial implication of the coupling of Auschwitz and Hiroshima—that is, the metaphor for absolute evil and that for necessary evil—has already been nullified by their synchronicity, or inseparability. As long as Sophie lives in Stingo, Auschwitz and Hiroshima coexist. Without Stingo, who has been saved by Hiroshima, Sophie's testimony can never be known. Sophie's testimony to the evil of Auschwitz is made possible only through the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Here, again, Hiroshima appears as necessary evil. Yet Hiroshima can serve Stingo as necessary evil as long as it prevents another Hiroshima. In other words, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima can be regarded as necessary only when it is certain that there will be no more wars. More than Auschwitz, Hiroshima is absolute, because it concerns not only Jews or any other particular group of people but every human being on earth. Hiroshima is thus elevated to the absolute referent. The peace in which Stingo lives always refers to this absolute referent. It is a peace achieved only temporarily while the total nuclear war is deterred, that is, while the absolute referent continues to be referred. In this sense, Stingo is the survivor of not only World War II but also the total nuclear war that has not yet broken out. Now the relationship between Sophie and Stingo has been overturned. Sophie's testimony to the evil of Auschwitz is a necessary part of Stingo's presence as the survivor-narrator in the mock peaceful world of the nuclear age.

This is the notorious irony of *Sophie's Choice*: it looks more like a novel about Stingo than about Sophie.

Notes

1. Hannah Arendt, Styron's friend, might be the source of the idea of anonymity suggested in *Sophie's Choice*. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt writes: "The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive) robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life" (452).
2. Styron learned much about the connection of Nazi genocide and slavery in the American South through Richard L. Rubenstein's 1975 book, *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future*, for which Styron wrote an introduction in 1978, a year before *Sophie's Choice* was published. Rubenstein tries to see Auschwitz from a comparative perspective, pointing out that the "slave plantations and the concentration camps are part of the same developmental continuum within Western civilization" (45).
3. As Efraim Sicher points out, *Sophie's Choice*, along with its screen adaptation, is part of the so-called "Americanization of the Holocaust" (121).
4. Calling "all other time"—the time other than the time of war—peace, Hobbes may seem to diachronically separate the time of peace from that of war. But just like Freud's theory of the unconscious, Hobbes's theory of war is speculative. Hobbes himself admits that we cannot expect to see such a war in reality, saying "It may peradventure be thought, there was never such a time, nor condition of warre as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world" (187). At the same time, however, Hobbes tries to illustrate what he calls the condition of war by referring to the "savage people in many places of *America*." Here, again, Hobbes speaks of places, not times.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 2002. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin, 1977. Print.
- . *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: A Harvest Book · Harcourt, Inc., 1968. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Repression." Trans. Graham Frankland. *The Unconscious*. New York: Penguin, 2005. 33-45. Print.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. New York: Penguin, 1985. Print.
- Rubenstein, Richard L. *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future*. New York: Perennial, 1975. Print.
- Sicher, Efraim. *The Holocaust Novel*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Styron, William. "The Enduring Metaphors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima." *Sophie's Choice: A Contemporary Casebook*. Ed. Rhoda Sirlin and James L. W. West III. New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. 163-66. Print.
- . *Sophie's Choice*. 1979. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.
- Telpaz, Gideon. "An Interview with William Styron." *William Styron's Sophie's Choice*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002. 231-41. Print.