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JOYCE CAROL OATES: TRANSCRIBING THE ENIGMATIC

TANYA TROMBLE-GIRAUD

Joyce Carol Oates weaves the mysteries of life into every level of her texts, be it thematic, structural, lexical, typographical, etc. This article analyses three of Oates's fictional works—*The Falls*, *Beasts* and *The Tattooed Girl*—in order to explore certain textual strategies used by this self-named “formalist” writer to communicate the unconscious realm of her characters. Oates's use of italics, repetition, dashes and ellipses are discussed in depth to show how Oates uses them to evoke the psychological reality of her characters and oppose the notion of appearance to that of psychological experience. These typographical, organizational and punctuation tools allow Oates to underline the communication difficulties, emotions and obsessions they gradually reveal and contribute to evoking Oates's mysterious, frightening fictional realm of characters constantly, yet ineffectually, grasping at meaning.

Dans ses textes, Joyce Carol Oates tisse les mystères de la vie à tous les niveaux thématiques, structurels, lexicaux, typographiques, etc. Cet article analyse trois de ses œuvres (*The Falls*, *Beasts* et *The Tattooed Girl*) afin d'explorer certaines stratégies textuelles utilisées par cette écrivaine, “formaliste” autoproclamée, pour dépeindre le domaine inconscient de ses personnages. L'utilisation par Oates des italiques, de la répétition, des tirets et des ellipses, est étudiée en profondeur pour montrer comment Oates les met en œuvre pour évoquer la réalité psychologique de ses personnages et opposer la notion d'apparence à celle d'expérience psychologique. Ces outils typographiques, d'organisation et de ponctuation permettent à l'écrivaine d'insister sur les difficultés de communication, les émotions et les obsessions qu'ils révèlent progressivement, et contribuent à évoquer le mystérieux et effrayant royaume fictif de personnages qui tentent constamment, mais sans véritable succès, de saisir le sens.

The mysteriousness of life is granted a certain central prominence in the writing of Joyce Carol Oates. The notion of the “gap” is key to Oates's conception of human existence in the consistent discrepancy between experience and the ability to intellectualize and comprehend it and can be found at both the thematic and structural levels of her texts. As Sartre wrote, “One is not a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way. Style is what gives

prose its worth" (30).¹ The titles of the three representative works studied in this article all allude to kinds of gaps. The title of *The Falls* denotes both the geographical gaps in terrain necessary for the formation of waterfalls as well as the metaphysical discrepancy between language and action. The titles of the two other works highlight comprehension gaps between reader and signifiers. In the novella *Beasts*, the title word refers to human nature rather than the animal kingdom. With *The Tattooed Girl*, the title phrase refers to a character whose physical qualities distract from the nature of her humanity.²

The mysteries of existence—elusive origins, inconsistencies of experience, communication difficulties—are thematically foregrounded in Oates's plots. In short, the questions "Why do you do what you do?" and "Why is life like this?" tend to preoccupy her characters.³ Oates's protagonists are defined by their interrogative spirits, their wondering natures. Indeed, the frequent use of the verb "wonder" and other aporetic expressions add to the feeling of mystery pervading the works in question wherein the characters are often presented as unsure and obsessive about lacking information; they not only wonder about others, but also about themselves and their own motivations. Leaving these sorts of questions unclarified and unanswered has been an important quality in Oates's oeuvre since *By the North Gate*, says Greg Johnson, who sees it as part of the important theme of the "inefficacy of language" that pervades her work ("Barbarous Eden" 9). In *The Falls*, after skimming through newspaper articles reporting Arian's vigil at The Falls, Dirk reflects on the uncanniness of the experience: "How strange it seemed to Dirk, the myriad actions and impressions of the long vigil reduced to such simple statements" (TF 88).

The enigma that Oates's characters struggle with as a seemingly permanent aspect of their lives has four main sources—metaphysical questions about the meaning of life, opacity of communication with others, obscurity of one's own unconscious impulses, and lack of knowledge about facts behind events—all of which intertwine and affect each other in various ways and to varying degrees. The opacity of communication, whether it be with another person or with oneself, has various causes.

¹ My translation of: "On n'est pas écrivain pour avoir choisi de dire certaines choses mais pour avoir choisi de les dire d'une certaine façon. Et le style, bien sûr, fait la valeur de la prose."

² The following abbreviations will be used for in-text citations of these three works: *TF* for *The Falls*, *B* for *Beasts* and *TTG* for *The Tattooed Girl*.

³ Samuel Chase Coale has remarked about *Missing Mom* (2005), pointing out that "the reader is left with a devastating 'why,' the word repeated one-hundred-and-twenty-two times" (438).

It can be intentional, due to one party keeping thoughts to himself or deliberately attempting to mislead, or unintentional when a character has problems expressing his thoughts or when uncontrollable unconscious impulses are at play. The inability to express certain feelings and experiences through words leads to the use of various types of visual representation that indicate the spaces where meaning lies, although it will remain inaccessible.⁴ Oates's texts convey this opacity in various ways, through the use of italics, repetition, and punctuation marks such as dashes and ellipses.

When asked about her personal view of her own aesthetics, Oates responds that she considers herself a formalist because she is interested in the forms and structures of fiction and language. We need forms to put our stories in, she says, adding "my work is always carefully calibrated" (Miller). She is very concerned with the length and symmetry of the sentences, paragraphs, sections, chapters and parts that make up her works and she speaks of herself as being excited by forms in the same way as poets are excited by them. There is more to this than the simple challenge of finding words to fit into a certain rhyme and meter. What Oates is trying to emphasize is the importance of finding a form that will be best suited to the translation of her ideas onto paper.

In order to address the issue of our unfathomable states of mind, which at least in her literary world are home to numerous obsessions, Oates has developed a style (especially in her more recent works) that appropriately makes frequent use of repetition and poetic overlapping because, she says, that is the way our minds work. She has also said that "a novel with no repetitions would be a novel without memory, wouldn't seem psychologically plausible" (Miller). The concrete result is often a thread of characters' italicized thoughts running periodically through the text. Italics in Oates's works often stand for thoughts that come to us unbidden, from our deep subconscious. They are, in fact, the attempted manifestation in print of that which is ultimately unknowable, the uncontrollable mad obsessions of our psyches, or what William James describes as "the 'transitive parts,' of the stream of thought" (2).⁵ At times, these thoughts take the form of an obsessive sort of mantra

⁴ Claire Chaplier also discusses narrative techniques in her dissertation on cruelty in some of Oates's short stories. For her, Oates's use of various techniques such as alternation, distortion and gaps turn the narrative structure into a "realm of mystery" (185).

⁵ James's complete explanation of his concepts of "substantive" and "transitive" states of mind is as follows: "When we take a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is the

as is the case in *Beasts* with the repetition of the phrase “Go for the jugular!” Such techniques find their place in Oates’s project of evoking a psychological reality.

In a 2005 article entitled “An Eye for Detail: The Lessons of Balzac, Flaubert and O’Connor,” Oates emphasizes and extends the argument put forward by Henry James in his “The Lesson of Balzac” that what makes Balzac’s writing great, the reason he is “the master of us all,” is his attention to detail (115). “The Lesson of Balzac,” writes Henry James, is in “the part assigned by him, in any pictures, to the condition of the creatures with whom he is concerned” and his attempt at creating an “art of complete representation” (103). If Balzac’s characters are interesting to his readers, it is because the supposedly insignificant details he accumulates are in fact highly significant as they create an illusion of reality that makes his characters interesting as individuals, for “there is no such thing in the world as an adventure pure and simple,” writes James, “there is only mine and yours, and his and hers” (106). In “An Eye for Detail,” Oates resurrects James’s argument to counter the notion that character description is a waste of time. She cites “two masters of European literature,” Balzac and Flaubert, who each used detail as an important part of characterization, and “one master of the contemporary American short story,” Flannery O’Connor, who “created stories in which every detail and nearly every word was charged with meaning” (38, 40).⁶ Oates outlines a theory of the “background” and “foreground” of literature that recalls O’Connor’s notion of a “realism of distances”:

I agree that the essential thing will always remain what people—in fiction or in life—actually do; but nearly as important for the writer is the environment in which they perform. A failure to understand the relationship between the “background” (overall rhythm or structure and theme) and the “foreground”

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.”

