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Tanya Tromble

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The Lost Landscape:
Joyce Carol Oates's Textual Tapestry of Fiction in Fact and Fact in Fiction

Tanya Tromble, LERMA E.A. 853

Introduction

For a writer like Joyce Carol Oates, who has been publishing fiction and non-fiction in parallel from relatively early on in her career, it can be difficult to distinguish fiction from personal reality. Oates's first story collection, *By the North Gate*, was published in 1963. She began keeping a personal journal in the early 1970s. Her first volume of critical essays, *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature*, in 1974. The initial versions of the earliest memoir essays to be included in *The Lost Landscape: A Writer's Coming of Age* date to the mid to late 1980s. To what extent is Oates's life reflected autobiographically in her fiction? She has admitted to taking inspiration from her own family history, for example, in works like *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, 2007, and to writing about a high school friend who was the victim of "date rape" in *We Were the Mulvaney's*, 1996.

Inversely, to what extent has she forged her individual self through her writing? Perusing her first full-length memoir *A Widow's Story* (2011)¹, an informed Oates reader will find much that recalls elements of previously published fictional texts. The short one-page chapter "Hospital Vigil(s)" (32) recalls Ariah's vigil in Part I of the novel *The Falls* (2004). Oates's account of "the aftermath of the [car] wreck" (WS 8) she and her husband experienced a year before Ray's death takes one back to her young adult novel *After the Wreck, I Picked Myself Up, Spread My Wings, and Flew Away* (2006). And the refrain "The first wrong thing" (WS 10), "Another wrong thing" (WS 13), "Yet another wrong thing" (WS 16) which structures the chapter "The First Wrong Things," has much in common with the tripartite refrain of wrong things in her micro-fiction story "Slow" (*The Assignment*, 1988). Indeed, Oates suggests that her literary production comprises a fundamental part of who she is when she remarks that as her late husband did not read most of her fiction, "it might be argued that Ray didn't know me entirely – or even, to a significant degree, partially" (WS 8). When she recalls the past, she has a tendency to situate it in terms of what she was working on at the time, as when she remembers

¹ Abbreviated as WS for in-text citations.

their sabbatical year in London and that she was working on the novel *Do With Me What You Will* at the time (WS 12), reinforcing the notion that her fictional worlds strongly influence her real-life experiences. Such comments further reinforce the idea that one cannot consider the writer separately from her writing. Indeed, Oates suggests as much in her essay “On Fiction in Fact” (*Where I’ve Been, And Where I’m Going: Essays, Reviews, and Prose*, 1999) in which she argues that all factual accounts are fictionalized to at least some extent by the choices one makes in narrating them. Thus, one might expect Oates to narrate her own autobiographical accounts in language similar to that which she has used in creating the lives and worlds that make up her fictional *oeuvre*. As I have shown elsewhere, this does seem to be the case with *A Widow’s Story*.² However, Oates considers this first memoir to be of a very different sort from the later *The Lost Landscape: A Writer’s Coming of Age*, 2015.³ *A Widow’s Story* was intended “to focus upon the raw, unassimilated, blindly head-on plunge of experience *in medias res* after an unexpected death,” to be “an evocation of grief itself” (LL 350). *The Lost Landscape*, however, is composed mostly of chapters which have been “recollected,” by which term Oates means to imply an implicit process of distortion: “As soon as you shift from the tense *I am* to *I was*, still more to *I had been* you are entering the realm of what might be called ‘creative recollection’” (LL 349).

I. *A Widow’s Story*⁴

Oates’s husband of forty-seven years, Raymond Smith, unexpectedly passed away due to complications following pneumonia in February 2008. Her memoir, *A Widow’s Story*, is a published testimony to her experience of widowhood in which she recounts the depression and guilt she encountered in the first months of what she calls her “posthumous” life. However, if one were not privy to the biographical fact about the death of Raymond Smith and the subtitle “A Memoir” were omitted, there would be very little to distinguish this volume as a work of non-fiction. First-person narration, which Oates uses in her memoir, may be rare as the

² I have discussed this issue, as well, in connection to Oates’s *A Widow’s Story* and her *Journal* in a 2015 paper. See Tanya Tromble, “Fiction in Fact and Fact in Fiction in the Writing of Joyce Carol Oates,” *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*, Vol. 2, Article 2 (2015).

³ Abbreviated as LL for in-text citations.

⁴ This section is adapted from the section entitled “Fiction or Non-Fiction?” in my “Fiction in Fact and Fact in Fiction in the Writing of Joyce Carol Oates,” *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*, Vol. 2, Article 2 (2015).

dominant voice of a lengthy Oates novel, but it is certainly not unheard of in her oeuvre.⁵ In fact, it is difficult to resist reading this memoir as another brilliant novel penned by an author seismically in-tune with yet another contemporary issue for the reason that it structurally, thematically and typographically shares many characteristics with much of her contemporary fiction.

Structurally, it is a forward-moving work – encompassing the timeframe from February to August 2008 – scattered with analepses relating memories of Oates’s life with Ray, as in Chapter 69, “‘Happy and Excited,’” which is entirely devoted to reminiscences about their first year of married life together in Beaumont, Texas. Indeed, frequent recourse to analepsis is a prominent characteristic of Oates’s contemporary fiction which oftentimes more resembles an intermingled collage of life-scenes than a fluid stream of story with definite starting and ending points.

