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Pascale Antolin

1

In his book *Signifying Loss* published in 2011, Nouri Gana points out that “the social and public decline and devaluation of mourning practices have, in turn, given rise to a heterogeneous array of discursive and narrative practices of signifying private and collective grief and grievances” (9). Joan Didion’s autobiographical books, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011), for instance, exemplify these new practices, as does Joyce Carol Oates’s *A Widow's Story* (2011). In this “Memoir,” as it is subtitled, Oates relates on a day to day basis her husband’s hospitalization for pneumonia at the Princeton Medical Center on February 11, 2008, his death on February 18, and the grief she experienced until August 30 of the same year. Her book, therefore, suggests a “mourning diary,” in the fashion of Roland Barthes’s.ⁱ

2

Mourning has a long-established relationship with poetry—as testified by the Western tradition of elegiac poetry—it is not surprising, therefore, that this relationship has expanded into new literary genres. Gana contends that, following the break-up of community,ⁱⁱ “mourning has withdrawn into the recesses of the individual psyche” (10) and given rise to what Peter Homans calls “mourning without mourning practices” (9). In fact, it might equally be the case that mourning practices have not so much declined as actually changed or come to be regulated differently. Life writing has thus emerged recently, if not as a new mourning practice *per se*, at least as an increasingly common means of coping with one’s grief. In *Living Autobiographically*, Paul John Eakin contends that “[when we talk about ourselves] we perform a work of self-construction” (2). Oates’s memoir may thus be a means of *self-reconstruction*.

3

As a diary it follows a chronological process, revealing a process of psychological development that relates to Freud's mourning work as it is analyzed in his early essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1915), and later altered in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). From this point of view, even though *A Widow's Story* is a prose narrative, it is reminiscent of the elegy—all the more as Oates calls herself "the elegist" (281), that is a modern-day elegist who has given up the conventional poetic form. Yet, Oates's memoir is focused not only on her late husband, Ray Smith, and on her own experience of bereavement, but also on other widows in a didactic, gender-oriented narrative—as suggested by its title. On many accounts, it turns out to be a hybrid work: it draws from life writing and from the elegy, relates Oates's current experience of loss to her past life as a married woman, associates Oates's narrative with extracts from other texts, both personal and literary. It also combines first-person narrative with advice to other widows in the second person, and passages in the third person in which she calls herself "the Widow." Hybridism is even present at the typographic level, since normal type is constantly interspersed with italics. Oates's narrative, therefore, appears to be emotional and spontaneous, elaborate and artificial at one and the same time. We can thus wonder whether this hybridism may not be her response to the "dispossess[ion]" (Butler 22) she experienced when her husband died. In "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Judith Butler explains:

When we lose certain people... something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us.... On one level, I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well. (22)

- 4 Hybridism being a major characteristic of Oates's fiction, it is as if writing about her experience of bereavement in her traditional manner, that is resorting to her personal hybrid style, had been the best means for her if not to complete the mourning work, at least to start recovering her identity.

1. Generic Hybridism: Between Memoir and Elegy

5

Oates's *A Widow's Story* shows the author-mourner going through a temporal process of psychological evolution, as shown both by the diary form and by the titles of the five parts that make up her book: "The Vigil" is concerned with the few days when her husband was treated in the hospital; "Free Fall" refers to his death; "The Basilisk" deals with the period when she felt tempted to commit suicide;ⁱⁱⁱ "Purgatory, Hell" focuses on a period when she faced identity problems. Yet the book concludes on a last part "You looked so happy" in which the adjective "happy"—even though it is used with a verb in the past—powerfully stands out, all the more as in this last part she writes: "Words may be 'helpless'—yet words are all we have to shore against our ruin, as we

have only one another" (310). Here again, as in her early essay "On Fiction in Fact,"^{iv} Oates expresses her mistrust of language. Yet she also seems determined to use it as a means, if not the only means, to come to terms with her loss.

