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JOYCE CAROL OATES' *WONDERLAND*: AN INTRODUCTION

When Aristotle notes that man is a
rational animal one strains
forward, cupping his ear, to hear which
of those words is emphasized... (*EP*, p. 3).¹

Despite constant praise from reviewers, the writings of Joyce Carol Oates have so far attracted little detailed critical commentary. Her productivity, certainly, has been widely noted: in ten years, she has published some six novels, including the award-winning *them*, four collections of stories, four volumes of poems, a book of critical essays, as well as many uncollected reviews, essays, and poems. Already, this list will undoubtedly be out of date—a checklist of her works published in *American Literature* in 1971 is now dramatically dated, and even then had omitted many items. Such prolific productivity by a writer who, in addition, is a full-time professor of literature at the University of Windsor, might suggest an obsession with words, and even imply a lack of self-criticism in her writing. Certainly, her books reveal an enviable fluency that often overflows into carelessness, inadequate characterization, or arbitrary structure. But her verbal profligacy is offset by some of the most compelling writing in contemporary fiction—in particular, she possesses a peculiarly chilling ability to evoke some of the darker recesses of the contemporary sensibility, to penetrate our fears and insecurities and the deep-seated threats to our sense of personal and communal identity. In what follows, I hope to initiate some analysis of a writer who is arguably one of the most important novelists in North America—and, specifically since her migration from Detroit to Windsor in 1967, in Canada.

Miss Oates' fundamental subjects are most clearly, if sometimes

superficially, seen in her short stories: she is insistently concerned with the fragility of the human personality in contemporary America, and with examining the threatening undercurrent of violence ever present just beneath the serene surface of suburban living. Many of her stories, however, give the impression of being written at white heat, thrown off as one insight after another seizes her. Their clarity of expression, as opposed to their vision, frequently falters. Some, certainly, are masterpieces: at times she has a frighteningly clear insight into, say, the felt terror of poverty in the city, or the obsessive grasping and destructiveness of a collapsing marriage, or the velvet-gloved ruthlessness of strife between generations. "Plot", for instance, evokes in a gripping manner what the woman narrator describes as the "peculiar boredom in her glands. Women have that boredom today..." (MI, p. 197). Similarly, in "Scenes of Passion and Despair" the narrator broods on her husband and her lover in a passage very typical of Miss Oates' insight into characters living in a volatile state of half-courage and fear:

If his drinking got too bad and he really got sick, she would abandon her lover and nurse him. If he killed himself she would abandon her lover and wear black. Years of mourning. Guilt. Sin. If he found out about her lover and ran over and killed him, shot him right in that bed, she would wear black, she would not give evidence against him, she would come haggard to court, a faithful wife again.

The husband will not get sick, will not kill himself, will not kill the lover or even find out about him; he will only grow old.

She will not need to wear black or to be faithful; she will grow old.

The lover will not even grow old; he will explode into molecules as into a mythology. (MI, p. 185)

In the novels, the obsessions, despair, paradoxes, and fears that characterize Oates' stories are welded more satisfactorily into a peculiarly gothic structure, its gargoyles and extravagances growing compellingly out of the everyday paraphernalia of contemporary social realities. The settings of the novels have affinities with the broad naturalistic tradition of Flaubert, Crane, Dreiser, even Faulkner. They range from the itinerant fruitpickers of South Carolina, the urban poor and affluent professionals of Detroit, to the University, the medical research clinic, and above all the spiritual tundra of North American suburbia, where even the rules of society are appropriately broken "in an orderly way" (EP, p. 65). Through these apparently ordinary

settings frequently erupt the latent terror, violence, obsessive sexuality, religious strife Oates perceives lying close to the surface of contemporary life. Her novels are thus not really related to the naturalistic tradition, but are more in the tradition of American Gothic, with sudden upsurges of violence or unexpected lyricism, exploding through day-to-day surface. Richard, the grotesque 250 pound 18-year-old who narrates *Expensive People*, describes his own environment, which is typical of most of her novels: "Fernwood, and Brookfield and Cedar Grove and Charlotte Pointe", all redolent with the odor of cash, with the Johns Behemoth private school, the Vastvalley Country Club, the constantly aspiring and mobile professional caste (*EP*, p. 36). Such a setting is related to what she describes, in the novel of the same name, as "Wonderland", with its symbolic structures of supermarkets, "decorated with 'modern' multicolored cubes and benches of garish carnival colors", the ersatz of amplified music, "square after square of cubes and benches and potted plants..." (*WL*, p. 445). In *Expressive People*, the equivalent to "Wonderland" is called, ironically, "Paradise" (*EP*, pp. 145-147).

