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Literature and Composition Theory: Joyce Carol Oates' Journal Stories

Joyce Carol Oates began her career as a teacher and a writer in the 1960s, a decade of tremendous ferment in theories of composition and the relationship between writing and thinking. Much of the groundwork for the published research of the 1970s was begun in the 1960s: Peter Elbow focused attention on writers rather than teachers; Janet Emig studied the composing processes of 12th graders; Young, Becker, and Pike popularized the tagmemic heuristic; colleges revised admissions policies with CUNY's open enrollment experiment that served as the focus for Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* in place by 1970; Ken Macrorie wrote the radical composition text *Writing To Be Read*, which became available for classroom use in 1968; and Donald Murray joined the faculty of the University of New Hampshire in 1963 where he began work that led to the sometimes abused and misused term *the writing process*.¹ It would be foolish to argue that Oates knew any of this work in composition specifically or well, but in the 1960s she was teaching in the kind of student climate that generated such work. She has always been a teacher and a writer who thinks about composing processes in ways that are compatible with composition theory, particularly theory that emphasizes expressive modes over traditional rhetoric. In an Author's Note to her novel *them* (1969), she speaks about the years 1962-67 when she taught at The University of Detroit and about how her character Maureen Wendall was based on a student she had in an evening class. She claims to integrate this real student's letters into her own text and says that the epistolary "'confession' had the effect of a kind of psychological therapy" for the student (11). Years later, Oates admitted that she made up this student, but the way she uses the fictional Maureen's letters to a writer-teacher named Miss Oates indicates her early concern with the connections between life and literature and with how writing can deaden those connections or can free the writer's individual voice. Maureen cannot accept the vision she perceives as her teacher's, that books are "more important than life" (333). She cannot understand red-inked comments about "*Lack of coherence and development*" (335), and she fails the course. But Maureen is a writer, as her letter clearly shows. She has a personal voice, and the letter form allows her to articulate what she remained silent about in traditional literature and composition classes (she not only failed her literature class, she also received a D in her composition class). She

questions the very notion of form: “You said, ‘Literature gives form to life,’ I remember you saying that very clearly. What is form? Why is it better than the way life happens, by itself?” (330). But she yearns for form even as she questions its value: “I wish I could write down my thoughts not in a mess like most of my life but in some order—I want to explain something, I want to get it clear” (309).

Through her ruse of the real-student/real-teacher, Oates reflects her belief in the power of writing to give form to life, however messy that life or that form may be. Through Maureen’s letters she challenges the traditional boundaries of academic writing and, by doing so, underscores the possibility of uniting literature and composition theory. Maureen’s letters are both an image in a literary work and a way of providing a character, who is symbolic of real students, with a voice. In other words, in a decade that marked the beginning of the split between literature and composition, Oates uses the traditional literary form of the letter in a non-traditional way that connects it to emerging composition theory. Early in her career, before her treatment of the academic world became more cynical in its exposure of publish or perish pseudo-criticism,² Oates pursued her interest in the relationship between literature and composition by writing a number of metafictional stories in epistolary or journal form. Reading these stories can help us to see how literature informs composition and composition informs literature and how both connect to theories about language and art.

Oates’ story that most reflects composition theory is “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again.”³ The story consists entirely of notes that a writer/narrator generates for an English class, notes which help her give form to her experiences: being caught in an act of kleptomania, running away from her wealthy, insulated, but cold home to the Detroit world of prostitution and drugs, being beaten in prison. The full title of Oates’ story is one invented by the writer/narrator: “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again: Notes for an Essay for an English Class at Baldwin Country Day School; Poking Around in Debris; Disgust and Curiosity; A Revelation of the Meaning of Life; a Happy Ending. . . .” The title thus makes the crucial connection between the literary work and the writing process. The story illustrates the writer/narrator’s use of writing as a way of knowing; it also illustrates Oates’ own recognition of and use of the process and her distinction between process and product, art and reality.

