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## ► To cite this version:

Tanya Tromble. Thrill or Angst? Metaphysical Implications of Rewriting the Detective Plot in Joyce Carol Oates's "The Falls". *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 2017. hal-03197217

**HAL Id: hal-03197217**

**<https://amu.hal.science/hal-03197217>**

Submitted on 13 Apr 2021

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# Thrill or Angst? Metaphysical Implications of Rewriting the Detective Plot in Joyce Carol Oates's *The Falls*

*Tanya Tromble*

**Abstract.** A growing number of Joyce Carol Oates's novels are a peculiar sort of "whydunit." In Oates's *The Falls* (2004), her detectives occupy a middle ground between the Golden Age detective and the hard-boiled hero—one example of the metaphysical detective story in her fiction that resists even this wide-ranging designation.

Since the beginning of her writing career, Joyce Carol Oates has been fascinated with the enigma of human life. Communication, understanding, and interpretation are notions consistently explored in her fiction. Her first published story, "In the Old World," dramatizes a young white boy's halting, oblique confession to a sheriff's deputy regarding his wounding an African American boy's eye during a knife fight. The protagonist is particularly preoccupied with the hidden meaning behind events, and this preoccupation with metaphysical inquiry is not only present in Oates's fiction but also manifests itself in her essay and journal writing. Various comments scattered throughout *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates* indicate that the mystery of the composition of the individual and the perception of the world outside the self are never far from her mind. One of Oates's philosophers of predilection is Arthur Schopenhauer, who developed a theory of knowledge that corresponds to the problematic dichotomy between past and present to be found in Oates's works. In Schopenhauer's philosophy, one can only ever know the present; he explains: "Our existence has no foundation on which to rest except the transient present. Thus its form is essentially unceasing *motion*, without any possibility of that repose which we continually

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strive after” (52–53, emphasis in original). This concept is rendered in Oates’s work by an instability of meaning that the subsequent discussion will make clear. Another thinker admired by Oates is William James, whom she has called “our greatest American philosopher” (Johnson xiv). From James’s concepts of the stream of consciousness and the fringe, which he explains is composed of multiple “waxing and waning brain-processes” that “at every moment blend with and suffuse and alter the psychic effect of the processes which are at their culminating point,” Oates has developed the notions of the night-side and the day-side of the personality. As home to memories, reflections, and feelings, the night-side gives rise to intuitions, hunches, guesses, visual and auditory hallucinations, and automatic behavior. The exact nature of the two sides remains mysterious; in James’s words, the processes of consciousness blend “just like ‘overtones’ in music: they are not separately heard by the ear; they blend with the fundamental note, and suffuse it, and alter it” (3). Liminal, fantastic elements are often present in Oates’s texts as markers of this night-side of her characters’ personalities.

In recent years, a growing number of Oates’s novels are a peculiar sort of “whydunit.” Elaine Showalter commented in 2009 that “from the 1990s to the present, [Oates] has been writing with ever-more furious speed and intensity on varieties of American crime, from rape to child murder to serial killers, and their effects on families and communities.” In other words, Oates has added a crime-fiction component into a fictional world already predisposed to metaphysical inquiry, creating crime plots that can only be open-ended because of their context.<sup>1</sup> Oates’s 2004 novel *The Falls* sets a fictional disappearance against the backdrop of a historic environmental lawsuit, delving into causes and effects over two generations. Through a discussion of the ways in which Oates depicts acts of detection, this article will explore the relationship between Oates’s detectives and traditional types, and ask whether or not Oates’s particular brand of whydunit can be illuminated by the concept of the metaphysical detective story.

## *THE FALLS*

*The Falls* is a long and complex saga of almost 500 pages, following the story of Ariaiah and her family from 1950 to 1978 as she loses two husbands and tries to raise her three children. The novel is divided into three parts. Part I opens on 12 June 1950 with Ariaiah’s first husband, Gilbert Erskine, committing suicide at Niagara Falls less than 24 hours after their wedding and concludes a month later with Dirk Burnaby, a local attorney who helped Ariaiah in the aftermath of her husband’s death, asking her to marry him. Part II narrates Ariaiah and Dirk’s marriage from beginning to end. Their giddy happiness at the outset of their life together gradually gives way to the routine of a young family with three children: Chandler (who may actually be Gilbert’s son), Royall, and Juliet. Dirk’s involvement in a sensitive local lawsuit that will come to be known as the Love Canal case<sup>2</sup> contributes to the unraveling of his marital bliss and death as his car, forced off the road by an unidentified Niagara Falls police officer, plunges into the river in June 1962. The death, although officially ruled an accident, is commonly regarded as suicide. Part III picks up the story of the family 16 years later, with sections alternating between the siblings’ points of view. Chandler, Royall, and Juliet are troubled by their lack of knowledge about their father’s life and death, sensing that details have been kept from them. Ariaiah, who is unaware that Dirk was murdered, considers his involvement in the lawsuit and subsequent death as a betrayal of their family and refuses to talk to her children about him. In this final part, the three Burnaby