From such familiar surroundings, Oates builds up an impressive symbolic structure. The basic materialistic surroundings of contemporary affluence—supermarkets, consumables, money, cleanliness, success, marriage, motherhood—are all heightened into the material of Gothic parable. Wonderland is revealed as Wasteland: surrounding themselves with the paraphernalia and the superficialities of affluence, modern Americans are still guiltily aware of an inner darkness their neon and strobe lighting barely illuminate.

Wonderland is a society of schizoids: its inhabitants define their goals in the rhetoric of idealism—the integrity of the individual, the promise of the future, the freedom and uniqueness of the personality—but it acts as if these great goals of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, Bruno's or Nietzsche's dreams of human autonomy, are graspable only in the most immediate material forms. The constant pressure to growth, to discovery, is defined in idealistic terms—"...life is a movement into the infinite...or it is a shrinking back" (*WL*, p. 120)—but it is experienced only in terms of economics, ego-expression, exploitation. The struggle to assert one's individuality ends, as with Macbeth, in being subject to the terrifying determinism of constant material

competition and destruction. So Jesse, the hero of *Wonderland*, finds that in "forcing his future into place" (*WL*, p. 207), his contemporaries and surroundings, his present (as opposed to his future) are all experienced as threats. Frustration and insecurity, Oates suggests, are not merely urged upon us by the consumer society, which conditions us to crave more, newer, bigger consumables; more fundamentally, they are at the very root of our contemporary consciousness and result not just in our physical dissatisfactions, but in the destruction of the very autonomy we strive for. Grasping for the freedom of the supermarket, we become more and more subject to its demands. Striving for autonomy, Jesse finds "even his spirit was become automated, mechanized. It worked perfectly for him. He had only to direct it and it responded" (*WL*, p. 208).

them won for Miss Oates the National Book Award for 1970, but *Wonderland* is probably her most completely realised novel, and deserves a wide audience and careful critical attention. It is central to her vision of America, using as its primary symbols money, food and eating, cleanliness, the struggle for success and social respectability—and, beneath these surface manifestations of contemporary affluence, violence. *Wonderland* relates the history of Jesse—successively Harte, Vogel, Pedersen, Vogel. Jesse is orphaned when his bankrupt father shoots the rest of his family and himself, and is brought up, educated and so formed by, first, his grandfather, then a Boys Home, the brilliant Doctor Pedersen, the University of Chicago, Postgraduate Medical School, from which he progresses to his final environment, his marriage, wife, and children. Through all these rapidly changing environments and experiences, Jesse constantly fights to discover and develop his inner personality. Moulded by radically dissociated influences, continually under pressure to achieve status, stability, relatedness, he needs a sense of his own identity. Otherwise, each successive experience is "all a blur, shapeless, a dimension of fog and space, like the future itself" (*WL*, p. 49).

What does, in its sinister pervasiveness, link Jesse's successive worlds, is money. It is the lack of money that drives his father to murder and suicide. As his father drives him home from school for the last time, the display window of Montgomery Ward's, with its "galaxy of gifts" (*WL*, p. 47) is a threatening mixture of temptation:

There is a village you can buy, tiny cardboard houses on a white board, with a church at its center. Jesse's mother wanted one of these but they were too expensive. Everything is too expensive this year. Last year. The year before that: everything too expensive. They have no money... . He wants a shotgun but there is no chance of getting it. No, no chance. There is no money... . Who can afford such things. Where are the people who can afford such things? (*WL*, pp. 47-48)

With the Pedersens, Jesse discovers the answer. But he also discovers the destructiveness of having money. The Pedersens, "with their soft, gelatinous bodies" (*WL*, p. 156), are a horrifying caricature of affluent consumers. They are all gross, stuffed, "like pale sausages" (*WL*, p. 85) yet possessing nevertheless, a religion of rarefied spiritualism. The Pedersens epitomise the society's collective schizophrenia, between the rhetoric of spirituality and the materialism of their actions. Eating becomes a sacred act, an obscene mock-Eucharist:

The lips parted, the mouth opened, something was inserted into the opening, then the jaws began their centuries of instinct, raw instinct, and the food was moistened, ground into pulp, swallowed. It was magic...Hilda watched her father covertly and saw how his nostrils flared with the exertion of eating, his face slowly reddened, a handsome face, sharply handsome inside that pouched, bloated encasement of skin, his eyes sharp and glistening as the eyes of skinny, devilish birds. (*WL*, pp. 138-139)

The greed of the Pedersens reveals not just a waste of resources, but a destruction of personality. Similarly with that allied fetish of the American way of life, cleanliness. B.O. was not discovered by Americans for nothing: fixed to the ultimate and sole reality of the material, Americans have tried to scrub, cauterize, deodorize, perfume the body, in a frenetic attempt to have it assume the role of the spirit that they have, in reality, abandoned. Jesse finds himself "contagious" (*WL*, p. 289); he obsessively washes; he "remembered with disapproval the years of his life he had been dirty, his hands crawling with germs. Now he understood how the invisible world of germs ruled the visible world, how there were friendly bacteria and unfriendly bacteria, and how it was necessary to control them as much as possible" (*WL*, p. 101). Again, behind the obsessive materialism lies the vocabulary of the spiritual, as the bacteria become the good and bad angels of the contemporary world. Oates' observations on the fetishes of our world are, of course, not especially original; but she uses them as starting points to analyse the ways the concept of personality may be

cheapened, distorted, or shattered. Such a concentration on money, food, and hygiene represent a fantasy world foisted upon us by the ad-mass society, giving us apparently tantalisingly easy access to just those products and experiences which seem most easily to fulfil our desires, make us more beautiful, admirable, free. Their very ease of access is at once a distortion of personality and an invitation by which we are led to believe in the absoluteness of the glittering surface of Wonderland.

The novel's most insistent concern, therefore, becomes the nature of the human personality—and on this subject Oates becomes more than just a penetrating commentator on the all too observable drives of contemporary life. Like John Updike's anatomy of New England suburbia, *Wonderland* offers a parable of the condition of twentieth-century man. Unlike Updike—with whom, however, she has certain stylistic affinities—she has no theological *parti pris*, no nostalgic harking back to the specific ideals of the founding fathers. A lapsed Catholic, her frame of reference is grounded in Christianity, but her real affinities are with Sartre and Heidegger. What seems to be her main philosophical target is, specifically, the frightening plausibility yet spiritual inadequacy of the modern phenomenological account of the self.

Jesse's constant problem is to define his inner being in a society that simultaneously cultivates individualism and yet is increasingly deterministic. As a substitute for the traditional belief in a mysterious yet real inner self, *Wonderland* offers the apparent security of facts. Technology—another of Oates' symbols of contemporary America—offers him a way out of his fears of life's mysteries. The human brain, he muses "...was not sacred. It was not sacred, it was touchable. It was matter...a weighable and measurable thing. Beneath the think it could be squeezed and prodded like anything else. Once dead, it was dead permanently; it was no miracle in creation. There was nothing to fear" (*WL*, p. 335). If, as Jesse learns, "the definition of life...was only one of behaviour" (*WL*, p. 208) therefore, "the personality is an illusion...it is just a tradition" (*WL*, p. 360). What, then, will satisfy him is personal and professional predictability—ambition, success, well-defined and achievable material goals. And the great lesson he learns is "control": "if he had control of himself, Jesse Vogel, then nothing else mattered in the universe...life had become predictable. He was forcing his future

into place" (*WL*, pp. 211, 207).

Jesse's obsession with material certainty, with defining himself by externals, is presented as an American paradigm, as he progresses from a poor, hardworking rural schoolboy to a famous neurosurgeon. His life is an epitome of the work ethic—and yet, when examined, it has been achieved not by personal dynamism operating against or using weaker forces but by a series of defensive reactions to the conditions and initiatives of others: his father's poverty, Pedersen's power and ambitions, the opinion of his professors and peers. He is essentially formed by externals. "It distressed Jesse that he must always exist in the eyes of others, their power extended in him though he did not choose them, did not choose them deliberately at all. They were a pressure on him, in his head, a pressure he loathed" (*WL*, p. 166).