Thematically, as well, the memoir has much in common with a typical Oates fictional plot. To begin, throughout the narrative, she often chooses to refer to herself in the third person as “the widow”: “*What the widow must remember: her husband’s death did not happen to her but to her husband. I have no right to appropriate Ray’s death*” (WS 228). This recourse to character-types is a technique Oates frequently employs to emphasize the universality of her characters’ experiences and reactions. Furthermore, as the characters in her novels must, in order to move forward, accept the fact that they will never know the “whole truth” about their traumatic pasts, Oates’s personal story in her memoir involves a similar pattern of trauma, grief, guilt, self-interrogation and, finally, acceptance. Indeed, Oates mentions, in her memoir, a feeling that she had first lived her life through her fiction: “I am made to think, not for the first time, that in my writing I have plunged ahead – head-on, heedlessly one might say – or ‘fearlessly’ – into my own future: this time of utter raw anguished loss” (WS 414). In her novels, a hidden secret often constitutes a sort of black hole which is detrimental to the subject’s ability to function. Examples include the stasis affecting characters in *The Falls* and the novella *Little Bird of Heaven* (2009) who have become paralyzed by their lack of knowledge regarding their fathers’ pasts. In the memoir, too, there is a hidden secret to which there can never be a definitive response: the “truth” behind the issue of whether or not the widow reacted appropriately to her husband’s illness. The ability or inability to accept the inaccessibility of this “truth” is a theme

⁵ Two examples of fictional works narrated in the first person by characters telling their own life stories in journal or memoir-type form include the early novel *Expensive People* (1968) and the more recent *My Sister, My Love* (2008).

that runs throughout the narrative and will ultimately determine whether or not the widow succumbs to madness. Furthermore, frequent comments throughout the memoir bely the gothic sensibility that pervades Oates's fiction, where the threat of descent into madness often lurks: "Where the life-struggle is stark, primitive, elemental – the terror is of being devoured alive. / Where the life-struggle is more 'civilized' – the terror is of being driven mad" (WS 268).

In terms of the material layout, as well, the pages of Oates's memoir are indistinguishable from the pages of many recent novels. Glancing at the page, one notices the narrative is frequently interrupted by dashes, ellipses, and italicized passages. Leafing through the pages of the memoir side by side with *The Falls*, for example, reveals that in both works rarely do more than two or three pages go by without the flow of the text being broken by an italicized passage, which is often meant to represent an interruption surging up into the text from another dimension. At one point in the memoir, Oates imagines herself in conversation with her late husband, whose words are represented in italics. This fictitious "Ray" admonishes her – "*Honey you're just excited. Don't take these people too seriously*" – and counsels her – "*Of course not. You're exaggerating. Don't upset yourself needlessly*" (WS 320, 321). This technique of typographically rendering certain passage 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. The effect created by this technique is of a disjointed narrative struggling to render a multi-layered 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 spatio-temporal relationships that make up lived experience. The differences in font indicate to the reader the passage between types of information with different psychological ramifications, the coexistence of objective and subjective realms.

Roughly half of the sixteen stories in the 2010 collection *Sourland*⁶ were first published in the two-year period following the death of Oates's husband. Three of these stories disturbingly depict widows who are subjected to shocking ordeals of physical violation: "Pumpkin-Head" (*The New Yorker*, January 2009), "Probate" (*Salmagundi*, Fall 2010), and "Sourland" (*Boulevard*, Fall 2009). The three widow protagonists seem to be closely modeled after the Oates that is depicted in the memoir, not only in their patterns of grief, but also in the structure of their relationships with their husbands. All three were married to their professional,

⁶ Abbreviated as *SL* for in-text citations.

scholarly husbands for significant lengths of time, from twenty (Hadley in “Pumpkin-Head”) to thirty-two years (Adrienne in “Probate”), and the couples remained childless. All three men died unexpected, premature deaths and were cremated, leaving their “surviving spouses” behind to execute “death-duties.” These female characters view their lives in terms of the “previous, protected life” of before (SL 3) and the “diminished” new life of after (SL 211), the two of which are separated by a gaping “abyss” (SL 212). They must take pills in order to sleep and suffer deeply from survivor’s guilt. Of Hadley, in “Pumpkin-Head,” we read: She was a widow who had caused her husband to be burnt to ashes and was unrepentant, unpunished” (SL 9). Of Adrienne, in “Probate”: “The widow is one who comes swiftly to the knowledge *Whatever harm comes to you, you deserve. For you are still alive*” (SL 222). As Oates, in her memoir, describes herself as practically welcoming her shingles outbreak as a sort of physical punishment she can respond to, the widow protagonists in these three stories almost seem to invite and welcome physical assault as just punishment to assuage their guilt.