Using the full title of the story, we can see how Oates uses the persona of the writer/narrator to set up several stages in the writing process. The writer/narrator does not at first know where to begin but can “Poke Around in Debris.” As she does so, she uses many of the heuristics typical of writing classes. She makes of her notes a kind of recursive outline, moving at will between events, people, and places. For example, in the notes labeled Roman numeral I, “Events,” she free-writes about five events numbered, in outline style, 1-5: a scenic view of an “excellent” (1.1) department store where she is about to steal a pair of gloves; a

confrontation with her mother over the theft, which has been fixed by the family's connections; a scenic view of an even more exclusive shop where her mother wants to deal with the kleptomania by buying things for her; and two truncated views of herself walking out of school and of herself arriving at the Detroit inner city. Because she is flexible with her notes, the girl returns to the stealing scene in section VII.1 and to her arrival in Detroit in VII.3. She uses this kind of process throughout her notes, focusing on "Events," "Characters," or specified places. If something does not generate an idea, as in the sections labeled "World Events" and "People & Circumstances Contributing to This Delinquency," she simply writes "Nothing" (III.IV) and goes on.⁴ Within the notes, the girl does a great deal with her need to question; questions generate more significant questions as her process enters another stage where her "Disgust and Curiosity" are piqued. Only toward the end of her notes when her world begins to fall back into place and she reaches some insight, albeit an insight short of a "Revelation of the Meaning of Life," do the questions begin to diminish. As her notes progress, she also begins to acknowledge herself in these events, to call herself "I" rather than distancing herself by using the term "the girl." By the end of her writing, she believes she is "home," that the writing has helped her to reach "A Happy Ending." But of course she is not, for she has not recognized that she has not turned her writing into a product and, even if she does so, she could resee, rethink, revise as she continues to change and to grow.

Although "How I Contemplated the World" is not, then, a fixed, final product for the persona, it does represent Oates' completed narrative, or as complete a narrative as an artist can produce given the fact that she, too, must constantly deal with new data and new angles of vision. As a published writer, Oates has declared a temporary peace between product and process. Through her details, she has clearly illustrated how writers observe in order to know, how they observe things they may ultimately discard. Through her own role as writer creating a character creating, she has composed a self-aware piece of metafiction. But more than in most metafiction that is so highly conscious of the text as text, this text's details also serve to create a realistic psychological portrait. The following passage, where the girl tries to come to terms with Simon, her lover, illustrates Oates' use of both composition heuristics and literary techniques:

Imagine Simon in this room, in my pink room; he is about six feet tall and stoops slightly, in a feline cautious way, always thinking, always on guard, with his scuffed light suede shoes and his clothes that are anyone's clothes, slightly rumpled ordinary clothes that ordinary men might wear to not-bad jobs. Simon has fair long hair, curly hair, spent languid curls that are like . . . exactly like the curls of wood shavings to the touch. I am trying to be exact . . . and he smells of too many pills coating his tongue with a faint green-white scum. (XI, 1)

This girl, as student, has learned the teacher's lessons about being "exact" and, by being exact, has recorded her own responses to the events in her life. But over and above the persona, Oates as writer controls the story. She chooses words for the girl who seems to choose words. It is Oates who sometimes has the girl stop short of an insight the reader may reach and that, if the writing process continued for the girl, she might come to herself. For example, in section II.1 the girl's notes reveal the students at Baldwin Country Day to be squeaky clean, perfectly molded academy girls. Her notes are extraordinary for their implied insight, and they help us to see why she cannot, should not, adjust. But as soon as the girl writes the words, she goes on to another topic, so that we do not feel that she has had the insight Oates allows us to have. Had her invention carried her farther, she might feel less comfortable about her return "home." Or again, Oates creates her as a persona who presents a sterile view of the houses on her street, all in terms of their status symbols. She comes to her own house: "Next is our house. Classic contemporary. Traditional modern. Attached garage, attached Florida room, attached patio, attached pool and cabana, attached roof" (V). The girl, later, recognizes her attachment to home and she accepts it despite this earlier sarcasm, perhaps even because her phrasing led her to see that we cannot escape who we are or what we come from. But Oates allows us as readers to see here what the persona does not, an indictment of this sterile suburb world that accepting will not make right or happy. Oates does not let us escape our own discomfort with the girl's world, our sense that to say that "World Events" (III) come to "Nothing" or that no one contributes to her delinquency (IV) reveals the girl's refusal to connect to any reality. For the girl, the writing process has been merely that. It has helped her to confront her experience, but it has not delivered her to a meaningful reality.