The integrated personality is, further, one that senses a continuity with an apprehended past, not one that successively inhabits disconnected worlds. In her novel, Oates is also examining the effects of discontinuity on the personality. Jesse's struggle for survival necessitates not just denying at each stage an older set of habits and surroundings, but in making a conscious attempt to create a new self—for in an obsessively materialistic world, the self becomes increasingly identified with its tangible surroundings. Thus Pedersen gives him a new name, focuses his attention not on the past but, as a scientist, on the present and the future, encouraging him to push "into the person you will be, the future that belongs to both of us" (*WL*, p. 91). On the one hand, the human personality atrophies unless it develops; on the other, the past cannot be denied without radical distortion.

Late in the novel, Jesse's wife Helene describes to a friend how she had "found some scribbling of Jesse's...just pieces of scrap paper with strange designs all over, resembling human faces, and the word *homeostasis* written over and over again, maybe a hundred times..." (*WL*, p. 450). "Homeostasis" is the scientific expression of the novel's main concern, introduced to Jesse by Pedersen:

The living being is stable. It must be so in order not to be destroyed, dissolved, or disintegrated by the colossal forces, often adverse, which surround it. By an apparent contradiction it maintains its stability only if it is excitable and capable of modifying itself according to external stimuli and adjusting its response to the stimulation. It is stable because it is modifiable—the slight instability is the necessary condition for the true stability of the organism. (*WL*, pp. 118-119).

Homeostasis is what the metaphysical problem of the personality has been reduced to, and for Jesse inner integrity degenerates into the fight for material stability. Outwardly successful and materially free, a surgeon with a growing reputation, inside him something essential is constricted. His control of his surroundings defines his essential being—until into his life comes Oates' constant symbol of the frightening yet often saving unpredictability of life, sexual love.

Critics of John Updike—whose affinities with Oates I briefly mentioned—have spoken of his obsession with the desperate marriage-centeredness of suburbia. Oates' best writing is similarly concerned with the tensions, betrayals, frustrations, and unpredictable joys of contemporary sexual love. As in Updike's *Couples*, in *Wonderland* sex offers man an experience simultaneously fulfilling and stable, yet alluring and unpredictable.² Oates frequently uses the phrase "permanently married" to describe, usually ironically, the mixture of apparent stability and constant newness postulated in the American ideal of marriage. She is fascinated by the extent to which sex may both imprison and deliver mankind: Men and women are "flesh with an insatiable soul" (*MI*, p. 72), and the bond between them is equally an ambiguous and ill-definable one:

Everywhere on this highway, at this moment, there were men and women driving together, bonded together—what did it mean to be together? What did it mean to enter into a bond with another person? (*MI*, pp. 392-393)

Into the middle of Jesse's successful career walks the unpredicted figure of Reva, (suggesting "dream") a young blonde woman to whom Jesse instinctively responds. As if embodying something in himself revolting instinctively against its repression, she reminds him, somehow, of his past. She opens up in him an aspect of himself his technological thoroughness has taught him to ignore—a mysterious depth in his personality: "somewhere", he now feels, "there were words for him, for Jesse, the exact words that would explain his life. But he did not know them. He used words shyly, crudely. It remained for someone else—a woman, perhaps—to draw these sacred words out of him, to justify him, redeem him as Jesse—he could not create them himself. Not alone" (*WL*, p. 374). He is now caught between fear of the past she mysteriously recalls for him and excitement at the rediscovery of the unpredictable and unmeasurable aspect of the personality. In the story

"The Heavy Sorrow of the Body", the narrator muses that "before falling in love, I was defined. Now I am undefined..." (*WOL*, p. 394). Reva similarly brings a sense of unprepared for lack of definability into Jesse's life. So heavily conditioned by a belief in the materialism of the human personality, his spontaneity and excitement disciplined for so long, he over-reacts, plots constantly to see her, pursues her from Chicago to upstate Wisconsin, until finally, after she has promised to come away with him, he is shaving in his motel, preparing for the ultimate liberating leap into unpredictability, when he cuts himself with an unguarded razor blade:

What if he cut himself...? But he had to shave, he had no choice...And then lightly, timidly, he scraped the blade against his skin and blood spurted out at once.