⁶ This is a reprint of an earlier essay which had been published under the title “Background and Foreground in Fiction,” *The Writer* 80.8 (August 1967): 11-13.

(each sentence of each paragraph) of literature accounts for much unpublishable fiction. (Oates, "Eye for Detail" 38)

"In the midst of the vulgar, certain mysterious signs appear," writes Oates of O'Connor. Of fiction in general, she maintains that "if your characters are wearing a certain kind of clothing—all this is of supreme importance" ("Eye for Detail" 41). Thus, Oates's "foreground" is similar to O'Connor's "surface." They are of prime importance because it is they which allow access to "an experience of mystery itself" that lies beyond (O'Connor 41). The careful selection of detail is an important component of Oates's psychological realism. "There are in general two kinds of writers," she explains, "the first—and older—kind wants to report incidents as if they were real, things that have already happened. The second is not content with 'reporting' events but wants to evoke their psychological reality for the reader, through the use of sensuous details and symbols" ("Eye for Detail" 41).

The expression "phrases of silence" is used by Oates in the final pages of *The Falls*. It is offered as part of a characterization of Bud Stonecrop, Juliet's taciturn friend: "The shaved-headed young man communicated as much in phrases of silence as of speech." The paragraph continues on to describe in more detail the types of silent communication used by Bud:

In mumbled asides, grimaces, shrugs, grunts. He sighed, he scratched his stubbled head. He was forever tugging at the ragged collar of a T-shirt, as if his baggy clothes were too tight. His smiles were cast sidelong, with the air of one uncertain that a smile from him was welcome. There was eloquence in Stonecrop if you knew how to read him. There was subtlety in his soul however clumsy; [sic] tongue-tied, and menacing he appeared to others. (*TF* 451)

Through a parallel mechanism, Oates's texts also communicate through various types of silences, both at the manifest and latent levels. In the following sections, I will discuss the textual "asides, grimaces, shrugs, grunts" employed by Oates. The techniques discussed in this article are widely present in much of her work; however, I have chosen to discuss each technique in relation to one specific work that will serve as an example. *The Falls* will provide the background for the discussion of the use of italics. Italics communicate the intimate, private thoughts of characters that would remain inaccessible in a real-life situation. Sometimes, these are thoughts the characters consciously decide to keep silent; other times, they represent ideas they do not consciously express. Repetition will be examined as it occurs

in *Beasts*. One might object that repetition is the exact opposite of silence. However, I will attempt to show that the repetitions fill the space of notions that cannot be otherwise expressed, they therefore mask different instances of silence. Finally, the unspoken, or unspeakable, as represented by dashes and ellipses, will be explored in relation to *The Tattooed Girl*.

Italics and Inner Thoughts

In the following passage from her journal, Oates evokes the meaning of dreams and the nature of the relationship they have with the conscious self:

One lives an entire life, no doubt, uneasily wondering at the relationship between the “dreaming” self and the “conscious” self. For surely there is a profoundly intimate relationship . . . yet at the same time such peculiar elements are introduced, such extrapersonal things. . . . A mystery that refuses to resolve itself, even with the passage of time. (300)

In the first chapter of his seminal work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud announces he will “demonstrate that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that on the application of this technique, every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state” (5). Oates’s journal entry, however, clearly denounces Freud’s humanist belief that the secrets of the unconscious mind are graspable and can be unlocked through the analysis of dreams. On the contrary, though there is surely a relationship between the dreaming self and the conscious self, its precise nature remains a mystery even though a century has gone by since Freud’s initial publication of his dream theory.

Words matter. In a 2005 interview in London, Oates discussed a recent novel whose title was changed for the British market: “So ‘missing mom’ gets translated into *Mother, Missing*, but *Mother, Missing* is a very different title. So, over here in England and in the U.K. it will seem like a very different novel” (“Joyce Carol Oates Reread” 102). Just as different words in a title can alter the perspective from which one sees a work, the way in which the actual words are rendered on the page can have a similar effect. Discussing the typographical representation of the opening sequence of Oates’s *Black Water*, Nathalie Arnaud-Vincent puts forward that “it is certainly the brutal and spectacular format of the typographical isolation of the

passage that generates a veritable visual shock which is the cause of the first rhetorical shock of this text, insofar as it is true, as Henri Suhamy suggests, that it is in the material layout, in the configuration on the page, that the first “figure” of style can be found, the first important key to a text” (29).⁷ The opening chapter of *Black Water* is only one page long, a single eight-line paragraph. The first line is all in capitals; the last line is all in italics:

THE RENTED TOYOTA, DRIVEN WITH SUCH IMPATIENT exuberance by
The Senator, was speeding along the unpaved unnamed road, taking the turns
in giddy skidding slides, and then, with no warning, somehow the car had gone
off the road and had overturned in black rushing water, listing to its passenger’s
side, rapidly sinking.

Am I going to die?—like this? (Black Water 3)

The role of the typography, Arnaud-Vincent suggests, in communicating the shock and horror of the situation is as important as the content of the passage itself. Here, typography plays a role in our appreciation of a text. As Henri Suhamy explains, “figures appeal to our sensibility; they occur in discourse like illustrations, as if the text were creating ornamental motifs or representative images for itself. One is tempted to say that the most striking figure of style is constituted by the typographical manipulations that can be seen on posters, or on pages of poetry” (7).⁸ Thus, choosing to italicize a word, for example, grants it a different import. As in the above passage from *Black Water*, Oates has frequent recourse to italics in her recent fiction. Leafing through the pages of *The Falls* reveals that rarely do more than two or three pages go by without the flow of the text being broken by an italicized passage. It does not take long to realize that these passages are interruptions surging up into the text from another dimension. Might they be the place in the text where the “dreaming” self and the “conscious” self, frequently alluded to by Oates, sometimes meet? As such, do they provide or obscure access to meaning?

⁷ My translation of: “C’est sans doute de cette mise en page pour le moins brutale et spectaculaire, de cet isolement typographique générateur d’un véritable choc visuel que naît le premier choc rhétorique de ce texte, tant il est vrai, comme le suggère Henri Suhamy, que c’est dans la présentation matérielle, dans la configuration sur la page que réside la première “figure” de style, la première clé signifiante d’un texte.”

⁸ My translation of: “Une figure fait donc appel à la sensibilité; dans le discours elle survient comme une illustration, comme si le texte lui-même fabriquait des motifs ornementaux ou des images représentatives. On est tenté de dire que la forme la plus frappante de figure de style est constituée par les manipulations typographiques qu’on voit sur les affiches, ou sur des pages de poésie.”

The first chapter, "The Gatekeeper's Testimony: 12 June 1950," four pages long, is cut into by six such passages:

- 1) *"Could I tell, right away? Not exactly. But looking back, yes I should have known. Might've saved him if I had."* (TF 3)
- 2) *"No socks! With fancy shoes like that. A giveaway."* (TF 4)
- 3) *"Under the spell of The Falls. Nobody mortal was going to stop him."*
- 4) *"Like we're sick of ourselves. Mankind. This is the way out, only a few have the vision."* (TF 5)
- 5) *"You wear out. You see too much. Every breath hurts."*
- 6) *"Not the first of the poor bastards I've seen, but God help me he will be the last."* (TF 6)

This chapter reporting the gatekeeper's testimony is not narrated in the first person as one might expect. Instead, it is told through the voice of a third-person semi-omniscient narrator, recounting the gatekeeper's actions from his first sight of Gilbert Erskine (the unknown individual) until he returns to his booth to phone emergency services after witnessing the man's suicide jump. The italicized sentences listed above periodically interrupt the narrative. Though they are directly related to the subject of the chapter, they are also incongruous because they evidently originate from a different chronological period as well as a different point-of-view. In this case, all six passages can be plausibly understood as the gatekeeper's direct speech, looking back on the events with the privilege of hindsight. Thus, the narrative time of the chapter, 6:15 A.M. to 6:26 A.M. of 12 June 1950, is interspersed with testimony from a later period which represents the gatekeeper being interviewed by police, perhaps, or recounting the experience to friends and family.