siblings begin to investigate their father's life and death, eventually discovering much of the truth about what happened and viewing their own lives more clearly.

Metaphysical inquiry is integrated into the text at each level: thematically, stylistically, and structurally. Thematically, the novel treats the limits of understanding and uses incomprehension to drive the plot. Exploring the family as the greatest place of mystery, it highlights incomprehension and miscommunication among family members. The characters have difficulty in making sense of the various experiences that compose their lives, as the pieces never fit together into one neat puzzle. Stylistically, Oates makes frequent use of italics to set apart sections of her text. Italics in Oates's works often stand for thoughts that come unbidden from the deep subconscious. They are, in fact, the manifestation in print of that which is ultimately unknowable: the uncontrollable, mad obsessions of psyches or what William James describes as "the 'transitive parts,' of the stream of thought" (2).<sup>3</sup> Structurally, the characters' confusion about different, mysterious pieces of their lives is reinforced by the elliptical structure of the text, which leaves chronological narrative gaps that may or may not be filled by reader inference.

## THE UNWITTING DETECTIVES OF *THE FALLS*

*The Falls* is an unorthodox crime novel that involves much more layering and context development than typically present in traditional crime fiction. However, it can be read as just one crime story (the murder of Dirk Burnaby) involving two generations. As the murder takes place in the last paragraphs of part II, the reader knows when, where, and how Dirk was murdered but not why or who has done the deed. Solving these mysteries will be a primary concern of part III.

Part III's opening pages make clear that Aariah has done her best to erase Dirk from her children's lives. Royall suspects that she and others in the community know more about his family's past than he does. He asks Chandler for information, but his brother is constrained by a promise to Aariah and suggests instead that Royall investigate on his own. Thus Royall the amateur detective is born. Unaided by his family members in his desire for knowledge and understanding, he is left to his own devices, an amateur unwittingly forced into the role of detective.

Part III's chapter 2 opens with Royall on the eve of his wedding. He explores the cemetery on Portage Road and meets a sensuous older woman "unknown to him" (290), although she calls him "darling boy" and says she knew would meet him there (288). The two make love on the ground (290). The woman-in-black episode is one of the most enigmatic in the novel, a true fantastic episode in Todorov's sense of the fantastic as a moment of hesitation.<sup>4</sup> The woman in black may be the ghost of Nina Olshaker (the plaintiff in Dirk's final lawsuit), the real Nina Olshaker, or another woman who had known Dirk. Whatever her origin, Royall's encounter with the woman prompts him to call off his impending nuptials, search for information about his dead father, and take charge of his own life, moving out of a static realm controlled by women—notably his mother and his fiancée. Likewise, a liminal experience raising both epistemological questions and ontological uncertainty sparks each sibling's eventual discoveries: Chandler's experience of tunnel vision en route to his crisis intervention prompts his own investigation into his father's death; the voices heard by Juliet calling her to the falls ultimately lead to her discovery about the crime.

In this way, the brothers become detectives of necessity. At a stalemate in their romantic

and professional lives, they must fill in the blank in their past to metaphysically continue living themselves. The changes they undergo through their investigative processes attest to this fact. When Chandler finally visits his brother, breaking their period of estrangement, it is clear to each of them that the other has changed:

[Chandler's] heart went out to his younger brother as to a child bravely playing house, having run away from home. On his side, Royall saw with surprise that his schoolteacher brother was looking uncertain, brooding, red-eyed in a way he'd rarely seen him; Chandler's jaws had been carelessly shaved, and his jacket was buttoned crookedly. (387)

Convinced that his life has been a dream to this point, Royall feels that learning about his father represents the beginning of a new stage. Through the process of collecting information about their father, the two brothers learn about themselves and change accordingly.