6

Other signs of progress, even acceptance, are perceptible particularly in the last part of her book. For instance, she can now read Ray Smith's death certificate more serenely: "After almost four months, I am able to read these words without feeling *I want to die. I should die*. Almost, I am able to read these words as if they were ordinary words and not terrible words that chart so casually and perfunctorily the end of my life as I'd known it" (409). The words have not changed meaning but Oates has begun to accept their significance—at least she wants to convince herself that she has, as suggested by the nearly oxymoronic repetition of "almost" and "I am able." It was also the moment when she could sleep again without any sleeping pills, after six months of insomnia (413-414), while the shingles she had been suffering from recently, a physical sign of her stress, had begun "to abate, and even to fade" (414). Yet the very appearance of the shingles may have been a paradoxical^v sign of her evolution as well, of the metamorphosis of her grief into physical pain. By then her grief is no longer outside, so to speak, like a basilisk lurking in every dark corner, but "burrowed into [her] skin" (414), that is about to be internalized. Above all, the last fragment of her book is entitled "A Widow's Handbook" (414), a sign of acceptance of her new identity as a widow, and also a sign that she has moved from the personal to the universal—gender-oriented as this universal may be—for she is now ready to speak not just for herself but for all other widows, too.

7

In his book *The English Elegy*, an analysis of the traditional elegy, Peter Sacks writes: "the movement from loss to consolation... requires a deflection of desire, with the creation of a trope both for the lost object and for the original character" (7). As a work of art, the elegy represents this trope, bringing about a figurative or aesthetic compensation. Sacks's approach is based on a comparison between the elegy as artwork and Freud's early definition of the mourning-work. Sacks explains: "Each elegy is to be regarded... as a work, both in the commonly accepted meaning of a product and in the more dynamic sense of the working through of an impulse or experience—the sense that underlies Freud's phrase 'the work of mourning'" (1). In other words, Sacks like Freud insists on the temporality of mourning and prescribes a libidinal reinvestment. An objection to Sacks's approach is that any narrative—and not just elegiac poetry—is likely to play the same consolatory, even therapeutic role, as psychologist Robert Niemeyer puts it in an article entitled "Narrative Strategies in Grief Therapy:" "Meaning reconstruction in response to a loss is the central process in grieving," he writes, because human beings are "inveterate meaning makers—weavers of

narratives that give thematic significance to the salient plot structure of their lives" (67).

8

Further similarities between Oates's book and the traditional elegy can be highlighted when Sacks draws a parallel between the process of mourning and the resolution of the Oedipus complex. He writes: "At the core of each procedure is the... experience of loss and the acceptance, not just of a substitute, but of the very means and practice of substitution. In each case such an acceptance is the price of survival, and in each case a successful resolution is not merely deprivatory, but offers a form of compensatory reward" (8). It is true that according to Lacan, the figure of the father, representing the symbolic order, intervenes between the child and the child's first object of attachment, i.e. his mother. This relationship is thus interrupted and mediated by a signifying system, which acts as a third term. In the elegy, similarly, Sacks points out: "The poet's preceding relationship with the deceased... is conventionally disrupted and forced into a triadic structure including the third term, death.... The dead, like the forbidden object of a primary desire, must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words" (8). The work of mourning and the elegy, therefore, replay the child's entry into language. They represent the mourner's return into a preexisting order of signs and conventions. No wonder that at the beginning of the second part of her memoir, "Free Fall," Oates should underline that "a widow inhabits a tale not of her own telling" (81). It is only when she has produced her own "veil of words" that she has created a metaphoric barrier against death, her own death. Only then is the meaningless loss she has been confronted with somehow counterbalanced by a process of creation, restoring empowerment, control and meaning. This is particularly visible in the contrast between the initial meaninglessness of the world around her—be it her home or the most familiar objects (63-64)^{vi}—and the emergence of an interpretation at the very end of the book when she finds her lost earrings among the litter of her fallen trash can: "*If I have lost the meaning of my life, and the love of my life, I might still find small treasured things among the spilled and pilfered trash*" (415). These earrings are still "things" but they have also become "small treasure[s]" that Oates can draw pleasure from, if not yet full sense of.