Interestingly, in other stories from the collection first published several years before Raymond Smith’s unexpected passing, Oates had already written passages that greatly parallel emotions and situations testified to in her memoir. In the story “Bitch” (*Boulevard*, 2005), for example, hospitals are described as dangerous places to be avoided because “the air of hospitals is a petri dish of teeming microorganisms” (SL 67). Furthermore, when the protagonist’s father passes, like Oates and her husband, she is not with him, but must be “wakened from a stuporous sleep by a ringing phone” (SL 70). Later, she is confronted with the “task” of clearing the hospital room and reacts similarly to the way Oates presents herself reacting in her memoir, stoically facing the situation and motivating herself with somber words of encouragement: “She was capable of this task, she thought” (SL 70). Other examples include “The Barter” (*Story*, 1999) in which a boy accepts a beating thinking he is giving something up in exchange for bringing his father home from the hospital, and “Death Certificate” (*Boulevard*, Fall 2006), which is constructed around the disagreeable ordeal of picking up a copy of a death certificate at a county courthouse. If fiction is the art form that most helps us work through and give meaning to life, might we not also occasionally experience events under the influence of moments we have previously encountered through fictional experience? The examples from Oates’s writing illustrate the complexity of the relationship between life and writing, as she acknowledges in her essay “On Fiction In Fact”:

At least in theory, a diary or a journal may be a fairly accurate record of an individual’s life, but any memoir or autobiography that is artfully shaped,

didactically intended, divided into sections, and narrated with a retrospective omniscience is a text, and therefore an artifact. It may contain elements of truth, but its very organization belies the messiness and myopia of real life. (78)

II. *The Lost Landscape*

Oates writes of composing her first memoir in the wake of her first husband Raymond Smith's death in 2008. However, the information provided in the Author's Note to *The Lost Landscape* (2015) providing previous publication information allows us to see that she had been publishing "memoir" short works since the late 1980s (I have made a table of this information, see Appendix).⁷ Thus, much of the content of her "second" memoir was initially published before the content of her "first" memoir was generated. Oates's second full-length memoir, *The Lost Landscape: A Writer's Coming of Age*, was published in 2015. Twenty of the twenty-seven essays in *The Lost Landscape* are reprinted, with varying degrees of alterations. (This process parallels the treatment of most of her short stories, which are first published in various periodicals before being collected into volumes of short stories.) Oates also has a Substack blog – "Joyce Carol Oates: A Writer's Journal" – on which some of these texts have been published, as well. Not only does Oates regularly engage in the act of memoir-writing (especially since the late 1980s), but she has actively duplicated her memoir work in various formats and stages, and even seems to be engaging in self-promotion through her blog.

For example, an essay reflecting on memories of her father which appears in *The Lost Landscape* as "Fact, Visions, Mysteries: My Father Frederic Oates, November 1988," "originally appeared, in a substantially different form, in *The New York Times Magazine*, March 1989" (LL xiii), and was reprinted in *I've Always Meant to Tell You*, edited by Constance Warloe, in 1996. In February 2023, it would be reprinted again, in a version edited and arranged by Robert Friedman, on Oates's Substack page with the title "My Father, My Fiction," and the subtitle "Is character, bred in the bone, absolute fate?" This is an essay whose core message is important enough to its author that she has given it a thirty-five-year life, by reviving it no less than three times. This fact seems noteworthy in itself as few, if any, of the author's fictional

⁷ 1986 if we count "Story Into Film" as memoir. Indeed, this short essay focuses on issues of inspiration for Oates's most-anthologized short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" and questions related to its adaptation into a feature-length film. The focus of the essay is primarily on artistic concerns and the differences of focus and scope between artistic media. It's focus, therefore, seems to be much less personal than those of the other essays, though inspiration and feelings about how one's work is treated by others are certainly personal topics.

works have been the subject of similar treatment. Occasionally, she has developed published short stories into longer fictional works. On one well-known occasion, she revised the ending to a novel – *Wonderland*. She also completely rewrote her second novel, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (first published 1967), for its reissue in a Modern Library edition in 2006 (Durrans 147). Nevertheless, over the course of her lengthy and productive career, examples of fictional texts appearing in at least three different versions in print are rare, if not unheard of.

This observation sparks several questions. What is so important about this memoir essay? Are we to understand that Oates seeks to promote this memoir more than she does her fiction? Does the place of personal memory weigh more importantly in the author's mind than her fictional creations do? These questions are related to other more general questions pertaining to Oates's interest in and use of memoir: What place does memoir have in her body of work? How many autobiographical elements are worked into pieces of her fiction? And to what extent? What is the author's view of her memoir writing? Are Oates's memoir pieces stylistically and thematically distinguishable from her fictional pieces? Oates addresses some of these questions herself at various points throughout *The Lost Landscape*.