Like Maureen Wendall, the girl in "How I Contemplated the World" uses a composing process that has "the effect of psychological therapy." Oates ended this phrase from her Author's Note to *them* with another equally significant phrase: "of probably temporary benefit" (11). For while she uses composition theories that connect writing to knowing, she also uses theories that question the possibility that there is any stable knowledge. When she speaks about her own writing process, she shows herself the heir of linguistic theory that emphasizes reality as a language construct and that Terry Eagleton has ably traced to Saussure and Heidegger. In a preface written for Linda Wagner's collection of critical essays about her writing, Oates explains that an artist is always someone different when writing than after writing and that what writers write is always different from the indefinable something they were working through. The piece of art that a critic describes is only something of what the writer had in mind at the time; it is like the recollection of a dream, never the dream itself, which is impossible for the writer ever consciously to articulate. Like the process, the product of writing is at best a portion of reality that is in a state of constant flux (xi-xiii). One implication of such a belief about language and reality is that if someone uses writing as a way of under-

standing the self and the world, a “happy ending” lies out of reach because an “ending” is impossible. Even had the girl in “How I Contemplated the World” turned her process notes to product, she would have to pick up the process again if she is to continue to grow in understanding.

“How I Contemplated the World” is clearly a story that relates to composition theory. Oates’ nonstudent journal keepers also write metafictional narratives that we can connect to composition theory: these stories read like self-reflective journals with the character using a composition heuristic that Oates turns into the product of art.⁵ The story “Plot,” collected in *Marriages and Infidelities*, illustrates this most clearly. Here, a writer/narrator keeps a journal where he begins to compose the plot of a short story and where he also comments on that plot and its autobiographical significance. The lines between plot and autobiography blur and the narrator even speculates on whether, having completed his plot, a violent one involving a suicide via self-immolation, he is destined to fulfill that ending; that is, whether his language will create instead of reflect reality. Oates has said that she wrote this story at a particularly difficult time in her life and that she was using it to explore the therapeutic nature of art (Creighton 18). Clearly the narrator, like Maureen Wendall, uses his plot as personal therapy:

What do you do when your love dies so quickly, so strangely? You must write about it. Rewrite it. You can change both your names, exaggerate your love for her, exaggerate her beauty. (211)

But within the plot of the story, the narrator’s created character (the persona’s persona we might call him, who also at this point is using writing as therapy) also has this insight:

But having written twenty-two pages he discovered that X could not be explained away so easily. There was the X on paper, and the X out in the street. Two X’s. X out in the street is never in the narrative, but only mentioned. (212-13)

What Oates is suggesting is that the journal is one view of a situation, the plot another, the product, if it is completed, yet another, all words that represent a separate reality from the one we live.⁶

With their emphasis on language as a fluid process of perception, Oates’ narrative journals also connect to reader-response theories. But Oates is not a conceptual relativist who locates differences of interpretation solely in the interpreter. Reed Dasenbrock’s cogent defense, in *College English*, of Donald Davidson’s theory of literary perception over the relativism of people like Barbara Hernstein Smith and Stanley Fish helps explain Oates’ view. Unlike Hernstein Smith and Fish, Oates, like Davidson, seems to believe that even as we know that

our interpretations are unlikely to all be true, we articulate them as if they are true in order to make sense of the world. We behave as if there is a reality that we live and that language helps us to read and write toward an understanding that is at least temporarily true. As the narrator of her retelling of Thoreau's "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (*Marriages and Infidelities*) puts it, ". . . everything dies. Therefore nothing exists that is not true" (384). Or as the narrator of "Plot" says, "A 'plot' is not a fiction, as you know, but very real; it is the record of someone's brain" (209). The narrator of "29 Inventions" (*Marriages and Infidelities*) also explains the connection between reading and writing. She sounds much like a traditional first-person narrator, but her metafictional voice has the closeness to a reader that we find in an epistolary form or in a journal written by someone conscious that it will be read. She identifies herself, variously, as a nurse/stenographer/technician/friend and describes her work for a psychologist who is treating a patient, a patient who may, in fact, be another version of herself. Throughout her narration, she sees that her 29 versions of reality are really inventions of reality, and so she freely changes versions until the only reality we have are the words of the inventions that she has not erased; that is, the words that Oates in the moments that she was performing as Oates the writer, has chosen to have her not erase. "I am," the narrator says, "a process that is dying, disappearing, moving away./Of all of us, only you remain" (100). In other words, the story that has not been erased exists only as readers interpret it, but, just as dying exists, the possibility of interpretation does exist and does matter.