9

This gradual return to pleasure and symbolism is also exemplified by the evocation of flowers and gardening. In his analysis of the elegy, Sacks mentions the offering of flowers: "the flowers... serve not only as offerings or as gestures for respite but also as demarcations separating the living from the dead" (19). At the beginning of her memoir, Oates throws away all the "sympathy gift baskets" (106) she is sent, both flowers and luxury food—no doubt because at this early stage she is not yet ready to accept these signs of her husband's death. In the last part, by contrast, while she starts reading her friends' multiple condolence messages, she also starts cultivating her own flowers: "I am working in Ray's garden to save it from weeds, and to create a new garden, in Ray's

memory; and I am working with my hands, and with my back, and my legs" (371). The verb "create" is significant here, and gardening seems to turn into a symbolic activity both as regards fertility—since it involves the acceptance of time, life and renewal—and as far as empowerment is concerned. But it is not merely symbolic: Oates's whole body is involved as underlined by the polysyndeton. And not only is she taking on her husband's role but she is also wearing his "soiled gloves" (371) to garden, which further suggests a process of identification or internalization.

10

The notion of "identification" is absent from "Mourning and Melancholia"—and therefore from Sack's analysis of the traditional elegy. At that early stage, Freud asserts that the mourner severs attachments primarily through a labor of memory. Memory is indeed a recurrent concern of Oates's—she refers to herself as "the repository of memory" (281). Especially, her diary is scattered with analepses relating memories of her life with her husband: from the time they spent in Beaumont, Texas (311-318) in the early sixties, to their life in Detroit later (335-341) and their brief courtship (411-412). These flashbacks, however, mostly come in the last part of the book, as if it were only at that later stage that Oates could escape the harsh present of her loss and "remember" the past, that is reconstruct it, and therefore "re-member," or reconstruct, herself as well. But remembering does not seem to be enough for Oates to "sever [her] bonds with [her] object" (Freud, 1915 204). In *The Ego and the Id*—where he introduces his structural theory of subjectivity and gives up the opposition between mourning and melancholia—Freud writes: "When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration in his ego which can only be described as a reinstatement of the object within the ego, as it occurs in melancholia... this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects" (36). Freud now considers melancholic identification to be integral to the work of mourning. It may therefore explain Oates's late decision, in the very same section as the garden episode significantly, to "look at" (371)—she does not even use the verb to read yet—her husband's uncompleted novel manuscript. Reading this so far secret text—half fiction half autobiography—allows Oates to discover what she calls Ray's "shameful family secret... the traumatic memory of [his] childhood" (394), that is his sister's lobotomy when he was around 10. In a recent article Tanya Tromble writes: "In [Oates's] novels, a hidden secret constitutes a sort of black hole detrimental to the subject's ability to function" (5). Shedding light on this "black hole" in the very last sections of her memoir (80-81) helps Oates no doubt recover "her [own] ability to function." It is an essential step forward in the process of melancholic identification she has to go through to complete the work of mourning.

11

While Oates's memoir shares some striking characteristics with the traditional elegy, it seems to have more in common with the modern elegy, as it is analyzed by Jahan Ramazani:

If the traditional elegy was an art of saving, the modern elegy is what Elizabeth Bishop calls an 'art of losing.' Instead of resurrecting the dead in some substitute, instead of curing themselves through displacement, modern elegists 'practice losing farther, losing faster,' so that the "One Art" of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but *immersion* in it. (4, italics mine)

- 12 Taking care of Ray's garden and above all reading his old uncompleted manuscript represent two key moments for Oates in this necessary "immersion" process. What is more, the modern elegy has another essential characteristic, as Tammy Clewell puts it, it "dramatize[s] the pathology of melancholy" (53). And this dramatization is highly perceptible throughout Oates's memoir.