In his role as investigator, Royall mutates for "a brief hallucinatory time" into "Roy, working for Empire Collection Agency" (480). In his role as collection agent, he is transformed from a nice, dopey, all-American boy into a hard-boiled type. He carries a gun, and his job has a dangerous side; other agents have been beaten, stabbed, chased, and targets for bullets. Royall indicates to his brother that he would be capable of using the gun to revenge their father's death. This shift in personality is accompanied by a parallel transformation in his physical appearance: "Pale stubble glittered on his jaws like mica" (389).

The problem, however, is that Royall's investigation is missing from the pages of the novel. The investigation that *is* present in the text is Chandler's. Chandler "tried to speak with" almost everyone connected to his father and the lawsuit—including expert witnesses, Judge Stroughton Howell, and police chief Fitch—but almost everyone was either "incommunicado" or refused to see him (376). Two people express the opinion that Howell was "obviously biased," the "witnesses were under pressure" from the mob, and Dirk's death was ordered by "the bastards"—meaning big business interests (380, 385).

Although readers may think Chandler's and Royall's investigations are equivalent in quality given that Chandler is retracing some of Royall's steps, there are indications that this assumption is not true. For example, when Chandler mentions Howell, Royall does not seem to recognize the name. Thus, the text presents, on the one hand, an investigation conducted by a rugged, hard-boiled type and, on the other, information collected by a classic intellectual investigator. The effect is to cast Chandler as the brains and Royall as the brawn of the investigative team. Oates's generic hybrid is thus more a juxtaposition of types than a melding of them. The palimpsestic sibling investigation implies that, although the conjunction of thought and action styles provides a more thorough understanding of a situation, the two remain fundamentally incompatible, as is illustrated by the doubt that remains at the novel's close. Indeed, the possibility is raised that Royall acted on his brother's identification of Howell as the man behind their father's death. Chandler reads "in the papers the shocking news of the midsummer disappearance of Chief Justice Stroughton Howell" and wonders about Royall's potential role (471). As time passes, he begins to doubt this notion:

He [Royall] no longer carries a gun. He no longer has any need to carry a gun. Since that evening in his apartment on Fourth Street, when the brothers spoke together so frankly, Royall has never alluded to any gun, and Chandler has never asked him about any gun. Chandler almost might think *Was there a gun? Was it real?* He'd been drinking that night, and his memory was muddled. (471–72, emphasis in original)

Adding to the confusion is the fact that neither Royall nor Chandler discover an important piece of the puzzle. Although their sister, Juliet, is not an active seeker of information, she learns a central fact through her relationship with Bud Stonecrop, the boy who prevents her from following the voices into the Falls. Bud reveals to Juliet that his father was the hired gun responsible for her father's death: "Him and this other guy, driving a truck. My dad was driving a police cruiser. They ran him off the highway into the river. That's how your father died, in the river. I guess you know that. Somebody wanted your father dead, see? My dad was contacted and took the job" (462). Oates here presents a dispersed investigation divided amongst a sibling trio composed of two amateur detectives unable to find all the information they pursue and a nondetective who accidentally acquires information. Oates's hybrid juxtaposition of detective types thus highlights the limits of each type of investigation. The broader scope afforded by this hybridity seeks to reflect the complexity and frustration of lived experience that often prevents knowing with absolute certainty.

In terms of the attempt to uncover the "truth" about Dirk's life and death, the information collected by each of the children remains incomplete. Readers are told that Chandler and Royall compare notes; however, there is no reason to believe that they share their information with Juliet or that she passes on her information about their father's hired assassin. In addition, only Royall can confirm whether or not he was involved in Howell's disappearance. Indeed, it turns out there really is no way to prove anything. Lawyer Neil Lattimore's comment to Chandler—"The bastards killed him. You'll never prove it, though" (385)—sums up the problematic relationship foregrounded in the text between "knowing" something emotionally and actually having evidence to prove it. Although Juliet now knows who killed her father, she does not know who ordered it, as Sergeant Stonecrop cannot tell—he is in the final stages of syphilis and is suffering from severe dementia. However, the interweaving of the narrative points of view provides a somewhat more complete picture for the reader. Yet Oates's text remains in many ways unreadable due to the fact that the reader is not granted access to everything known by the characters. Breaking one of the fundamental "rules" of detective fiction once again allows Oates to highlight the notion of epistemological uncertainty central to her fiction.