By retelling canonized stories, Oates reflects a reader-response theory that is not relativistic. The story in *Marriages and Infidelities* most relevant for its connection to both writing and reading is "The Turn of the Screw," Oates' version, among other things, of the distinction James so often notes between art and "The Real Thing." In Oates' story, two personae keep journals, one a young man trying to survive his uncle's difficult old age and one an aging Jamesian writer voyeuristically transforming the young man into a figure for art. The artist, of course, does not in his journal see the young man as the young man in his journal sees himself. But, Oates implies, this does not, finally, matter. The artist ends his journal:

He has understood my message. [The young man, of course, has not.]
My love. I will live through him and he through me: born again in my
writing, in something I will, must write, something I will begin soon
in honor of his youth and the perfect power of his face. (451)

Here, the artist is implying that the product of writing may become a reality, may serve as a monument, in a significant way that the process cannot. In a letter to Joanne Creighton, Oates has said of this story that it is a parody of journal-keeping that leads her characters into self-delusion. But this delusion, she goes on, does not matter, for the "young man, misread by the artist, will nevertheless inspire him to

create one of his most powerful and mysterious novellas” (159). If truth is not possible, a well-crafted writing product still may enable a writer to create a significant, though temporary and relative, new version of truth for readers.

With the endorsement of the attempt of writing to articulate meaning, Oates seems to me much closer to composition teachers who urge their students to use writing to learn about themselves and the world than to the literary theorists Dasenbrock excoriates in his discussion of Davidson versus Fish. I do not wish to argue here whether or not Dasenbrock’s assessment is accurate, but his distinction is useful for describing Oates’ view. Conceptual relativism, says Dasenbrock, represents “a particularly arid and impoverished notion of what constitutes literary study, the entire world of reading reduced to interpretation as a virtuoso performance.” Such a notion leads to classrooms where “from one side enters the student, with an unconscious but tenacious prior theory that works of literature can teach us about life; from the other, enters the professor, armed with the prior theory that literary texts aren’t really about anything or that we can’t know what they’re about, doomed as we are to write the text we read according to our own beliefs and values” (15). In an interview with Judith Applebaum, Oates makes her position very clear that literature can teach us about life (*Publisher’s Weekly*, 26 June 1978). There, Oates explains that she believes art creates a convincing state of mind that we experience. By seeing how others get through, we learn and do not make their errors (Milazzo 49). Ultimately, she believes in the meaning of writing and reading, even though she is always willing to raise questions about the possibility of meaning. Two illustrations from the collection *Night-Side* show just how conscious she is of the dilemma. In “The Dungeon,” a journal keeper, an artist, feels compelled to show his journal and some obscene sketches to a woman he has become obsessed with. He writes of her response: “—Tried to see it as art, did you? Aesthetic reaction. Yes of course it is art—is meant to be, at least—but it is also LIFE & SORROW & INARTICULATE YEARNING out of the dungeon—” (146). In “Exile,” the journal keeper, a physician whose work on the “neurophysiological . . . relationship between the brain mechanism and consciousness” (199) is dismissed as insanity, speculates that language itself may be the “primary obstacle to communication” (198). Through her journal keepers, Oates asks, What is art? When does it become art? How much does art reflect life? Their answers acknowledge that art and the languages of art—words, musical notations, sketched lines—are processes that grope at reality and are doomed to be inarticulate representations of reality. Such an acknowledgment can be terrifying, but as a writer who validates the attempt of writers to articulate what they come to know—even if this knowledge is that they cannot know—Oates transcends the terrifying.

The last essay in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lectures on Literature* contains this statement:⁷

I have tried to reveal the mechanism of those wonderful toys—literary masterpieces. I have tried to make of you good readers who read books not for the infantile purpose of identifying oneself with the characters, and not for the adolescent purpose of learning to live, and not for the academic purpose of indulging in generalization. I have tried to teach you to read books for the sake of their form, their visions, their art. I have tried to teach you to feel the shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of the author—the joys and difficulties of creation. (381-82)

By creating personae who call attention to themselves as writers, Oates forces us to look at her vision of language that constitutes her vision of art. But Oates does not want her art to minimize the “emotions of the people in the book.” In an interview for *Atlantic* (Fall 1972) with Joe David Bellamy, she explains that she is “temperamentally hostile to the weighting down of a natural and spontaneous story with self-conscious significance. . . . The gifts of a Thomas Hardy . . . are far more remarkable than the gifts of a writer like Malcolm Lowry, who so painfully and doggedly and willfully created a novel of symbols/ideas/significance” (Milazzo 141). In other words, Oates is very deeply interested in the “infantile” way readers respond to characters as people.