It is the gatekeeper's ability to look back and reflect on the experience that makes his understanding of the events complete. At the time, he was simply reacting, not thinking: "He should have dialed his emergency number, back in the tollbooth. Now it was too late to turn back" (TF 4). Indeed, had the gatekeeper actually been conscious of having the thought about the socks at the chronological point when the second italicized sentence occurs in the text, he could have dialed the emergency number. Therefore, the gatekeeper integrated much more than he was able to conceptualize at the time of the onward rush of events. Thinking, and putting these thoughts into language, does not come until a later time. In these examples,

then, the italicized sentences represent reactions that originally remained silent, unconscious, not taking form until the gatekeeper mentally processes the events at a later time. Thus, we might say that Oates's italics allow a certain degree of access to the liminal realm between the night-side and the day-side of personality. Though they are used to communicate various kinds of thoughts, these thoughts almost always have an emotionally-charged significance and are frequently part of a visceral reaction on the part of the character to whom they are attributed.

The first pages of the second chapter, "The Bride," provide examples of different sorts of italicized sentences. This is the chapter in which Arianh wakes to find Gilbert missing, thinks back on her wedding of the previous day and the circumstances of her engagement, and finds Gilbert's farewell note. The first six pages of this chapter include the following examples:

- 1) "*Yes. I would. Foolish woman of course I would. Who are you, to be spared My justice?*" (TF 8)
- 2) "*Gone. He's gone. Can't be gone. Where?*" (TF 9)
- 3) "*Had Gilbert heard?*"
- 4) "*Don't. Don't think of it. No one can force you.*" (TF 10)
- 5) "*Thinking Mother! What does that make Gilbert and me, brother and sister?*"
- 6) "*If you've never drunk anything stronger than sweet cider, Arianh, do you think it's wise to have a second glass of champagne—so soon after the first?*" (TF 11)
- 7) "*Dear God, don't let my stockings be baggy at the ankles. Nowhere it can show.*" (TF 12)

These are different types of sentences with different purposes than those discussed above in relation to the gatekeeper. Example 3 appears to simply be the standard use of italics as emphasis, conveying the panic and shame Arianh feels at the thought that her new husband might have heard her snoring. Examples 5, 6 and 7 convey thoughts whose origins are not ambiguous, belonging to the realm of Arianh's conscious thoughts. Each is conveniently signposted, providing an indication to the reader about how to understand them. 5 is preceded by the word "thinking," 6 is clarified by the phrase "a female voice chiding in her ear" (TF 11), and 7 is an example of something "she'd prayed silently" (TF 12). However, the remaining examples are not quite so straightforward. The first is in reply to Arianh's anguished

plea “God, help me! You wouldn’t be so cruel—would you?” She has just realized she has become a widow after less than one day of marriage: “How swift the reply came! A taunt that echoed so distinctly in Arian’s skull, she halfway believed these pitying strangers could hear it” (*TF* 8). Is God actually speaking to Arian in the reply? Is she consciously providing the pessimistic response? Or is it an unconscious deep-rooted reaction to her emotional anguish? The intended origin of example 2 is similarly difficult to establish. Directly following the sentence that ends “Arian had to know something was wrong, she’d been jolted from her hot stuporous sleep to this knowledge” (*TF* 9), it is unclear whether these are waking thoughts, dream thoughts, or are words meant to communicate the emotion of a lingering feeling. Example 4 is similar in many ways to 2, conveying either conscious thoughts or a recalcitrant state of mind. Thus, in many instances, the text itself proves as enigmatic as the themes with which it deals.

The play between the “voiced” and the “unvoiced” is present both at the levels of plot and text and is responsible for the creation of a subtext, a mysterious space between the lines in which meaning somewhere lies. The reader is privy in some degree to both the public and private worlds of the characters, the former through the standard narration and the latter through the use of italics representing the characters’ inner thoughts. Italicized phrases represent ideas that cross through the characters’ minds but that they, for one reason or another, do not choose to express out loud. They may do this knowingly or unknowingly. They may choose to keep an opinion or reaction silent. They may be reminded of things that have been said previously. In other instances, italics represent unvoiced thoughts emanating from the unconscious that the characters may or may not be aware of having.

The most straightforward use of italics, which accounts for a large number of them, is to give the reader privileged access to a character’s “private thoughts.” By this, I mean that they represent ideas that, at the narrative level, the characters wish to keep to themselves, often because if expressed they might be considered as inappropriate and could lead to an awkward confrontation, but that allow the reader a more thorough understanding of the characters’ mental processes. The third-person semi-omniscient point of view frequently employed by Oates, which Arnaud-Vincent has called a “seeing with” (*vision avec*) (27),⁹ lends itself quite natu-

⁹ Arnaud-Vincent’s “seeing with” is a sympathetic inside view. She explains what she means by this term: this view is “communicated by a narrative voice very close to the character that causes the reader to repeatedly become a voyeur This “inside vision” reaches a very clear peak in the numerous shocking passages in

rally to such revelations. This is particularly apparent in Part III of the novel which treats the relationship between Arianah and her three grown children—Chandler, Royall and Juliet—as they struggle to understand their mother’s animosity towards their father who died when they were quite young. Royall’s reaction to his mother in the following passage is one example: “‘Life outside the family is a masquerade,’ Arianah said flatly. ‘You kids will learn.’ / *But not inside the family?*” Royall shifted his shoulders uncomfortably” (TF 321). Chandler’s reaction to seeing Royall’s gun is another: “Chandler thought, chilled *My brother holding death in his hand*” (TF 389). Indeed, private thoughts of this type are attributed to each of the main characters. A final example concerns Juliet’s reaction to being taken to visit Bud Stonecrop’s invalid father:

She guessed that he must love his father very much; she was reminded of her own father, whom she hadn’t known but of whom she thought almost constantly. *He could be alive now. After that accident. He could be alive like this, a living death.* (TF 460)

Such private thoughts tend to be signposted and are thus easily identifiable as such. Their interest lies in the fact that they allow the characters a more developed voice and make them seem more life-like. The narrator does not simply describe the characters’ inner worlds, their inner voices are actually directly transcribed. This technique adds another layer to the authenticity brought to the text by the inclusion of dialogue. The opacity of the self/other communicative process is explicitly illustrated.

A more indeterminate type of private thought is directed toward oneself. During the crisis intervention episode, Chandler reflects on the nature of his volunteer work: “So it went. Chandler had several times arrived too late, the drama was over, everyone was headed home. / That sinking sensation in the gut. *You haven’t made any difference, what a fool you are. What vanity*” (TF 355). As the episode wears on and everyone begins to get “edgy, anxious,” Chandler has more thoughts of this sort: “Chandler was concerned that his head would begin to ache. That was his weakness, or one of them—throbbing pain behind his eyes and a rising sense of dismay, despair. *Why did he die. My father. Why, like a trapped rat. I loved him! I*

which is it very clearly the interior monologue of the heroine that is responsible for the narrative progression.” My translation of: “élaborée par une voix narrative très fortement complice qui amène le lecteur, de manière répétée, à se faire voyeur . . . Cette “vision avec” culmine très nettement dans les passages, nombreux et fulgurants, où c’est très clairement le monologue intérieur de l’héroïne qui assure la progression du texte.”

miss him" (TF 358-59). Later, once the episode is over, Chandler reflects on his relationship with Melinda and her baby daughter Danya as he drives to their apartment: "Almost, when he held Danya, he could feel the infant taking in information, hungry to absorb all of the world. / *She could be mine. She could love me as a father. I am not required to justify my life*" (TF 373). A similar example is this two-line italicized section appearing just prior to the account of Chandler's impulsive drive "to l'Isle Grand to visit his father's sisters whom he had not seen in more than sixteen years": "*The dead have no one to speak for them except the living. / I am Dirk Burnaby's son, and I am living*" (TF 378). In these instances, it is unclear whether these are meant to be direct, conscious thoughts or whether they are the author transcribing the character's feelings into words similar to the way in which we render the Chinese language, for example, using the Western alphabet, a close approximation based on a system of signs we can understand.