More important than the observation that each character's individual vision remains incomplete is the fact that the closing pages of the novel indicate their coming to terms with this knowledge. Chandler "seems to know, he will never know" the truth about Howell (476). Yet the efforts of himself and his brother have paid off, providing them with a more complete understanding of their parents' pasts: "Chandler has begun to understand something of his mother's grief sixteen years before. She has never hated Dirk Burnaby, only the loss of him" (474). There are indications that the three siblings are moving forward with their lives. Juliet has become an attractive, confident young woman; Chandler has plans "to marry [his girlfriend] Melinda within the year and adopt [her daughter] Danya and he intends to resign his position as a junior high teacher and go to law school"; and Royall "has become a full-time liberal arts student at Niagara University," working part time "as an assistant in the geology department" (471, 475). In creating this amateur trio, Oates parodies the isolated hero of traditional detective fiction forms. Her use of shifting point of view shows that her "investigators" are entangled in life's web, not set apart from it; they are only marginal in the sense that everyone is marginal if only one individual story is known. Furthermore, the dispersed narrative technique resulting from the shifting point of view makes it impossible to provide a unified rational narrative as a solution to the crimes.

The classic Golden Age detective is typically able to almost singlehandedly piece



together all pertinent facts; the traditional hard-boiled detective similarly gets his man but through action and reaction rather than ratiocination. Neither path proves fruitful in *The Falls*. As Sharon Dean notes, “Oates calls the reality a writer presents ‘mirrors reflecting mirrors—and each subtly distorting that hazy field we call ‘reality!’” (527). That the complete truth eludes the Burnaby children serves as a metaphorical reminder of the intangibility of truth. Through their investigation, they are able to piece together a certain metaphorical truth about their father, although certain tangible facts are destined to remain permanently beyond their grasp.<sup>5</sup> In the end, the investigation exposes much about the nature of life and knowledge but relatively few precise details of the case, revealing the very fallible human nature of the detective characters and thus distancing them from their traditional superhuman predecessors.

At the close of *The Falls*, the Burnaby family attends a memorial service in the park for Dirk, who is finally honored for his role in the Love Canal lawsuits. All appears to have worked out for the Burnabys, yet a profound feeling of angst emanates from the closing paragraph, overshadowing what should be the Burnaby family’s moment of triumph:

It’s a fact: elsewhere in Niagara Falls the air of September 21, 1978 is muggy, hardly breathable; of the texture of rotted fabric filtered through a corrosive mustardy sun. But here in Prospect Park, close by the Niagara Gorge, the air is fresh as if charged with electricity. You want to live: you want to live forever. The brass players, withdrawing from view, shaking spittle out of their gleaming instruments, are emissaries of wonder. On the gazebo platform, as the first stranger speaks, a vase filled with ice water glows with refracted light. Airborne particles of moisture, blown from The Falls, quiver with light. From time to time during the ninety-minute memorial for Dirk Burnaby 1917–1962 as the sun disappears and reappears between strips of tattered clouds, rainbows become visible above the Gorge. So faint, so frail, hardly more than optical illusions they seem. Look a second time, they’re gone. (481)

All may be right with the world at the memorial service in Prospect Park, but this brief reminder of “elsewhere” calls attention to the fact that it is not so everywhere. Outside of this ephemeral, fairy-tale-like bubble, life looks bleaker. The poor quality of the air, as well as the words *rotted* and *corrosive*, call to mind the problems of industrial pollution in another part of the city; the fleeting rainbows seem to symbolize the fragility of happiness. In addition, the location of the site at the Falls, impermanent in terms of geological time, calls to mind the thoughts running through Chandler’s head during his science lesson about the “terrible heartrending profound truths of time, mortality, human isolation in a godless universe. Truths of loss, annihilation” (404). Although the Burnaby family has arrived at a better place, the reader is reminded here that there has been no change to the fundamental principle of power relations that led to Dirk’s death and no change to the delicate structure of happiness that defines the human condition.

In selecting the name *Chandler* for her intellectual detective character, Oates no doubt wishes to invoke a real-life master of the hard-boiled genre while presenting that character as the classic Golden Age detective. In an essay on Raymond Chandler’s fiction, she identifies a similarity between the two classic forms:

[in the thriller] there is a tacit contract between writer and reader guaranteeing that the detective will triumph, as the life force must triumph. In this sense even the “hard-boiled” American detective novel is a British “cozy”—we are given to know that we are in safe hands, we need not fear chaos or the defeat of our deepest desires. The promise of the mystery-detective novel is that its beginning, its very opening statement, is simultaneously its ending, the terror of ambiguity resolved. (“Raymond Chandler” 102)

The novel's ending is clearly posited in opposition to any complete resolution of ambiguity.