Oates gives only a very broad statement of purpose for her memoir, it is intended to be "an accounting of the ways in which my life (as a writer, but not solely as a writer) was shaped in early childhood, adolescence, and a little beyond" (LL xi). If there is a thesis statement, of sorts, to be found, it may be the short two-sentence first chapter: "We begin as children imagining and fearing ghosts. By degrees, through our long lives, we come to be the very ghosts inhabiting the lost landscapes of our childhood" (LL 3). Other remarks related to motivation may be found scattered throughout the work like textual breadcrumbs for the reader to pick up on and muse over. A hint at Oates's conception of writing may be discernable in "Where Has God Gone" when Oates remembers being forced to take catechism lessons as a child: "How I yearned to rebel against these prescribed words, with very different words of my own!" (LL 126). Writing, therefore, allows one the ability to express oneself in one's own unique voice, thus performing an inherent act of rebellion and assertion of control. A comment in "Headlights: The First Death" seems to confirm this idea: "The life of the mind is essentially a life of control; if you are a writer, it is control which you bring to your work, by way of the selection of language, the arrangement of 'scenes,' the achievement of an 'ending' . . . But life is likely to be that which lies beyond our control, and is unfathomable" (LL 136). Perhaps memoir writing, or all writing, is part of an urge felt by Oates to counter the state of being "gone forever" after one's death: "There is a relief, that the rough fingers are gone. And yet, there is a sick sort of

fear, that the rough fingers are gone forever” (163). Or is writing a way of creating parallel universes in which to play out alternative paths that would have resulted from different turns of fate or choices: “Thinking of Cynthia Heike who died so young, at eighteen, I am thinking of that other life. For each of us, a succession of *other lives*, unlived” (148 “An Unsolved Mystery: The Lost Friend”). Though these remarks may seem at first rather disparate. They are, in fact, inhabited by an internal logic which connects them to the opening lines in “We Begin . . .” From an initial desire to use language to control and shape one’s own ideas to assert individuality in the face of the unknown and fear-inspiring, Oates has gradually moved over decades to a position in which she may use language to influence and shape the “ghostly” presence she will eventually leave behind. For indeed, the promise/threat of the inevitable posthumous time hangs over *The Lost Landscape*, whose very title highlights the inexorable advance of time through the adjective “lost.” In *The Lost Landscape*, the position of Oates’s parents serves to epitomize this notion. They are young spouses and parents in the opening essays, and by the close of the final essay, they are no longer living. Indeed, Oates’s closing paragraph makes of *The Lost Landscape* an ode to her parents, a final linguistic gesture which perhaps refocuses the work as “memoir,” drawing attention back to two important people the author has known.

In extremis we care very little for the public life – the life of the “career” – even the life of “literature”: it is emotional comfort for which we yearn, but such comfort can come to us from only a few, intimate sources. I know that I have been very fortunate, and I never cease giving thanks for my wonderful parents who bequeathed me their love and their hope for me, that did so much to make my life as a writer possible; for this quilt on my bed, as singular and beautiful now as it was in the late 1970s when my mother gave it to me. (LL 348)

The closing paragraphs to the essay “Facts, Visions, Mysteries: My Father Frederic Oates, November 1988” stipulate in part,

The quality of personality they [my parents] embody, their magnanimity of spirit, the ways in which they enhance the lives of others around them – how oddly matched it is, with their origins and with the harsh and unsentimental world in which they were born. / I have taken it as a challenge, to evoke that world in its myriad complexities. And – how to write a memoir of Fred Oates? How even to begin? (323).

These enigmatic lines are difficult to interpret. What does she mean exactly? Does she mean she has tried to evoke her parents’ world in this particular essay, and may, or may not, have

succeeded to a certain extent? Or does she mean more broadly, as applied to her fictional project?

This is not an unreasonable way of reading Oates's remarks as autobiographical elements seem to be structurally interwoven into many (or most?) of her fictional works. Oates frankly admits that her novel *The Gravedigger's Daughter* was inspired by a real-life family tragedy: her paternal gravedigger great-grandfather's attempted murder of his wife and subsequent suicide while his daughter stood outside the front door.

In my re-imagining of the incident in *The Gravedigger's Daughter* the daughter of the suicidal gravedigger is not an adult but a girl, and her father contemplates killing her as well as her mother, before turning the gun on himself. What had not quite happened in actual life, but had been intended, was fulfilled in fiction – in this way, the desperate vengeance of my great-grandfather Morgenstern was fulfilled (311).

Oates's explanation might recall Stephen Reynolds' explanation of his concept of autobiografiction as "a record of real spiritual experience strung on a credible but more or less fictitious autobiographical narrative." However, the work is clearly novel, not essay.

A parallel might also be drawn between Oates's family tragedy and the opening chapters to her novel *Wonderland*, initially published in 1971. At the opening of the novel, the main character Jesse Harte's father kills his wife and the rest of his children before turning his murderous sights on Jesse. When Jesse manages to run off, his father abandons the chase and turns his shotgun on himself. This novel was apparently conceived of and published before Oates learned of her own paternal grandfather's sordid doings. In *The Lost Landscape*, Oates reproduces one of her journal entries from May 1986 in which she reports learning about this, "another family secret," only a week prior during a visit from her parents to Princeton (*LL* 310).⁸ This could be read as anecdotal support for Oates's frequently expressed idea that children sense things, even when they aren't told outright, idea she also includes in the memoir, in the opening to "After Black Rock": "Of course, all that children are not told, children somehow *know*. Not