Other italicized interventions seem to communicate "unacknowledged unconscious responses" on the part of the characters such as during Royall's unplanned visit to the cemetery: "Royall wasn't one to ask himself *Why the hell have I stopped here?*" (TF 282). These are the occasions in which it actually seems that the author is communicating information that has erupted from the depths of her characters' unconscious realms. We understand when we read this that although Royall was not one to ask himself such a question, deep down at some more profound level of existence, he must have been wondering. Likewise, Royall's reflection about his mindless tourism job: "Royall liked his job at the Devil's Hole, work that kept him busy and didn't require much thought. *It hurts too much to think. There's no future in it*" (TF 292). These thoughts are, in fact, residue of suppressed emotion; thoughts that exist on some level, but that Royall will not acknowledge on the surface layer of his personality. Again, during Chandler's crisis intervention episode, instances of unconscious realizations accompany his conscious decision-making. "How charged with significance this scene had come to be, in the intensity of the drama, that had no significance otherwise. *The small life. The inevitable life. The life that awaits*" (TF 370). Soon after, he decides to make a bold move towards resolving the situation: "He understood that he was doing the right thing. *In the purity of his heart, he could not fail to do the right thing*" (TF 371). Is Chandler's unconscious speaking in these moments? What about when Melinda is angry with him for putting his life on the line and these two sentences interrupt the narrative: "*Going outside the family. Betraying. / Bullshit*" (TF 374)? A related use of italics, but one that conveys

thoughts which are perhaps not quite so deeply buried, is for interventions which seem to indicate a “voice of conscious”: “*Careful now* Royall was being warned. *You want to be careful, son.* This voice, crafty yet kind, he sometimes heard when he might be drifting into a mistake” (TF 282).

More often, however, italicized passages represent “memories” of things other characters are actually supposed to have said out loud as in this passage when Royall remembers words said by his mother:

Years ago he'd overheard Arianh maneuvering Chandler out of going to the University of Pennsylvania, where he had a scholarship, in favor of staying closer to home, attending Buffalo State. *You know how strain upsets you. What if something terrible happened to you. So far from home.* (TF 323)

As in the gatekeeper's excerpt, discussed above, these intrusions create a diachronic tension and though they represent the words of another person, they surge up in the characters' present in much the same way that unconscious thoughts do. When a character thinks about a past conversation, it is also represented in italics in the text, such as this conversation between Royall and Candace after “Candace discovered she wasn't pregnant after all”:

But do you still love me? Royall? Even if—

Honey, of course. I love you more than ever.

You're sure? Because if—

I'm sure.

We will have babies, though. Won't we?

Just as many as you want, Candace. I promise. (TF 297)

Once again, the italics in this passage indicate both a chronological gap and a relationship of continuity between past and present. Finally, two other uses consist of rendering “imagined other voices,” when one character imagines the response of another character—“Yet Royall imagined her teeth grinding, *Yes I am furious. Yes you have gone too far this time*” (TF 317)—and “interpretation of body language”—“Royall saw Candace and Annie exchange a glance. *My future mother-in-law. Oh, God!*” (TF 303).

This technique of typographically rendering certain passages in italics to set them apart, indicating their difference from the narrative in which they are embedded,

allows the reader access to two levels of meaning in relation to the characters: both the exterior and interior realms. As Burwell writes about a similar technique in *Do With Me What You Will*, “italicized sections permit individuals to reflect upon, to amplify, or to force rhetorical analysis of what the detached narrator reveals about them” (94). The effect created by this technique is of a disjointed narrative struggling to render a multi-layered fictional reality. Italicized interruptions indicate rupture while at the same time pointing to continuity, betraying the instability of the present while offering a glimpse of the complex space/time relationships that make up lived experience. The differences in font indicate to the reader the passage between different types of information with different psychological ramifications, the coexistence of objective and subjective realms. In some cases, they foreground the discrepancy between appearance and actual psychological experience. In others, they simply add another layer of meaning by “showing” a character’s memories rather than “telling” them by integrating them more smoothly into the narration. This technique of “showing” an inner mental thought as a textual “image” creates a sort of “internal polyphony,” allowing the reader access to the realm of unvoiced thoughts which in real life usually remain silent, the unconscious dimension of the characters. In so doing, it foregrounds the fact that in real life, so much actually remains hidden and unknowable to each individual.

Repetition

Related to the problem of effectively communicating the notion of private thoughts and unconscious impulses is that of successfully conveying depth of emotion, emotion that Oates’s characters may not be able to adequately express in words but that is nonetheless felt. The use of adjectives and adverbs is not always enough to properly transmit the intensity of emotion. Oates uses repetition in her texts to convey the passion of her characters and invest certain passages with a lyrical quality that sweeps the reader along with the tide.¹⁰ “*I can’t fail, I must*

¹⁰ This section does not concern itself with all stylistic forms of repetition as outlined, for example, by Henri Suhamy in *Les Figures de Style*. Rather it focuses on the repetition of a word or an expression throughout an entire text or a section of text that takes on the quality of a refrain, becoming a motto or “connecting thread” (*fil conducteur*) for the text. The effect is one of insistence, of trying to force meaning on linguistic signifiers through sheer use of them, the idea that if something is said enough, it either becomes true (in a performative sort of way) or eventually reveals the truth it has hitherto been masking. Suhamy reminds us of the quality the use of repetition has to blur the distinction between signifiers and signifieds: “Grammatical organization is by nature the enemy of waste and redundancy. However, with repetition the distribution of roles between signified and signifiers is slightly blurred. Signifieds are mixed with signifiers and these suddenly take on the

succeed. This mantra ran through my head like a deranged Muzak. *Can't fail. Must succeed. Can't. Must. Who? How?*" (Oates, "Nighthawk" 60). The "I" in this passage is none other than Oates herself in a non-fiction piece recalling her days as a graduate student. However, the attribution of the quality of being assailed by a mantra running through one's head "like a deranged Muzak" is one that she also employs in her fiction. Both Arianne of *The Falls*, especially in Part I, and Gillian of *Beasts* are afflicted with this obsessive malady. Samuel Chase Coale describes the "wave of feeling" created by Oates's use of repetition in Part 1 of *The Falls*:

Repetition both tames and extends the original experience and event; it observes similar particles of language in order to interrupt the breaking wave of shock and dismay. Yet in its frantic repetition, the wave of feeling is reborn and thrust forward: we are plunged into the falls of human passions and compulsions, with barely one's head above water, consciously aware of the very real danger of drowning in a torrent of language. (437)

"Run for your life" is the refrain of the chapter "The Fossil-Seeker" (*TF* 26-39). Variations on this phrase are repeated at least seven times in the space of the chapter, conveying Gilbert's panic and despair at having married a woman, thus betraying his friend Douglas. Coale writes that Oates's language in this chapter "pursues Erskine to his death with its obsessive repetition," repetition which "chants a death sentence" (437). However, in Oates's spirit of characters taking on lives of their own, her language accompanies his death wish rather than causes it, transcribing what this specific personality in this situation must be feeling rather than rushing up behind to push him off the cliff.¹¹ Later, "yes" is used as a rhythmic beat throughout the chapter "7 July 1950" (*TF* 110-11) when Arianne accepts Dirk's marriage proposal; "they were married" begins many of the short paragraphs in

movement of things they were meant only to represent according to an abstract and arbitrary code" (53). My translation of: "L'organisation grammaticale est par nature ennemie du gaspillage et de la redondance. Or, du fait des répétitions, la distribution des rôles entre signifiés et signifiants se brouille un peu. Les signifiés viennent se mêler aux signifiants, qui adoptent soudain le mouvement des choses qu'ils étaient censés ne représenter que dans une codification abstraite et arbitraire."