## THE FALLS AS METAPHYSICAL DETECTIVE FICTION?

Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney identify six characteristics of the metaphysical detective story:

(1) the defeated sleuth, whether he be an armchair detective or a private eye; (2) the world, city, or text as labyrinth; (3) the purloined letter, embedded text, *mise en abyme*, textual constraint, or text as object; (4) the ambiguity, ubiquity, eerie meaningfulness, or sheer meaninglessness of clues and evidence; (5) the missing person, the "man of the crowd," the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity; and (6) the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation. (8)

Many of these elements can indeed be found in Oates's novel. However, it is with the end result, the overall effect of the work, that the difference becomes apparent. The act of detection is problematic in Oates's work, and her complex structures highlight the intricate interconnectivity of experience and the simultaneous existence of multiple types of understanding. Likewise, her characters are often unable to make satisfactory sense of the evidence they accumulate. Nevertheless, Oates's fiction does not share the metaphysical detective story's "most striking aspect" that is quite possibly, according to Merivale and Sweeney, "the inherently unresolvable nature of its own self-reflexiveness" (10). Oates's technique in novels such as *The Falls* is not postmodern in the sense of metatextual fiction raising barriers between the reader and the represented universe. The play of language is not an end in itself. In addition, the acts of detecting, although they fail to completely solve the mysteries, are not failures per se—they are simply incomplete.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas the project of metaphysical detective fiction seems to be to explore the notion that there is no inherent meaning outside of that created within texts, Oates's literary project has a different aim. Rather than focusing on the artificial constructions of reality, she focuses on the nature of this reality, showing that there is no inherent meaning in the individual but only in the interconnectivity that is created through relationships. This has led some critics to analyze Oates's writing as social criticism. Gavin Cologne-Brookes, for example, views Oates as a pragmatist with a melioristic vision. As such, he argues, she writes out of a belief in the possibilities of social change, "stressing the importance of individual behavior as the only way to facilitate improvements in collective behavior" (5). Brenda Daly, for her part, highlights the interconnectivity that is foregrounded in Oates's works, discussing the ways in which Oates challenges the conventions of the thriller in *The Barrens* and *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*. Like *The Falls*, both novels challenge the myth of the isolated self, emphasizing interconnectivity in its place. Daly explains: Oates's "aesthetic techniques are certainly playful, but they are also political" (459). At the close of *The Falls*, Royall awakens to the "mysterious livingness" of all things, which certainly emphasizes the human potential for connections. Oates's fiction may indeed, as Daly suggests, encourage the reader to imagine a more socially responsible and democratic future for society. However, through its multiplication of nonsensical instances of violence, struggling characters, and individual forms of justice, it also foregrounds the distance to the democratic, socially responsible, caretaking ideal espoused by Daly.

*The Falls* retains a high degree of hybridity and elusivity, evoking traditional forms



yet not conforming to them. The classic detective story offers an optimistic vision to its readers, confirming for them the basic goodness of society. At the other extreme, the thriller adapted to society's newfound cynicism confirms the inherently malignant nature of humanity. Each vision reflected the prevailing attitudes of its time, each conformed to a certain cultural conception of truth, and each satisfied the desire for resolution. Oates's detectives, however, occupy a middle ground between these two major types. It is a world where no absolute meaning can be established; there is some good, some bad, some reason for optimism, and some reason for cynicism. Thus, it appears that Oates evokes both forms to undermine their visions and highlight the contemporary irrelevancy of absolutes. To this end, her detectives serve to accentuate the uncertainty of meaning; her structures serve to reinforce the absence of narrative authority. As an author cannot tell the reader the meaning of a work, a detective cannot tell one the true meaning of an event.

The absence of authorial guidance in this novel parallels the posthumanist belief emanating from Oates's work that undermines the humanist project of understanding, showing it to be unachievable. No one meaning can be found in the world, and this is mirrored in the world of the text that highlights—contrary to classic forms of detective fiction—the inability of the detectives to uncover absolute truth at the narrative level and the absence of narratorial responsibility at the structural level. No authorial voice points to one meaning over another. Oates's essay "On Fiction in Fact" emphasizes the notion of the intangible, metaphorical nature of truth, indeed of any idea that must be transmitted through the distorting lens of language: "Writing is an art and art means artifice, the artificial. That we are keenly aware of this today is a testimony to our higher standard of truth, no less than to our diminished expectation of encountering it" (77).