⁸ There are inconsistencies in *The Lost Landscape* regarding this family incident. In her reproduced journal entry from May 1986: "My father told of how his grandfather Morgenstern tried to kill his grandmother in a fit of rage, then killed himself – gun barrel placed under his chin, trigger pulled, (his daughter) Blanche close by. My father was about fifteen at the time" ("Facts, Visions, Mysteries . . ." 310). Earlier on in the memoir, a passage from "After Black Rock" reads: "Like my mother's early life, my father's early life had been shaped by the premature and violent death of a relative, in this case his maternal grandfather, a German Jewish immigrant who'd tried to kill both his wife and his fourteen-year-old daughter (my grandmother-to-be) with a shotgun, and ended up killing only himself" (64). It would have been impossible for Oates's father to be fifteen and his mother to be fourteen when the incident occurred.

the words to the song but its melody, and its tone. A writer might be one who, in childhood, learns to search for and decipher clues; one who listens closely at what is said, in an effort to hear what is not being said; one who becomes sensitive to nuance, innuendo, and fleeting facial expressions” (61).

If Oates has long been using her fiction as an outlet through which to explore autobiographical material, to what end does she eventually turn to memoir? What does this form offer her that fiction does not?

Joyce Carol Oates self-identifies *The Lost Landscape: A Writer's Coming of Age* as memoir in the very first sentence of the Author's Note. However, the work's subtitle seems at odds with definitions of memoir as given, for example, in Abrams and Harpham's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

Autobiography is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. It is to be distinguished from the memoir, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private diary or journal, which is a day-to-day record of the events in one's life, written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication (26).

Indeed, the subtitle “A Writer's Coming of Age” seems to specifically indicate that the focus of the work will be on “the author's developing self.”

In the “Afterword” to *The Lost Landscape*, Oates distinguishes between different types of memoir writing: “The most reliable memoirs are those comprised of journal or diary entries, or letters, that attest to the immediacy of experience before it becomes subject to the vicissitudes of memory. As soon as you shift from the tense *I am* to *I was*, still more to *I had been* you are entering the realm of what might be called ‘creative recollection’” (LL 349). Once again, Oates here blurs the lines between forms by considering that journal entries are the most reliable form of memoir, rather than a form distinct from memoir. Furthermore, as discussed above, even Oates's *A Widow's Story*, which would fit into her category of “reliable memoir” as it “was composed primarily of journal entries recording approximately four months following the hospital admission and the death of my husband Raymond Smith in February 2008” (LL 349) is not exempt from a certain coloring influence of Oates's previous fictional works. Quite a bit of blurring of terms can therefore be observed in Oates's use of the word “memoir.” Her understanding of memoir is quite broad – seemingly englobing any act of writing oriented towards conveying memory. Oates firmly ensconces her argument in this idea when she opens

her Afterword with the sentence, “The root of the word *memoir* is *memory*” (349). Her understanding of the word thus encompasses what others distinguish separately as memoir, autobiography, diary entries, journal entries, letters and transcripts of telephone conversations. Perhaps Oates uses “memoir” to mean what some critics identify as “life-writing,” which Zachary Leader defines as “a generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed” (1).⁹ If anything, Oates’s remarks in the Afterword to *The Lost Landscape* serve to highlight the fictional aspects of memoir: “The reader should not expect anything like a full disclosure of a life but should understand that memoirs, like works of fiction and poetry, must be highly selective” (351). She goes on to cite several authorial strategies, taken from her fiction-writing arsenal, that have also gone into her memoir compositions, such as synecdoche, distortion and oversimplification due to the necessity of selection, composite characters with fictitious names, prevailing themes, quasi-fictitious main character names “Joyce,” and quasi-fictitious chapters.

The one question that remains largely untreated by Oates is the one pertaining to similarities and differences in style and theme in her memoir pieces and fiction pieces. In the essay “Facts, Visions, Mysteries . . .,” after relating the facts about her “father’s father Joseph Carlton Oates” who “left his young wife Blanche when their son, Frederic James, an only child, was two or three years old, in 1916” before unexpectedly reappearing in a tavern in 1944 to challenge his now-grown son to a fight (LL 300-1), Oates comments on the narrative force inherent in this family history: “How like a ballad or a folk song this story is, in the melancholy simplicity of its telling!” (LL 301). A few pages on, she acknowledges the fictional potential of her enigmatic grandfather as a character (LL 303). Is there a link to be made here to neuroscientist Anil Seth’s explanation of the brain as a storytelling box? The fact that we only experience life in retrospect, once the information about the situations we experience in the present have been filtered through the brain and made sense of? Should we expect a writer to treat their personal stories any differently than those of their fictional characters?

III. Similarities of Style: “Why Don’t You Come Live With Me It’s Time” - Insomnia, Midnight Strolls, Empty Nighttime Buses, Bridge Crossings and Visiting Grandmother

⁹ Leader goes on to specify: “These writings include not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings (*narration* first existed not as a literary but as a legal term), marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms (including blogs, tweets, Facebook entries)” (1).

In the conclusion to “Nighthawk: Recollections of a Lost Time,” Oates take care to point out the difference between real life and fiction; the former does not systematically respond to the latter’s codes, for example. “*In one of my own works of fiction such a figure in the periphery of a young woman’s vision, undefined, unbidden, mysterious, might turn out to be Death – but this was not fiction, this was my life*” (LL 265). However, though our actual lives do not unfold according to the demands of plot and symbolism, our memories of what we’ve lived can an often do. Oates reflects, “*Our lost selves are not really accessible. Our memories are fabrications, however well-intentioned*” (LL 264). If Oates considers memoir-writing to be similar to fabricating stories, we might also expect there to be many stylistic similarities between her memoir essays in *The Lost Landscape* and her fictional stories.