¹¹ Oates's attitude towards the fictional characters and worlds she creates is not without its ambiguities. She often insists upon the fact that her characters seem to take on lives of their own, insisting almost upon writing their own stories. However, during a February 2010 appearance in Philadelphia, when asked whether she had ever considered returning to the world of her National Book Award winning novel *them* to write about what has become of her characters thirty years later, she responded with an adamant "no," saying that is not something she would be allowed to do because *them* is a fiction, it is not real. [Reading, Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (15 February 2010)].

the eponymous chapter (*TF* 115-39) recounting the early days of their marriage; and variations on “It was only logical, wasn’t it?” become a refrain for the first section of the chapter “The Little Family” (*TF* 163-65) in which, to refer to Coale’s very poetic description, “language attempts to net the experience and plumb its intensities as word-particles rush forward, creating wave-sentences of passion and submission” with the effect of “hammering home the reality of what Arian has done” (437). In each of these cases, the syncopated rhythm created by the repetition allows the reader access to a certain dimension of the character’s emotional realm and a more powerful understanding of the sheer panic, passion, awe or doubt they struggle with.

Repetition is equally important to the structure of *Beasts*; Gillian’s narrative is driven by the two incessant refrains “go for the jugular” and “we are beasts and this is our consolation.” Whereas the meaning behind the repetitious phrases in *The Falls* is fairly clear, with the repetition serving to create an emotional buildup, in *Beasts*, there is the added difficulty of the ambiguous nature of the words. Is “go for the jugular” meant literally or metaphorically? What does the “this” refer to in “we are beasts and this is our consolation”?

“Go for the jugular,” or a variation of it, is repeated eight times, always in italics. The phrase first appears as the closing line to chapter 2, “The Alarm: 20 January 1976” (*B* 7). At this point, its insurgence seems completely random. It may have something to do with journal writing, which Gillian talks about doing just prior to its appearance, or perhaps to what she was writing about. It is upon its second occurrence that we discover the origin of Gillian’s refrain to be words expressed by Mr. Harrow as instructions to poetry seminar students: “‘The blood-jet is poetry.’ *Go for the jugular*” (*B* 58). Mr. Harrow’s words form a mysterious expression that seems to relate to something about communicating meaning through one’s writing, but Gillian does not quite comprehend and struggles to understand. Subsequent occurrences are joined by the alternate phrasing “*excavate your soul*” (*B* 67, 78). Still, Gillian does not understand. Mr. Harrow’s words and behavior are opaque to her. She does not relate to men the way he thinks; she does not think of her boyfriends as “lovers” as he suggests (*B* 61). Furthermore, she struggles with not being able to live up to his expectations for her writing:

Don’t be fearful: excavate your soul.
Go deeper!

You can't go deeper? Go deeper.

Go for the jugular.

But I could not. Alone of Mr. Harrow's students, I could not seem to follow his instructions. (B 67)

This is the opening of chapter 12, "Anatomical Specimens': November 1975," in which Gillian gives more precise information about the nature of Mr. Harrow's desires for his students' writing:

He wanted "no lies, no subterfuge, no 'nice-girl' bullshit." We were to record our dreams, our fantasies, our hopes, our visions; our personal relationships with parents, siblings, friends, lovers; we were to examine our emotional, physical, sexual lives as if we were "anatomical specimens." If we wanted to be writers we must examine the world with fresh, sceptical eyes. (B 67-68)

"Go for the jugular," then, means accessing the night-side of one's personality. This is a potentially dangerous act, Oates's text seems to indicate, resulting as it does in the eventual literalization of the metaphor.¹² It is around this point in the text that the implication of "go for the jugular" starts to shift. From a metaphor about accessing one's truest emotional self, it shifts to a metaphor used as a call to real-life action before ultimately being literalized in an act of murderous revenge. Chapter 13, "The Late Birth: November 1975," recounts Gillian's continuing obsession with pleasing Mr. Harrow and her deepening depression at not being able to do so. For her journal exercise, she reflects on her parents and the fact of her birth: "*I am a late birth. Born when my mother was forty-one. When my father was in his early fifties. My birth was a 'miracle'—no one had expected it. Miracles are unnatural*" (B 80). This chapter refers literally to the fact that Gillian's parents were already middle-aged when she was born. However, it also refers metaphorically to the length of time it has taken her to give in to her inner urges. Reading this chapter, we witness Gillian using her professor's words as a mantra. "Go for the jugular" thus becomes a call to action used by Gillian to motivate herself to be able to confront Andre Harrow. The chapter begins with the italicized words: "*You can't go deeper? Go deeper. Go for the jugular.*" It then continues with relatively mundane narration: "I remember the chapel bell tolling." The bell also contributes to the call to action. In the middle of the following paragraph, more italicized words burst in: "*Fire. Fire.*"

¹² The "go for the jugular" metaphor is literalized in *Beasts* when Gillian enacts her murderous revenge, thereby allowing her inner and exterior worlds to mix. Brian McHale discusses literalization of metaphor as a "collapse of world-boundaries [that] is violent, disruptive [and] catastrophic" (80).

The jugular. Go for it!" (B 77). On the following page, we learn that Mr. Harrow has completely usurped the place of her parents in Gillian's imagination: "As Andre Harrow, so conspicuously withdrawing from me, loomed larger and larger. / *Don't be fearful: excavate your soul.* / How obsession begins, takes root like a virulent weed . . ." (B 78). And finally, as she is working on her journal writing, "*Go deeper. Deeper*" appears in the middle of a paragraph (B 79). The following chapter, "14. The Surrender: November 1975," is the one in which Gillian finally surrenders herself to Mr. Harrow. Once this occurs, the repetition of "go for the jugular" ceases until it is used as justification of, or explanation for, the fire set in the Harrows' residence, which chronologically happens much later, but is textually introduced before.

The second refrain, "we are beasts and this is our consolation," appears less frequently in the text, but carries added importance due to its lexical link to the title, giving some indication of its thematic relation to the work as a whole.¹³ Indeed, from the epigraph to the opening pages, there are multiple examples of unnatural, perhaps even grotesque, humanity. Both paratextual elements and the text itself instill the work with the unstable state of human beings and the cloudy frontier between human and animal realms. The "allograph" epigraph¹⁴ chosen by Oates to open *Beasts* is five lines from D. H. Lawrence's poem "Medlars and Sorb-Apples" taken from the collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. The function of the epigraph retains its enigmatic nature, although Oates seems to be setting up an intertextual relationship between her novella and Lawrence's poetry through the similarity of the titles. The five lines of the epigraph evoke the gods, an exaggeration of human characteristics, and the idea of taking pleasure in pain, a marginal human tendency. They seem to be both a commentary on the title, fleshing it out, and on the text, an indication of how the author (*épigrapheur*, the one responsible for placing the citation in this position) sees the content of the story and the reader (*épigraphaire*, the one intended to read the text) will react to the reading experience.¹⁵ Then, on the first page of the actual text, the inaugural image is that of the emasculating totem in the Louvre: "It was approximately ten feet high, a primitive, angular wooden

¹³ *Beasts* is a thematic title as outlined by Gérard Genette in his discussion of paratextual elements in *Seuils* (82-83, 93).

¹⁴ An allograph epigraph is a citation, an epigraph attributed to an author who is not the author of the text (Genette 154).

¹⁵ Genette distinguishes between three roles pertaining to epigraphs: *épigraphe* (the author of the citation), *épigrapheur* and *épigraphaire* (153-54).

figure, seemingly female, with a long, narrow brute face, blank eyes, and a slash for a mouth.” The object is identifiably human-like, yet none of its traits are exactly right so that “it seemed only minimally human” (B 1). The second chapter, too, begins with a disturbing image of deformation in the first indications of Gillian’s physical appearance: missing hair, “close-cropped” hair, burning hair (B 5).

As with “go for the jugular,” the phrase “we are beasts and this is our consolation” seems to retain some hidden meaning which is all the more frustrating to the reader as Oates has foregrounded its importance to such an extent. Indeed, it is the caption chosen by Andre Harrow’s artist wife, Dorcas, to accompany her campus sculpture exhibit. Gillian’s classmate Marisa interprets Dorcas’ words and art to mean “we’re all animals and that’s our strength” (B 24). This reformulation is apparently offered as an explanation; however, it remains an equally enigmatic statement, in my opinion. Ostensibly, it indicates that “we should take comfort in the knowledge that we are simply animals and do not need to attempt to rise above this status,” to paraphrase in a much less concise way. Yet, is this true? Whether or not to give in to one’s animalistic impulses is a major theme of the novella. Gillian ultimately does; however, she also suffers the consequences.