2. Dramatization and Formal Hybridism

13

In *A Widow's Story*, Oates uses a large number of dramatic strategies, among them repetition. While, in the traditional elegy, it "creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death" (Sacks 23), in Oates's narrative, by contrast, repetitions rather express the violent emotions the narrator is faced with. This is perceptible in many a passage—for instance when she repeats negative forms immediately after she has been told that her husband is dead (59), or when she uses an anaphoric "I can remember" (80), which turns into a kind of lament. Repetitions often suggest that she is trying to convince herself somehow of the actual fact of her loss. But, mostly, they betray her dismay. In an early passage from *A Widow's Story*, the alternation of repetitions and antitheses illustrates the tough resistance Oates is experiencing:

Of course I must know—*I know*—that Ray's body was picked up this morning at the medical center by a driver for the Pennington funeral home. I know this, since I arranged for it. I know that Ray's body was delivered in a coffin, transported in an inconspicuous vehicle... in order to be identified.

All this I know, yet somehow I have forgotten.

All this I know, yet somehow I am overwhelmed by the fact that *Ray is in the next room. Ray is dead, Ray is in the next room. Ray is here* ... (91)

- 14 The use of italics and broken lines in the last sentences dramatizes the conflict between illusion and reality that Oates is faced with. Similarly the repetition of the word "widow," often in italics or with a capital letter throughout the memoir, betrays her effort to cope both with her loss and with her new identity as a widow. So does the repetition of her husband's name. Sacks explains that "the survivor leans upon the name, which takes on, by dint of repetition, a kind of substantiality, allowing it not only to refer to but almost to replace the dead" (26). Repeating Ray's name is a means for Oates to make sure that it will not fall into oblivion. As she says: "a widow is compelled to speak of her husband, to utter his name as frequently as possible, in terror lest this name be lost" (88).

15

Nevertheless, while the traditional elegy is a commemoration of the lost one, Oates's memoir is rather an exploration of—or “immersion” in (Ramazani 4)—her loss, no matter what she may occasionally say: “Now I am writing a book about Ray/ I am writing a book about the (lost) Ray” (392). In particular, the loss of her husband results in a loss of identity: “This is true. I am obsessed with my ‘self’ now—whatever it is, it seems to be about to break and be scattered by the wind, like milkweed” (128). The memoir reflects her belief—borrowed from William James—that an individual does not consist of one complete, coherent self, but rather of a juxtaposition of multiple selves. To recover her identity, she clings to her public self, and some hundred pages further down she writes: “And so in these hallucinatory weeks following Ray's death I am determined to impersonate ‘JCO’ as flawlessly as in the cult film *Blade Runner* the race of replicants impersonated human beings. I am determined to impersonate ‘JCO’ not merely because I have contracted to do so but because... it is the most effective way of eluding the basilisk” (217). In other words, she turns to her *persona* as a writer, and “a major American writer” (225) as she ironically puts it, because this is a mask, a façade, allowing her, like her memoir, to try and recover some anchorage. Throughout the book these identity problems are emphasized by the use of different narrative forms: while Oates mostly speaks in the first person, in some instances she refers 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*” (228). This recourse to a character-type emphasizes the universality of her experience and reactions. Such passages in the third person are mostly found at the end of the sub-parts that make up the narrative: “*How many widows have made this futile call—dialed numbers which are their own numbers; how many widows have listened to their dead husbands' voices again, again—again... As you will too, one day. If you are the survivor*” (205). Here Oates also uses the second person as she does occasionally, addressing herself or other future widows. In these endings as in other parts of the memoir, she resorts to italics as well so that the text looks as dramatically broken, as confused as her mind. Especially, as Tromble puts it, every italicized passage represents “an interruption surging up into the text from another dimension” (6). At one point, Oates even 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*” (320)—and counsels her—“*Of course not. You're exaggerating. Don't upset yourself needlessly*” (321). Italicizing certain passages sets them apart, indicating their difference from the narrative in which they are embedded. For Tromble, comparing Oates's memoir and her fiction, this technique allows the reader access to two levels of meaning... 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 space/time relationships that make up lived experience. (6)