She also acknowledges repeatedly that her writing is colored by her contemporary life experiences. A simple, concrete example can be found in the fact that the settings of her stories change once she moves to the Detroit, Michigan / Windsor, Canada area and become more resolutely urban in shape and concern. Indeed, in “Detroit: Lost City 1962-1968,” she willingly admits to such an extensive and convincing use of autobiographical elements in her fiction writing as to no longer be able to distinguish fact from fiction: “So much of my writing from approximately 1963 to 1976 centers upon or has been emotionally inspired by Detroit and its suburbs that it is hardly possible for me, years later, to extract the historical and autobiographical from the fictional” (LL 273). Given this, Oates seems to be holding up her fictional production as a repository of her personal experiences:

A writer’s work is a codified transcript of the writer’s life. The (public) work is a record of the (private) life. As years pass, however, and the private/secret life is forgotten except in outline, even the key to the code is but haphazardly recalled, for past secrets are never so tantalizingly secret as those of the present. But the work remains, books remain, as testimonies of a kind. (LL 274)

The problem, of course, is that in the absence of autobiographical clues, there may be no way of distinguishing between fact and fiction, not only for readers, but for the author herself. Perhaps it doesn’t really matter. In the meantime, those stories which do clearly include autobiographical elements are interesting insights into the way Oates processes her experiences and weaves them into her fictional threads.

One example of this is Oates's short story "Why Don't You Come Live With Me It's Time"¹⁰ (1st published *Tikkun* 1990) which tells of the adult narrator, Claire, an insomniac, thinking back to when she was twelve or thirteen years old and remembering the loneliness of the insomniac struggling to understand the foreign phenomenon of elusive sleep, especially a certain type of sleep which can feel so much like death: "sheer nonexistence, oblivion" (150). The majority of the story focuses on one memory in particular. Upon this occasion, Claire remembers sneaking out of the house at three in the morning, shimmying across the Ferry Street Bridge which was closed for repairs – no easy feat as Claire must master her movements during the dangerous bridge crossing so as not to fall off the unprotected beam into the roaring river below, and walking to visit her grandmother – a fellow insomniac – who lived several miles away on the other side of the river. As Claire remembers it, the journey to grandmother's house takes on the full horror of the "Little Red Riding Hood" fairy tale it calls to mind. Grandmother's warm welcome, her kind words and offer to make Claire's favorite oatmeal, take on a sinister tone as the memory progresses and becomes more confused and dreamlike. Claire eventually runs away in sheer fright and cannot even remember how she got home.

The essays collected in *The Lost Landscape* seem to show that Oates's short story was constructed out of several different autobiographical elements.¹¹ Oates recounts a similar perilous bridge crossing in "They All Just Went Away" (1st published *New Yorker*, October 1995), though she recounts it happening in daylight. She discusses her childhood insomnia at length in "Headlights: The First Death" (*LL* 135-9), which tells of her leaving the house at night to wander to the end of the driveway and stand waiting to observe infrequent vehicles passing by on the main road. In this essay, Oates has recourse to several elements she had originally used in her story. One of these is "buses at night" (*LL* 136). Indeed, one of the striking images from the story is a ghostly city bus which surges up noiselessly in the night – "lit gaily from within, yet nearly empty too, only the driver and a single (male) passenger sitting erect and motionless as mannequins" (157) – and quickly vanishes. Another striking image common to both works is the face in the mirror. In this essay, Oates connects her early insomnia and

¹⁰ For a discussion of the New Gothic aspects of this story, see my "Variations on the Body Snatcher: The New Gothic Visions of Patrick McGrath and Joyce Carol Oates." *Patrick McGrath: Directions and Transgressions*. Ed. Jocelyn Dupont. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. 21-35.

¹¹ This has also been pointed out in Greg Johnson's biography of Oates: "Joyce incorporated another of her childhood 'secrets' in a much later story, 'Why Don't You Come Live with Me It's Time.' Based in part on Joyce's relationship with Grandma Woodside [referred to as Blanche Morgenstern in *LL*], it includes a scene in which the girl narrator negotiates a dangerous bridge crossing late at night; the bridge, only partway completed, comprises a few ten-inch steel beams, with a river far below. This stunt 'has its exact parallel in things I'd done, usually with other children,' she wrote in her journal" (27).

nighttime wandering outside to a restlessness of the brain provoked by her grandfather's death, the first death she remembers experiencing in any proximity. She explains, "A death in the family is an abrupt and awful absence. A presence as familiar to you as your own face in the mirror is suddenly gone" (LL 137). Oates had used this image more literally in the earlier short story. In the opening paragraph, the adult narrator is startled to see the face of her long-dead grandmother staring out at her before she quickly realizes, "of course it was virtually in the same instant I saw the face was my own, my own eyes in that face floating there not in a mirror but in a metallic mirrored surface, teeth bared in a startled smile" (149).