“We are beasts and this is our consolation” appears upon only three occasions throughout the text. It is an expression chosen by Dorcas to accompany her sculpture exhibit, thus setting up an appropriate symmetry: Andre Harrow is the origin of “go for the jugular,” Dorcas the origin of “we are beasts.” In this capacity, “these provocative words,” as they are called, appear set apart in the text on their own line and all in capital letters (B 13). The expression is twice rendered in italics. The first occurrence is in the very first chapter when Gillian stumbles unexpectedly upon the sight of the familiar totem in the Louvre:

As if the nursing mother had called to me . . . *Gillian? Don't be afraid. We are beasts, this is our consolation.* For here was nightmare. Here was obscenity. I imagined how, staring at such a thing, a man might feel sexual desire wither and shrink within him: the yearning, hungry male reduced here to an ugly head, pressed so tight against the mother, it must surely smother. A woman would feel all softness within her, the tenderness that makes us human, vanish.

We are beasts, we feel no guilt.

Never guilt. (B 2)

This passage would seem to indicate that Gillian is not completely convinced of the inherent bestiality of humans. However, the tale that follows does indeed give some credence to the claim. Interestingly, in this instance, the phrase is associated with the admonition not to be afraid, pointing to the idea that there is an inherently fearful aspect of humanity associated with our deepest natures. The final appearance of these words is no less enigmatic:

They'd been drugged. Like me.

They'd been in love. Like me.

They would keep these secrets forever. Like me.

We are beasts and this is our consolation. (B 119)

Thus begins chapter 21, "The New Year: January 1976," the chapter following the one in which Gillian discovers the Harrows' betrayal and the "use" to which they have put her and others. Again, we wonder what the consolation is exactly? If it has to do with the acceptance of inherent bestiality, why must secrets be kept? At this point, though it is not specifically stated, a plan for revenge, though still in the early stages, seems to already be taking shape in Gillian's mind.¹⁶ Is the consolation, then, that her desire for a bestial revenge is legitimized by Dorcas' theory? The questions remain unanswered.

Reading an Oates passage can often be quite a physical experience. The reader feels the emotion bursting forth from deep down, such as when an italicized expression surges up in the middle of a paragraph. When mad obsessions break to the surface, oftentimes as the result of a communication barrier, this can lead to violence, a persistent theme in our culture which Oates confronts. Indeed, Gillian is challenged by communication difficulties on all sides. Her relationship with her parents is dysfunctional, she cannot completely trust her friends and she is unable to communicate with her professor. Thus, "the short insistent refrains"¹⁷ that communicate the confused nature of Gillian's enigmatic interior monologue effectively involve the reader in the mysterious frightening realm of one who is constantly, yet ineffectually, grasping at meaning.

¹⁶ At the close of the preceding chapter, immediately following her discovery, we read: "If a plan was taking shape in my mind, as a dream begins to form itself, by day, out of the residue of the day, to burst into splendor by night, I had no awareness of it" (B 117).

¹⁷ My translation of: "les petits refrains obsédants." Expression used by Arnaud-Vincent in her discussion of *Black Water* (27).

Dashes and Ellipses

As Oates's characters struggle to create meaning out of their experiences, they often find themselves either lacking in knowledge or struggling to find the appropriate words to express themselves or both. In *The Falls*, the frequent use of the verb "wonder," particularly in situations narrated from Chandler's point of view, adds to the feeling of mystery, presenting the characters as unsure and hesitant, but also highlighting the opacity of their relationship to the world as in these two examples:

1) "Chandler wondered, not for the first time in such circumstances, how it can happen that a man finds himself in such a place, one day. A rat backed into a corner. No way out." (TF 358)

2) "She has wondered if, at the instant of his death, as his car skidded into the guard railing, smashed through and plunged into the river, her father, Dirk Burnaby, had experienced a vision.

And what that vision might be.

She has wondered *Is Death itself a vision?*" (TF 429)

In *Beasts*, Gillian's uncertainty faced with the ambiguity that seems constantly to surround her is similarly expressed by a great number of aporetic expressions. For example,

1) "Someone, it might have been Cassie, squeezed my hand so hard I winced in pain." (B 7)

2) "I might have smiled more, I suppose. I might have smeared lipstick on my mouth." (B 47)

Another strategy Oates uses to communicate the hesitancy of her characters is the use of symbols such as ellipses¹⁸ and dashes to indicate confused pauses in speech or sentence break-offs due to inadequate word availability. Though these symbols occasionally appear within the narrative, the use of ellipses and dashes to commu-

¹⁸ The discussion here pertains not to ellipsis in the sense of a figure of speech that involves the omission of words, rather to ellipsis as the punctuation symbol consisting of three points of suspension which serves, as we shall see, as a textual indicator of the boundary between language and the non-linguistic. For James Berger, language is a "middle realm" between material sources and the non-linguistic which is "never fully itself, always in creative and agonized relation with what it is not" (354-55). It is this "agonized relation" between language and the non-linguistic that struggles to find expression in Oates's text, but can only be represented through the use of symbols.

nicate the notion of unexpressed meaning is used most frequently in dialogue or other transcriptions of direct speech or thought such as certain italicized passages discussed above.¹⁹ Oates has on multiple occasions talked about her characters taking on a life of their own and controlling, in some ways, the way the text is written. One of these is a 2005 interview with Susana Araújo: “I feel that my characters are alive in some way. And that they are not just characters in a story. And that they have a livingness and a psychology that overlaps the formal constraints of the fiction. So the characters can still keep on living” (“Joyce Carol Oates Reread” 96). The fact that dashes and points of suspension occur most frequently in dialogue and representations of the characters’ thoughts seems to point to their frequent inability to express themselves.

However, Oates’s use of these symbols is inconsistent. Similar to her use of italics, upon close scrutiny it becomes apparent that one cannot trust the symbol itself as indicative of meaning because throughout the works they are used for so many different functions. The reader is always forced to interpret them according to the context in which they appear. In this way, the reader is put in a parallel position to that of the characters, over and over again wondering What? and Why?

In general, Oates tends to use dashes to indicate hesitancy on the part of her characters and ellipses to indicate that words are being omitted from the text or that there is a conversation gap because a character cannot find the right words to formulate a thought. The following passage from *The Tattooed Girl* offers an example of each:

Myself again. But more than myself, a new man.

“Oh. Mr. S-Seigl . . .”

When Alma Busch saw her eccentric employer with his whiskers shaved away, his face naked and exposed, bleeding from a half-dozen small scratches, and his heavy cheeks, jowls, and chin red-smarting and swollen, she stood staring at him astonished. What a sweet comical simpleton the girl was, Seigl laughed in delight.

¹⁹ Dialogue or direct speech is not always set apart in Oates’s writing by quotation marks. Speaking about a short story entitled “Good To Know You” from the collection *Will You Always Love Me? and Other Stories* which recounts a conversation between two couples in a Chinese restaurant, Oates calls this way of rendering conversation without quotation marks an “American vernacular style” (Reading, Kelly Writers House). This style, to which she has frequent recourse, has the effect of further blurring the different ontological domains associated with a text, making it sometimes difficult to distinguish which thoughts to attribute to characters, narrator and author.

“Alma. I see now I should have warned you, dear. *This* is what the illustrious ‘Dr. Seigl’ looks like.”

Alma stammered, “But—Mr. Seigl—your face is b-bleeding —” (*TTG* 165)

This passage occurs the day Seigl’s disease goes into remission and he excitedly but inexpertly shaves off his beard. It provides an example of the nuance between the uses to which the two types of symbol are put. The ellipses in the second line indicate Alma’s confused astonishment at seeing her employer thus transformed and her inability to formulate an appropriate reply, whereas the dashes at the end of the passage signify the choppy rhythm of her speech, communicating her hesitancy at the appropriateness of broaching the subject of Seigl’s bleeding face.