16

No doubt “italicized interruptions” represent a major technique of narrative dramatization, reflecting Oates’s mental and emotional “instability.” So is the disorderly evocation of all sorts of minor episodes from her daily life—“this memoir [is] steeped in the grittiest of details” (256)—further emphasizing fragmentation: from finding an insulting message on her car as she returns from visiting her husband in the hospital, to gathering his belongings after his death, doing her shopping at the local supermarket, the hostile attitude of her cats, the cost of death or the different types of sleeping pills she is prescribed, to quote only a few. Oates mentions all such minor episodes because they have now become painful and challenging, and the discontinuity of her narrative confirms her disorientation. In fact Oates’s narrative looks like a collage made up of eighty-six fragments, each with its own title, each referring to a particular moment, emotion or memory. When she mentions them, however, she talks about herself again, trying to make sense of the most basic reality. Moving from one subject to another this way, as if she were talking freely to a psychoanalyst, she seems to get closer to the subject, in the Freudian sense of the word, that is herself.^{vii}

17

Fragmentation is particularly visible at the level of paragraphs, punctuation and syntax. Oates’s narrative is constantly interrupted by dashes, ellipses and brackets. It consists of series of short paratactic, if not verbless sentences, often making up full paragraphs. From this point of view, the memoir is reminiscent of Barthes’s *Mourning Diary* published in 2009. Barthes was always keen on fragmentation^{viii} and it is a major characteristic of his books, yet in the *Diary* it reaches a sort of climax and he explains: “I don’t want to talk about it [his mother’s death], for fear of making literature out of it—or without being sure of not doing so” (23). In the *Mourning Diary*, fragmentation is neither meant as a deliberate literary choice nor as a mirror image of Barthes’s moral devastation, but it comes from a deliberate refusal of the narrative form, of life as narrative. As Antoine Compagnon puts it: “writing a narrative would amount to refuting, avoiding, denying mourning” (1, my translation). While Oates too has chosen the diary form that involves breaks from one day or one date to another, she does not seem to share Barthes’s approach. Both her narrative and her syntax are dramatically jerky, spasmodic, because this is certainly the best means for her to express “the widow’s derangement” (89), as she calls it.

18

Nevertheless, the most striking characteristic of Oates’s memoir is the figurative language she uses throughout. While Gana considers that “prosopopeia (i.e. personification, apostrophe) figures as the master trope of mourning” (13), Oates rather resorts to metaphor, which involves hybridism by definition, since it borrows from different fields. As

Niemeyer explains: "Sometimes literal words fail us in conveying our unique sense of loss.... To move beyond the constraints of public speech, we need to use words in a more personal way, and draw on terms that are rich in resonance and imagery. Speaking of our loss metaphorically can help us accomplish this" (78). This is exactly what Oates does—she leaves the trodden, public paths of language to coin her own phrases and make her own way through language. A lot of her images, be they comparisons or metaphors, not surprisingly refer to death—the couple's house has turned into "a cave—a sepulcher" (40) or it is said to be "ghost-white in the darkness" (40), and above all her temptation to commit suicide is represented as a deadly legendary animal, "a basilisk" (119). Her images also suggest disorder and disintegration—"My brain is a snarl of such thoughts. A near-broken radio flooded with statics" (103); "my 'self' is a swirl of atoms not unlike the more disintegrated paintings of J. M. W. Turner" (127). However, one recurrent image stands out, the balloon: "In the car driving on Harrison Street amid late-afternoon traffic I am borne aloft by fury like a balloon buffeted in the wind and yet—soon—of course, soon—the fury balloon begins to deflate" (167); "the challenge is to live in a house from which *meaning* [italics in the text] has departed, like air leaking from a balloon. A slow leak, yet lethal. And one day, the balloon is flat: it is not a balloon any longer"^{ix} (227). Niemeyer writes that "one of the great advantages of metaphor is that it can compress a great deal of meaning into an economical expression or image, which can in turn be expanded by focusing on its elements and implications" (79). The balloon is a rich image as it can stand both for Oates's experience of loss and for her sense of emptiness; it can also suggest breathing air, or the loss of it, and fragility as well. No matter what, "metaphors of loss should be taken as bridges into the bereaved person's world of meaning" (Niemeyer 79), and these bridges allow the reader to get access to Oates's experience—that is, what she may be not be able to tell about her experience precisely. Her highly metaphoric language is another means for her to talk about herself obliquely, and therefore it can be considered a reconstruction strategy as well.