While literature and linguistic theory in the last quarter century have focused on whether or not one can know anything, composition theory has emphasized writing as a way of knowing. Oates wrote her journal narratives early in her career when her classrooms were closer to what Mina Shaughnessy found at CUNY than to what she now finds at Princeton, and these narratives reveal how student, as well as nonstudent, writers struggle to make meaning. As a writer-teacher-scholar, Oates has managed to inform her own writing by acknowledging the contradictory world view inherent in literary and composition theory. Describing her epistolary and journal stories, again to Joe David Bellamy, she has said her technique is “a kind of Victorian cliché; among other things, I wanted to suggest how interior lives touch upon one another in odd, jagged, oblique ways, without communicating any essential truth. . . . [T]he epistolary form is a way . . . of sending out cries for help, not meant to be heard; simply a way of articulating private bewilderment” (25). The statement at once questions the possibility of truth and acknowledges the need to articulate personal bewilderment in the face of such a world view. Oates’ literary works recognize bewilderment at the same time that they validate writing. Her journal keepers are like students of composition, particularly those being taught to use expressive modes. Like her journal keepers, students use writing as a process to make meaning of their lives. Whether or not they recognize the inability of writing to solidify meaning, we teach them in the way traditional literary theory reads characters: as people involved in the very serious business of trying to make sense of the world. These characters and these students do not play with language;

rather, they use language to discover what they know and can articulate about the people and events and places and ideas they are confronting in their lives and their writing. As scholars and teachers, whether of literature or composition or both, we, too, can expand what we know—or cannot know—by connecting rather than severing the ties between literature and composition.

Notes

¹At conferences, Murray, now retired, often speaks about regretting the phrase, which has been associated incorrectly with exclusively personal writing and with inattention to a grammatically correct product.

²Most of Oates' stories about academics are collected in *The Hungry Ghosts: Seven Allusive Comedies* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974) and *All the Good People I've Left Behind* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1979). Her cynicism is strongest in "Angst" (*The Hungry Ghosts*) where a writer hears her own work being discussed at an MLA-type convention and is upset by the nonsense being said and by the presence of an imposter in the audience who claims to be her.

³"How I Contemplated the World" was first published in *Triquarterly* (1969), then collected in *The Wheel of Love* (New York: Vanguard, 1970) and again in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* (Greenwich, CN: Fawcett, 1974). It is also widely available in college literature anthologies. For convenience, references are to section numbers rather than to page numbers.

⁴See Sue Simpson Park, "A Study in Counterpoint: Joyce Carol Oates' 'How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again,'" for a discussion of the contrapuntal patterns between Bloomfield Hills and Detroit, the mother and Clarita, and the father and Simon. Park uses the disorganized notes to jump into her concern with the girl's state of mind.

⁵Eileen Bender, in particular, has discussed Oates' metafiction in the context of current debates, including Roger Shattuck's charges that metafictional stories are "'fragments,'" "'shards,'" and "'cock-and-bull'" stories and John Gardner's charge that they are pieces of "'literary gimcrackery'" (*Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence* 165, 183).

⁶For a full discussion of "Plot" and the futile attempt to use fiction to order reality, see Carolyn Walker, "Fear, Love, and Art in Oates' 'Plot.'"

⁷Oates knows Nabokov's work well, having told her version of *Lolita* in her novel *Childwold*.

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Sharon L. Dean completed her graduate studies at The University of New Hampshire when Donald Murray was there beginning his work in composition theory. Like most of her contemporaries her training was in literature, but her teaching was in composition. Currently, she teaches both literature and composition at Rivier College in Nashua, New Hampshire. She has written in both fields, with the majority of her work in American literature. In addition to her current work on Joyce Carol Oates, she is writing a book on Constance Fenimore Woolson.

Announcement and Call for Proposals

1992 Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

Donald McCloskey, Anne Ruggles Gere, Steven Mailloux, Jeanne Fahnestock, Richard Larson, Carolyn Miller, Christine Neuwirth, Gary Schumacher, and Bill Smith will be among the featured speakers at the 11th annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July 8-11, 1992, in State College, Pennsylvania. We invite scholars, researchers, and teachers of rhetoric and writing to participate in the conference by presenting papers or workshops on any relevant topic—rhetorical history or theory, the composing process, basic writing, writing in academic and nonacademic contexts, advanced composition, the rhetoric of science, writing across the curriculum, rhetorical criticism, writing pedagogy, computers and writing, technical and business writing, and so on. One-page proposals will be accepted through **April 6, 1992**. To submit a proposal, to volunteer to chair a session, or to find out more about attending the conference, contact Davida Charney, Department of English, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802. (BITNET: IRJ@PSUVM).