Oates makes another brief reference to her childhood insomnia at night on Transit Road in "Nighthawk: Recollections of a Lost Time" (1st published *Yale Review*, 2001) (LL 244) before expanding on her insomnia as a graduate student. She uses a binary conceptualization of the insomniac experience, explaining, "Insomniacs divide (unequally) into two types: night-insomniacs and morning insomniacs" (LL 248), which recalls the way the narrator of "Why Don't You . . ." divides the experience of sleep into two different kinds (150). The Grandmother character in the story is apparently modeled after Oates's paternal grandmother Blanche Morgenstern, whom Oates refers to at one point in the memoir as "a somewhat mysterious woman" (LL 286). This mysteriousness is multiplied in Oates's story in which the grandmother's behavior is considered "strange" by her family members (157). More concretely, the story oscillates between depicting a loving and caring woman who makes Claire her favorite oatmeal dish when she arrives in the middle of the night, and a disturbingly threatening one who may, in fact, be the wolf in disguise – Claire runs away in fright when she suspects the grandmother of having put bits of glass into her oatmeal. Yet the correspondence between Oates's real-life grandmother and the grandmother character in the story is only partial. Oates does not recall any instances of feeling frightened by her grandmother in the memoir. Furthermore, the grandmother character died in 1966, while the narrator was still in college, whereas Oates's grandmother Blanche Morgenstern died on July 25, 1970, when Oates was living in Windsor, Ontario and working as a teacher, having completed her Masters degree nearly a decade earlier in 1961 (Johnson 182).

Like the fictional grandmother and Blanche Morgenstern, Claire shares things in common with Oates. However, the fictional character and real-life author do not directly coincide either. Oates inserts enough differences into the story to assert Claire's fictionality. For example, the character's family lives on a busy street in Hammond. This is an actual place in New York state, but situated northeast of the rural area Oates grew up in and a four-hour drive

from where her real-life grandmother lived in Lockport. Other elements may or may not have a degree of the autobiographical. As Oates makes no mention of them in *The Lost Landscape*, we cannot know. For example, Claire's family's negative idea of insomnia and its hereditary link to the grandmother.

In each of these examples, the story's initial publication precedes that of the essay, which seems to suggest that on the subject of her childhood insomnia, Oates initially took to the medium of fiction to explore this personal issue, before broaching the subject in memoir form at later times. This is not, as with the previous example of *A Widow's Story*, a scenario in which Oates feels she first lived an experience through literature. Rather, it is an example of something she lived being processed by her first in fictional form.

The Gothic sensibility which comes across in Oates's story is also one that she brings to her memoir writing. The first chapter of *The Lost Landscape*, "We Begin . . .," is composed of two relatively short sentences: "We begin as children imagining and fearing ghosts. By degrees, through our long lives, we come to be the very ghosts inhabiting the lost landscapes of our childhood" (3).

Similarities between *The Lost Landscape* essays and later career fiction.

- Use of italics (cf "An Unsolved Mystery: The Lost Friend")
- Prevalence of interrogative forms. Various structures – modality - which acknowledge and allow for the fact that multiple points-of-view/interpretations of every moment abound
 - o "It was not my grandmother Blanche but the medication that spoke, to assure others what might have been true about her final hours of consciousness, or might not have been true in quite that way" (308).
 - o "(*Was* my grandmother lonely? It is possible that I am imagining an isolation that my grandmother didn't actually feel; it is just as likely that she felt, every hour of her life, a profound relief that her father had not murdered her, and that the gift of life was hers to accept without a backward glance.)" (309).
- Dashes
- Repetition

This begs the question: What difference is there between fiction-writing and memoir-writing in the case of an author like Oates if a difference is not discernable in terms of content, style and theme? The difference appears to be predominantly one of authorial stance and prerogative. In fiction, the author labels the events and characters involved as predominantly imaginary. In memoir, the author labels them as belonging to the realm of their real lived experience. Yet the distinction is not cut and dry. Rather, one could imagine a scale with an infinite array of gradients between “pure fact” on one end, and “pure fiction” on the other.



Differences

- Voice? Slightly more oral, as in the idea of passing along stories through storytelling . . .
 - o “You . . .”
 - o “Did I tell you . . .” / “I may have made it sound like . . .”

Conclusion

Pondering, in “Where Has God Gone,” about her ability to remember fragments of the verses of Saint John memorized at the age of twelve, Oates comments, “As there is a kind of memory in a pianist’s fingers after decades, so too anything that has been memorized in childhood is retained somewhere in the brain, awaiting rediscovery and retrieval” (122). Such a statement seems to offer up the promise of continued autobiographical links between the writer and her work. Besides those elements in her fiction Oates allows her readers to identify by specifically writing them up in memoir form, how many others go unidentified and attributed by readers to the author’s imagination? In “After Black Rock,” an essay in which Oates discusses her family’s secret sordid past, including her maternal great-grandfather’s death in a bar brawl leading to her mother being given up to a childless relation, and her paternal great-grandfather’s attempted murder of his wife and subsequent suicide, Oates comments, “There seemed the fear among my adult relatives that something misspoken could not be reclaimed; if you spoke heedlessly, you would speak unwisely and you would regret it. In much of my fiction there is a simulacrum of the ‘confessional’ but to interpret it in these terms is misleading. Not

literal transcription but emotional transcription is the way of the writer” (64). Oates seems to be issuing a warning to those looking for “autobiographical elements” in her work. It won’t be as easy as you might expect. There won’t be direct correspondences, but rather situations which generate equivalent emotional charges . . . something much more potentially subjective and intangible.