Coming upon ellipses and dashes, it is not always eminently clear what they are supposed to indicate. It is generally easy to recognize when they are used for the standard functions of indicating that one speaker cuts another one off, or when dashes are used to set apart information in the middle of a sentence. However, when Seigl’s response to Dmitri’s question “Cigarettes, sir?” is represented as “Why, yes . . .” (*TTG* 34), it is not at all clear precisely what these dots are meant to represent: Surprise at being addressed unexpectedly by the waiter? Hesitancy at how to respond? Trailing off of the word? Perhaps all three. Or maybe none of the above. Another unclear formulation occurs when Seigl falls in the cemetery:

He tried to lift himself, and could not.

“God damn . . .”

Shameful to be lying in a public place, exposed to strangers’ eyes, helpless as a broken-backed snake! (*TTG* 47)

Here, do the dots indicate he says these words in a soft, resigned way rather than the expected forceful delivery of the explicative that would be indicated by an exclamation point or at least a period? Or disbelief, confusion? A combination of the above. One might argue this insistence on such small elements of the text to be a trivial matter. However, I would maintain that for an author who repeatedly insists on the importance of form to her fiction and claims to spend countless hours revising her work, even the punctuation should not be taken lightly. In January 1982, in the midst of working on a short story, Oates wrote the following entry in her journal about the process of communicating through the words she chooses to construct her fiction:

. . . The riddle of fiction. All's surface, skill, design, "tone." These are the elements the writer concerns himself with, becomes obsessed with. Paragraphs. Sentences. Words. But beyond the page, beyond the story itself, what is trying to speak? . . . Yet I'm fascinated with the ways in which they sneak up on me; the blocks of language; the voices. And this fascination carries over into a deep interest in others' language—Bellow, et al. Become attuned to the rhythms, the cadences, the commas, the brevity or length or simplicity or complexity of the sentences, and you are attuned to the buried self, the real soul. (452)

Thus, we must understand that Oates's use of these symbols is always meant to communicate something even though that "something" may not be entirely obvious, or may exist only as a feeling, beyond the realm of language, for it is possible that what cannot be said is of more value than what can be said.

Oates uses ellipses to foreground the fact that as readers we have access to only limited portions of the characters' "lives." The following line begins Part 1, Chapter 5, immediately after Seigl has first been introduced to Alma in *The Café*: ". . . *friend Alma. New to Carmel Heights . . .*" (*TTG* 43) Here, Seigl is remembering Dmitri's words, words that had been running through his head in a dream, but this is the only element of the dream communicated to the reader. Likewise, due to the limited omniscient point of view employed by Oates that tends to only present one character's viewpoint at a time, if a character is not conscious of something going on, the reader will often not receive any information about it. These cuts in and out of consciousness are communicated by ellipses, as in this example:

"You've heard of Primo Levi, Alma?"

Alma worked her mouth staring toward a corner of the dining room table. She'd polished it the day before, she liked how it shone. What was this guy saying? Who?

". . . in Auschwitz he never thought of suicide in two years. While always before, he had. And, after . . ."

Alma shifted her shoulders uncomfortably. Felt like her bra straps were cutting into her flesh. Why the fuck was Seigl telling her this? (*TTG* 161)²⁰

²⁰ Oates's allusion to Primo Levi, the Italian writer and thinker who survived Auschwitz, is interesting in the context of this study. Oates, like Levi, explores the problem of how to find meaning and value after exposure to inhumanity and cruelty, identifying the roots of evil inside humanity and not in any supernatural dimension. However, Joseph Farrell explains that in Levi's humanist thinking, "the dilemma over why humanity behaves as it does in a Godless universe" is ultimately resolvable (17). This is where Oates's thinking diverges from Levi's as her fiction tends to show that the search for meaning is all there is.

We understand here that not all of Seigl's mini-lecture on Levi is reported, only those words Alma is actually conscious of hearing. In the following passage, ellipses indicate that the conversation between Alma and Seigl continues "off the page" so to speak:

"I'll be needing you to assist me more hours of the day, starting next Monday. And so it might be more convenient for you to move into the guest room . . ."

Of course, Alma's salary would be raised. (*TTG* 145)

In the fictional world, Seigl's words to Alma are evidently meant to continue as he explains that he will, of course, raise her salary. However, his exact words are not represented, the fact that this point is discussed is told simply as part of the narrative.

Oates means to present her characters as "people" that exist beyond the pages of her fiction. In the same way that they can have "off the page" conversations, they are also meant to perform actions that are not explicitly described by the narrator as in this instance of Seigl instructing Alma on how to turn the heat up and down: "Alma? If the room is too cold, or too warm, here's how the thermostat works" (*TTG* 147). Here, the ellipses indicate the space of Seigl's demonstration. He must be touching the thermostat, manipulating its buttons or knobs in some way that Alma is meant to be observing, but this is neither specified, nor described in detail. Thus, Oates's use of ellipses in this manner foregrounds the artificiality of text and its inherent inability to account for the whole of lived experience.

By far the most common use of ellipses and dashes, however, is to communicate hesitancy on the part of the characters in a diverse array of situations. They might emphasize uncertainty at the veracity of the words being spoken, such as the surprise expressed by Seigl's acquaintances at the beginning of the novel—"Joshua Seigl? Hiring an assistant? To live in his house . . . ?" (*TTG* 5)—or Seigl's own astonishment at suddenly feeling well again, "Can it be? My God . . ." (*TTG* 163). They occasionally represent a pause in speech rhythm as the speaker vacillates between possible interpretations: "He wanted to know: where'd she come from? / Her eyes blinked slowly. Just now? Or—then?" (*TTG* 29). They can also reveal the limits of language in situations of incomprehension or confusion, such as when Dmitri fails to understand Seigl—"Pascal . . . ?" (*TTG* 40) —, when Alma dozes off and loses touch with reality—"Dmitri woke Alma with a rough shake of her shoulder. She groaned, confused. 'Don't h-hit me . . .'" (*TTG* 40-41)—or when a request from Dmitri catches Alma off guard, "A gun? Like . . ." (*TTG* 185). Similarly, they might

enhance a feeling of uncertainty on a speaker's part about the subject being discussed: "But—were there witches? I don't understand" (*TTG* 79); "In her husky smoker's voice Jet was saying, marveling, 'But—you look very well Joshua. You drove to the airport—by yourself?'" (*TTG* 114). At times, they suggest faltering due to a character's unwillingness to divulge certain information: "The eyes went vague, evasive. 'Different places . . .'" (*TTG* 77); "'Anything to t-tell you'—that's an unusually aggressive way of initiating a conversation even for you, Jet, isn't it?' / There. Seigl had managed to speak coolly, though under duress" (*TTG* 106); "'I—don't know.' / Guiltily Seigl thought: my illness" (*TTG* 107). They can even transmit tentativeness about the accuracy of a memory: "Hadn't one of Jet's lovers, years ago, been so desperate to escape her he'd fled to—was it Tangier?" (*TTG* 111).

Among the uses of ellipses and dashes to express the idea of hesitancy, the most frequent instances are those which imply an inability to formulate an idea in words or a lack of self-assurance on the part of the speaker. In the first case, these are moments when characters cannot produce the word or expression they are looking for—"Thank you . . .' / Seigl glanced up smiling and grateful but vague-eyed: he wasn't remembering Dmitri's name" (*TTG* 34); "Seigl said, 'Dmitri, here. I'd better pay now before . . .' Before he forgot, was probably what Seigl meant to say" (*TTG* 37)—or have difficulty deciding on the proper word to express an idea: "He protested, 'I can go for days without . . .' / Stumbling, falling. Mis-stepping" (*TTG* 69); "'Who else! Who else but your sister! Your sister you have banished from your life out of—guilt? Shame?'" (*TTG* 105); "Moretimes than Seigl could recall, Jet had been deeply—tragically?—in love" (*TTG* 111). Almost as frequently, dashes and ellipses signal uneasiness due to a lack of self-assurance that results in hesitation as when Alma addresses Seigl in the book store, saying "'You're a . . . doctor, I guess?'" (*TTG* 76), or when she stammers her apology upon arriving late for her first day of work: "'Mr. Seigl! Oh gosh I'm sorry I'm late . . .,'" and later, "'I . . . I wasn't sure . . . I'm always afraid of going into the wrong house, see?'" (*TTG* 87).