*The Falls* is not a flagrantly metafictional work. However, Oates's multilayered, multiple viewpoint technique does call attention to the fictionality of the work, giving the reader access to important details that would remain inaccessible in a real-life situation. *The Falls* is also subtly metatextual in its refashioning of crime fiction elements that are applied to its own open ends. As previously mentioned, readers of *The Falls* knows almost as much as they will ever know of the solution before the characters even begin their investigations. Thus, readers understand that the picture is always bigger and more complicated than that communicated by any single viewpoint. In this way, Oates emphasizes the connectivity and complexity at play in her fictional world. Readers have access to a greater portion of the tripartite "solution" to the crime than the individual characters who do not always share their knowledge with each other. Therefore, the metafictionality of *The Falls* is created through the reader-text relationship, as the structure of the work encourages readers to remember that it is an artificial construct.

As a general rule, mystery—the overall structuring concept—pervades every level of Oates's texts. Such a fictional world is situated in the gray borderline area between absolutes, the place in which humanity evolves, although it does not always recognize this fact. "Detective fiction" in Oates's writing is rendered powerless to restore a status quo (as in classic detective fiction) or uphold an absolute moral standard. Rather, its various elements are put to use in the rendering of an inherently flawed humanity as the finality of a detective fiction plot is dissolved into an atmosphere of all-pervasive mystery, confusing emotions, and conflicting responses. Rather than use detective fiction to demystify, Oates rewrites it to show that no event can ever be completely understood, no matter how talented the observer. Her mystery fiction shows readers not how to solve puzzles but how to accept the mysterious into their lives. The characters presented as models learn to accept the things they cannot know and continue living despite the gaps. In this way, Oates rewrites

detective fiction to correspond to her enigmatic vision of the world and to give it a more human dimension that perhaps speaks more fully to contemporary readers.

*Keywords:* *The Falls*; metaphysical detective fiction; Oates, Joyce Carol

## NOTES

1. Although Oates's recent works bear detective fiction motifs, such elements can be identified throughout her corpus. Oates began experimenting with detective fiction as early as the 1980s. *Angel of Light* (1981), for example, tells of a sister and brother searching for evidence that their mother and her lover are responsible for their father's death; and *American Appetites* (1989) begins with a domestic incident that leads to the accidental death of Glynnis McCullough and explores the police investigation of her husband, Ian, and the subsequent judicial proceedings. In the late 1980s, Oates began publishing thrillers under the pseudonyms Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly.

2. The landmark Love Canal lawsuits inspired this element of the novel. A local chemical corporation sold the Love Canal site in the 1950s to the Niagara Falls School Board without disclosing its use of the land as a toxic waste dump. The site was developed with residences and schools. In the late 1970s, investigative reporting and health surveys uncovered substantial illnesses and birth defects among the residents, leading to lawsuits and environmental protection legislation.

3. James explains his concepts of "substantive" and "transitive" states of mind as follows: "When we take a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is the different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be an alteration of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period. The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest. / *Let us call the resting-places the 'substantive parts,' and the places of flight the 'transitive parts,' of the stream of thought.* It then appears that our thinking tends at all times towards some other substantive part than the one from which it has been dislodged. And we may say that the main use of the transitive parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another" (emphasis in original).

4. Todorov defines the fantastic as residing in a moment of hesitation: "In a world identifiable as our world, the world we know, a world without devils, sylphs or vampires, an event occurs that cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The one witnessing the event must choose between one of two possible solutions: either he is faced with a sensory illusion, a product of the imagination and the laws of the world remain unchanged; or the event really took place and is an integral part of reality, in which case this reality is governed by laws that are unknown to us. . . . The fantastic occupies the moment of this uncertainty; once one or the other solution is chosen, the fantastic realm is left for another neighboring genre, the strange or the marvelous. The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by an individual who knows only the natural laws who is faced with an event of supernatural appearance" (29).

5. In her essay "On Fiction in Fact," Oates states that in fiction "truth is understood to be metaphorical and not literal; subjective, and not objective." This is the difference between fiction and historical fact. Although, she suggests, even fact is subject to the distorting powers of language and memory: "With the best of intentions, in recalling the past, if even a dream of the previous night, we are already altering—one might say violating—the original experience, which may have been wordless and was certainly improvised" (76, 77).

6. Merivale and Sweeney single out *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, Oates's 1984 gothic novel and parody of classic detection, as metaphysical detection (20).

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