The penultimate paragraph of “Fred’s Signs” concludes with the following anecdote: “One you asked your father, ‘Why is there a dot over the *i*?’ and your father gave this childish question some thought before saying, ‘Maybe because without the dot the *i* would look too small, like something was left out’” (84). Perhaps Oates’s memoir texts are the dot on the *i* of the rest of her oeuvre, giving it a little bit more scope and stature, separate, yet satisfyingly complementary, and without which the former would somehow seem incomplete. Yet, if we may take the author’s words seriously, this picture is still bound to eternal partial incompleteness, for “*There are intimacies, secrets, epiphanies and revelations and matters of historic fact of which I will never speak, much less write*” (“Nighthawk” in *LL* 264).

Table of Chapters and Their Initial Publications

(Except for Column Three, this information has been taken from the “Author’s Note” to *The Lost Landscape: A Writer’s Coming of Age*, pages xi-xiii. I have surmised that those chapters for which no previous publication information is given are being published for the first time here.)

Title	Initial Publication Information	First Publication Here	Other
1. We Begin . . .		X	2 sentences. Almost an extension of the initial “Author’s Note”
2. Mommy & Me	Shorter form, <i>Civilization</i> , February 1997		
3. Happy Chicken: 1942-1944	<i>Conjunctions 61: A Menagerie</i> , 2013		
4. Discovering <i>Alice</i> : 1947	<i>AARP Magazine</i> , 2014		
5. District School #7, Niagara County, New York	Slightly different, <i>The Faith of a Writer</i> , 2003		
6. Piper Cub	Substantially different, <i>Rhapsody</i> , November 2013		
7. After Black Rock	<i>New Yorker</i> , June 2013		
8. Sunday Drive	Substantially different, <i>Traditional Home</i> , March 1995		
9. Fred’s Signs		X	
10. “They All Just Went Away”	Substantially different, <i>New Yorker</i> , October 1995 Incorporates “Transgressions,” <i>New York Times Magazine</i> , October 1995		Reprinted <i>The Best American Essays 1996</i> and <i>The Best American Essays of the 20th Century</i> .
11. “Where Has God Gone”	Substantially different, <i>Southwest Review</i> , Summer 1995		Reprinted as “And God Saw That It Was Good,” <i>Communion</i> , ed David Rosenberg, 1995
12. Headlights: The First Death		X	
13. “The Brush”		X	

14. An Unsolved Mystery: The Lost Friend	Substantially different, <i>Between Friends</i> , ed Mickey Pearlman, 1994		
15. "Start Your Own Business"	Substantially different, <i>New Yorker</i> as "Bound," April 2003 ; and <i>Conjunctions</i> 63 as "The Childhood of the Reader," 2014		To be reprinted in <i>Pushcart Prize: The Best of the Small Presses</i> 2016
16. The Lost Sister: An Elegy	<i>Narrative</i> (date not given)		
17. Nighthawk: Recollections of a Lost Time	<i>Yale Review</i> , 2001 ; <i>Conjunctions</i> , 2014		Substantially different, <i>Narrative</i> , 2015
18. Detroit: Lost City 1962-1968	Substantially altered/ Shorter form, "Visions of Detroit" in <i>(Woman) Writer</i> , 1988		
19. Story Into Film: "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and <i>Smooth Talk</i>	<i>New York Times</i> , March 23, 1986		
20. Photo Shoot: West Eleventh Street, NYC, March 6, 1970	Shorter form as "Nostalgia," <i>Vogue</i> , April 2006		Reprinted <i>Port</i> , 2014
21. Food Mysteries	Substantially different, <i>Antaeus</i> 1991		Reprinted <i>Not By Bread Alone</i> , ed Daniel Halpern, 1992
22. Facts, Visions, Mysteries: My Father Frederic Oates, November 1988	Substantially different, <i>New York Times Magazine</i> , March 1989		Reprinted <i>I've Always Meant to Tell You</i> , ed Constance Warloe, 1996
23. A Letter to my Mother Carolina on Her Seventy-Eighth Birthday, November 8, 1994	Slightly different, <i>New York Times Magazine</i> , 1995		Reprinted in this version in <i>I've Always Meant to Tell You</i> , ed Constance Warloe; and in <i>The Norton Anthology of Autobiography</i> , ed Jay Parini, 1999
24. "When I Was a Little Girl, and My		X	

Mother Didn't Want Me"			
25. Excerpt, Telephone Conversation with My Father Frederic Oates, May 1999		X	
26. The Long Romance		X	
27. My Mother's Quilts	Slightly shorter, <i>What My Mother Gave Me: Thirty-One Women on the Gifts That Mattered Most</i> , ed Elizabeth Benedict, 2013		

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