He stared at his own blood

Then, again, as if hypnotized, he drew the blade against the other side of his face.

More blood...

He was fascinated by the sudden streaming of blood...Nothing could stop it. He brought the blade down against the top of his chest and drew it against his skin—such soft skin, shivering beneath his touch...

until, finally, "He stood there, bleeding from a dozen places, unconnected places, streaming blood so lightly, experimentally, giddily ...(*WL*, p. 404). The violence of his past, the violence beneath the perfumed, close-shaven, cleanliness of affluent America has surfaced. "In the end, impatiently, he decided to put his clothes back on over the bleeding. He drove back to Chicago that way" (*WL*, p. 404).

The novel's final book, "Dreaming America", is perhaps, slightly anticlimactic, although it unfolds the next, inevitable, part in Jesse's tragedy. His failure with Reva still haunts him uneasily, but he is now set against his daughter, a freaked-out, drop-out, affluent teenager, representing perhaps an inevitable reaction against Jesse's obsessive work-ethic, for whom "history is dead and anatomy is dead. Passion is the only destiny" (*WL*, p. 429). Jesse is obsessively drawn towards her; she reminds him of Reva and his lost glimpses of freedom, and yet his love is a desperate possessive desire to dominate her, to subdue and smother her with his despair. Again and again, the central problem of homeostasis recurs: for one so conditioned by such a view of the human organism, the deterministic mobility of America means that

failure involves death. In love with, afraid of, desiring, the freedom his daughter has achieved, Jesse pursues her to Toronto, and there, again instinctively returning to the destruction of his own father, he rows obsessively out along Lake Ontario with her:

"All of you...everyone...all my life, everyone...Always you are going away from me and you don't come back to explain...," Jesse wept.

He embraced her. He clutched at her thighs, her emaciated thighs, her legs. He pressed his face against her knees, weeping.

The boat drifted most of the night. Near dawn it was picked up by a large handsome cruiser, a Royal Mounted Police boat, a dazzling sight with its polished wood and metal and its trim of gold and blue. (*WL*, p. 512).

To read *Wonderland*, along with the best of Oates' other novels and stories may be a profoundly disturbing experience. She has an admirable ability to bring out a reader's own potential or actual neuroses, surrounded as we are by the paraphernalia of *Wonderland*, its affluence, its insistence on increasing material security, its insidious insistence on the unreality or inferiority of the past, its encouragement to us to choose the easy factuality of our surroundings rather than face the recesses of that unfathomable entity, the personality. Moreover, apart from the occasional carelessness of structure or unnecessary elaboration, the products frequently of her own obsession with words, her novels evoke their reader's responses by a dark, muscular, brooding style, as the everyday words and verbal signs erupt into deeply reverberating symbols. As John Ratti remarks, "she writes basic American English of what to the contemporary jaded eye and ear seems almost dazzling purity."³ A combination of compelling vision and clarity of evocation makes Joyce Carol Oates, even at 35, a major figure in contemporary fiction.

Footnotes

1. The following abbreviations for Joyce Carol Oates' works are used within the text:

EP: *Expensive People* (1968) - novel
 MI: *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972) - stories
 WL: *Wonderland* (1971) - novel.
 WOL: *The Wheel of Love* (1970) - stories

Other works include:

With Shuddering Fall (1964) - novel
A Garden of Earthly Delights (1967) - novel
them (1970) - novel
Do With Me What You Will (1973) - novel

The Edge of Impossibility (1970) - essays
Women in Love (Baton Rouge, 1968) - poems
Anonymous Sins (Baton Rouge, 1969) - poems
Love and Its Derangements (Baton Rouge, 1970) - poems
Angel Fire (1973) - poems
By the North Gate (1963) - stories
Upon the Sweeping Flood (1966) - stories

Unless otherwise stated, the place of publication is New York.

2. See e.g. G.F. Waller, "John Updike's *Couples*: a Barthian Parable," *Research Studies*, (1972),
3. "In the American Idiom," *New Leader*, LII (December 8, 1969), 10.