3. Hybridism as a Means of Self-Assertion

19

Oates's predilection for images in the memoir relates her book to illness narratives written by "wounded storyteller[s]," to refer to the title of Arthur Frank's book, all the more as she calls her grief "an illness to be overcome" (290). In a later article, Frank calls this type of autobiographical writing "moral non-fiction," adding that it is an act of "remoralization" in so far as "the writer... is primarily a witness, whose testimony speaks not only for himself or herself but also for a larger community of those who suffer" ("Moral Non-Fiction" 175-177). However, Oates is not merely a witness writing about her own experience of mourning. She is also—at least she means to be—a "guide" for other

widows, hence the title of her book. In other words, she plays different roles, corresponding with the different narrative voices she uses. It is as if she had written the diary first and then added the advice or commentaries to complete the book, when she made the decision to publish it—or she may also have written the whole “mourning diary” retrospectively, like Barthes. No matter what, while the subtitle “A Memoir” suggests the writer as mourner or “witness,” the title *A Widow's Story* emphasizes Oates's role as a guide, inviting other widows to identify with her—as confirmed by her recurrent use of a character-type, “the Widow.” Hybridism, therefore, is emphasized in the paratext itself, as a programmatic message.

20

No wonder that a striking tension should be perceptible throughout the book between what appears to be the spontaneous expression of Oates's grief (as testified by the diary form, the use of syntactic fragmentation and direct speech, for instance) and the elaborateness of the narrative. It is divided into five parts and eighty-six fragments, each with a specific title—followed by an epilogue falling into two sub-parts (413-415 and 416)—and concludes on a photograph representing Ray Smith and Joyce Carol Oates “at a garden wedding” (417). It is also scattered with extracts from E-mail messages Oates sent to friends, passages from consolation letters she received, her husband's obituary in *The New York Times* on February 27, 2008 (151-152) in a specific typeface, dreams, and numerous intertextual references (Dickinson, Homer, Roth, Hemingway, etc.). Especially, recurrent italicized passages at the end of most fragments stand out—not only are they in the second or third person narrative, as seen earlier, but they summarize a fragment or give advice to other widows, sometimes very explicitly (111). This strategy adds to the impression of textual confusion that Oates's book conveys and dramatically represents her own mental and emotional confusion.

21

In a recent article, however, Tanya Tromble underlines the thematic and formal characteristics between the memoir and Oates's contemporary fiction: “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 [Oates's] recent fiction” (4). It appears that to relate the disorientation she experiences following the sudden death of her husband, Oates deliberately resorts to her specific, even idiosyncratic, writing strategies—thus producing another “intermingled collage” or “disjointed narrative” (Tromble 5, 6)—in order to emphasize continuity, the continuity of her identity, and to assert autonomy and control, both challenged by her loss.^x Her hybrid style dramatically expresses both a fundamental break in her life and the no less fundamental persistence of her life.

22

In her early essay "On Fiction in Fact," and with some strange sense of premonition, Oates already evokes the complexity of the relationship between life and writing, thus anticipating the hybrid nature of her memoir, if not of any autobiographical writing: "At least in theory, a diary or 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" (78).