Though such examples are scattered throughout *The Tattooed Girl*, there are several long passages that stand out as being particularly marked by them. Part 1, Chapter 8 (*TTG* 57-65) relates the beginnings of Alma and Dmitri's relationship. It is told from Dmitri's point of view, the narrative interspersed with italicized passages representing dialogue from Alma's half of various conversations with Dmitri as remembered by him. Of seventeen such memory intrusions, twelve contain at least one set of ellipses, the cumulative effect of which reinforces Alma's helplessness,

confusion, uncertainty and lack of self-esteem. Another passage, Part 2, Chapter 11, presented from Seigl's point of view, relates his phone conversation with his friend Sondra Blumenthal once his disease has gone into remission (*TTG* 167-70). Seigl comes across in this passage as in the throes of a manic episode over which he has little or no control. He is needy and excited, failing to identify himself over the phone, "talking rapidly" and "laughing louder than he intended" which soon leaves him "breathless" (*TTG* 168). There is an uncharacteristic gleam to his eye and he is not entirely in touch with reality:

A halo of light shimmered in his eyes. Where was he? Sprawled in a chair before a tall radiant window. During this conversation he would lose his awareness of the person to whom he was speaking though if required to identify her he would have immediately responded: Sondra Blumenthal. (*TTG* 169)

Unable to control himself, he interrupts his friend and is astonished to hear himself asking for her help in planning his birthday party, for the idea of wanting to have a party "was a revelation to him" (*TTG* 169), impetuous behavior that shocks him and leaves him wondering why he had not previously realized he desired such a thing. Throughout this passage, Seigl's speech and thoughts are punctuated by dashes indicating the irregular rhythm of his speech and his inability to precisely formulate his thoughts: "Where have I been? I've been—nowhere. I mean, here. But I've been *no one* here. You know," Seigl said, laughing louder than he intended" (*TTG* 168). In more exaggerated states of confusion, his speech trails off into bewildered silence represented by points of suspension: "I realize I've been remiss, dear, and I'm sorry. I've had a—complicated time. But now it's past . . ." (*TTG* 169). This passage is followed by the above-quoted passage indicating his momentary loss of awareness. Seigl and Alma's conversations in Part 3 about Jews, the Holocaust, witches and Alma's life, also tend to be punctuated by these markers of hesitancy and confusion, visually reinforcing the difficulty they have in communicating and understanding each other. For example, Seigl's query about the mark on Alma's cheek: "Seigl spoke gently, kindly. 'I've wondered—is it a birthmark? Or . . .' His voice trailed off in embarrassment. And he'd meant only well" (*TTG* 242). Likewise, Alma's hesitation when the two discuss whether the Holocaust really happened: "Alma laughed uncertainly. 'Some people—I heard—they don't think—whatever it was—happened'" (*TTG* 246).

Thus, through the use of italics, repetition, ellipses and dashes, Oates reinforces the thematic mysteries evoked by her texts by transmitting them also through visible markers on the page. Although each technique has been discussed separa-

tely, largely in regard to a certain work of fiction, it is evident that they often work together. Part 3, Chapter 14 of *The Tattooed Girl*, one of the several ideological confrontations between Alma and Seigl, provides a good example of this. Narrated from Alma's point of view, her sense of Seigl as master of both his language and his emotions in contrast to her general state of bumbling confusion is shown through an accumulation of various devices. The narration describes her performing a variety of gestures that convey hesitancy and confusion including "staring and seeing nothing," "biting at her thumbnail" (TTG 256), shrugging, frowning, head shaking and "hugging her rib cage" (TTG 258). The dashes and ellipses that punctuate the dialogue convey the tentativeness of the two characters with regard to each other. Seigl does not understand Alma, but prods for answers. Alma, though reassured by his teacherly tone and methodical way of speaking, is confused by and wary of a situation she cannot understand. She had expected to be fired after mouthing off to Seigl several days before. As this has not transpired, she has lost her bearings. The repetition of "wanting to say" and her wondering to herself about whether or not Seigl's politeness is "real" (TTG 256) reinforce the idea that she is stuck, like a broken record, in a state of confusion. Likewise, the repetition of "Not a Jew!" (TTG 259) several pages later, new information that roars in her ears, leaving her dazed, serves to reinforce, once again, the notion of her confusion and her unwillingness to make changes to her preconceived notions. Deep down, Alma considers Seigl to be an inveterate liar. The thought/memory "*You made it all up. It's all lies*" (TTG 257) is a reference to their conversation about Seigl's novel and Alma's difficulty in understanding the concept of fiction based on reality. For her, writing must either relate historical facts or be made up, so she accuses Seigl of having invented his Holocaust story. She continues this logic at the end of the passage. By writing about the Holocaust and knowingly having a Jewish patronym, Seigl, according to Alma's logic, is letting people think he is a Jew, playing at being Jewish. He knows that he has qualities that others consider to be Jewish, but does nothing to outrightly refute this, such as change his name. Thus, according to Alma's logic, he is a liar and still worthy of her hatred. Alma's confusion and inability to "read" her employer are no less abated by their conversation. She has simply manipulated the new information to make it fit her old pattern of understanding. Such intellectual turmoil is exhausting, leaving her to sink "into a deep stuporous sleep from which she wanted never to wake" (TTG 260). Surrendering to the night-side would be one solution, perhaps, though it would bring neither Alma nor Seigl any closer to the "truth."

The techniques discussed here have the cumulative effect of lending a very oral quality to Oates's fiction, as if the characters are speaking directly, using the author only as a medium to transcribe their experiences. Nancy Blake has referred to such techniques as a "breaking apart" of language and observed that "one of the main reasons for the mutilation of language patterns" in contemporary fiction "has been the desire to leave spaces, interstices in the smooth surface of words in order to incorporate speech into their tissue" (11). After all, "man's most fundamental experience is that of the rupture, the gap between the word and the reality" (17), and it is natural that this should be reflected in fiction. Thus, the fragmented, oral nature of Oates's storytelling, broken up by so many gaps, raises the question of whether or not her work might be considered as blank fiction. Roland Barthes, in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, describes blank fiction (*écriture blanche*) as exhibiting a "non-style," an "oral style," a "spoken quality of writing" (*degré parlé de l'écriture*) (64). It is a fiction characterized, he writes, by "a style of absence that is almost an ideal absence of style; thus writing is reduced to a kind of negative mode in which the social and mythical nature of language is reduced to a state of neutral and apathetic form" (56).²¹

However, as Dominique Viart points out, the simple presence in a work of fragmentation, blank spaces on the page, and original style is not enough to justify qualifying a work as blank fiction. In a neutral style drained of pathos and emotional stylistic signs, blank fiction depicts the banal and ordinary aspects of life in a world where meaning is lost and disconnectedness abounds. These are most certainly not qualities of Oates's fiction. On the contrary, Oates's elliptical use of punctuation, together with the insistence of italics and repetition contributes to portraying a fictional world where meaning is not lost but rather latent and multiple, each character's experience is individual and unique and the establishment of meaningful connections, though rare, is possible. Although Oates's fiction can legitimately be read as "reflections of mutilated life" (Viart 26),²² rather than express a dual uneasiness with language and the world, it embraces both as imperfect but necessary and inevitable, attempting to portray the human condition through an evocation of emotion and a rendering of diverse states of being.

²¹ My translation of: "un style de l'absence qui est presque une absence idéale du style; l'écriture se réduit alors à une sorte de mode négatif dans lequel les caractères sociaux ou mythiques d'un langage s'abolissent au profit d'un état neutre et inerte de la forme."

²² My translation of: "réflexions de la vie mutilée."

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