23

In *A Widow's Story*, Joyce Carol Oates achieves a complex "correspondence between literary and psychic dynamics" (xiv), as Brooks puts it, and this accounts for the power and uniqueness of her book. To convey her experience of bereavement, Oates borrows from life writing—memoir and diary—and from the elegy—both the conventional and the modern elegy, as it involves melancholic identification and dramatization. In Oates's memoir, dramatization mostly relies on hybridism—hence multiple narrative voices, intertextual references and typographic variations—and it turns out to be the major characteristic of her narrative. Nevertheless, Oates's hybridism is not merely a means of representing the emotional and mental disorientation she experiences when her husband dies. As it is also a recurrent characteristic of her fiction, it can be a powerful means of self-assertion and self-reconstruction as well, allowing her to express confusion and continuity, chaos and control at one and the same time. Between the consolation achieved in the traditional elegy and the inconsolability of the modern, Oates chooses a didactic option, and turns herself into a guide for other widows.

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NOTES

- i. After his mother's death in October 1977, Roland Barthes began a "mourning diary" that was only published in 2009, that is twenty-nine years after his own death in 1980.
- ii. Gana writes: "Following the rise of psychoanalysis and the break-up and dispersal of community into the carefully discriminated spheres of the private and the public" (10). What I mean is the break-up of religious and social communities in 20th century urbanized western societies.
- iii. Oates evokes this temptation as a "basilisk," a legendary creature considered to be the king of snakes that could not be seen without bringing death: "The basilisk's stare!—that is the suicide-temptation" (213).
- iv. In her essay "On Fiction in Fact," Oates writes: "Language by its very nature tends to distort experience. With the best of intentions, in recalling the past, even if a dream of the previous night, we are already altering—one might say violating—the original experience, which may have been wordless and was certainly improvised" (77).
- v. Paradoxical in the sense that the shingles added physical pain to her moral suffering, but was also a sign of evolution, if not metamorphosis.
- vi. After her husband's death, Oates underlines several times that she is now "reduced to a world of things. And these things retain but the faintest glimmer of their original identity and meaning" (63).
- vii. On this particular point, see Pierre Bayard, *Le Hors-sujet. Proust et la digression* (Paris : Minuit, 1996) 15. This interpretation may raise objections, however, considering that Oates meant her memoir to be published.
- viii. In his autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes writes: "His first, or nearly first text (1942) consists of fragments; this choice is then justified in the Gidean Manner 'because incoherence is preferable to a distorting order.' Since then, as a matter of fact, he has never stopped writing in brief bursts.... Liking to find, to write *beginnings*, he tends to multiply this pleasure: that is why he writes fragments" (93-94).
- ix. Other passages can be quoted: "I feel like a balloon from which air has leaked—deflated, flat" (226); "The wounded individual, the widow, has been disembodied; she must try very hard to summon forth the lost 'self'—like one blowing up a large balloon, each morning obliged to blow up the life-sized balloon, the balloon that is you, a most exhausting and depressing effort for it seems to no particular purpose other than to establish a life-sized balloon to inhabit from which, in slow degrees, air will leak, over the course of the next twelve hours" (301).
- x. Butler writes: "What grief displays... is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways [...] that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (23).

ABSTRACTS

This article analyzes Joyce Carol Oates's hybridism in her 2011 memoir, *A Widow's Story*, as a powerful means of self-assertion and self-reconstruction. It suggests that to write about her painful experience of bereavement Oates resorts to hybridism—generic, narrative and typographic in particular—as it is both a characteristic of her fiction and a means of dramatizing her experience. This hybridism helps her not only express her emotional “derangement” but also recover her identity as a writer. Thus her narrative manifests confusion and continuity, chaos and control, inconsolability and consolation at one and the same time.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Antoine Compagnon, Arthur W. Frank, Jahan Ramazani, Joyce Carol Oates, Judith Butler, Nouri Gana, Paul John Eakin, Peter Brooks, Peter Homans, Peter M. Sacks, Pierre Bayard, Robert A. Niemeyer, Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Tammy Clewell, Tanya L. Tromble
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