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“His Heart Beat With The Avidity of a Young Lover”: The Unattainable Object of Desire in Joyce Carol Oates’s “The Skull: A Love Story”

Stéphanie Maerten

- 1 Oates’s “The Skull: A Love Story” is at first reading the story of a man’s unwholesome obsession with the skull of a murdered woman. The love story mentioned in the almost oxymoronic title is thus of an unusual and disturbing kind. Oates had already used the same provoking subtitle for a short novel published in 2002, *Rape: A Love Story*—both stories deal with a victimized woman in the aftermath of a crime and with the strange, unexpected kind of love that emerges from it. In “The Skull,” the woman is already dead. Kyle Cassidy, a forensic scientist, proceeds to solve the puzzle of her gruesome murder by reconstituting her fragmented skull in order to enable her identification. As the reconstruction progresses, his scientific interest gradually gives way to deep fascination for what has turned into an object of desire. In a stream-of-consciousness style allowing the reader direct access to Cassidy’s thoughts, the narrative alternates between the reconstruction process and fragments of Cassidy’s life. Oates draws a convincing portrait of the ageing scientist struggling with his fading virility—she describes his unsatisfactory marriage, the torments of forced abstinence and his yearning for a lost illegitimate daughter.
- 2 “The Skull” first appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in 2002 and was later published in a longer version in the short story collection *I Am No One You Know*. This paper deals with the latter.¹ The aim here is to show how the object, which aroused the scientist’s interest, becomes an object of fascination and how this fascination subtly turns into an unhealthy and unethical desire. Oates explicitly links desire with Cassidy’s self-identity issues—by piecing fragments of the skull together, and compensating for the missing parts, he unconsciously aims at filling the voids in his own life. Desire here stems from absence and at the same time, reveals Cassidy’s own fear of death. The creation by a

male artist of the ideal woman unavoidably evokes Pygmalion, sculpting his Galatea, and highlights the narcissistic tendencies associated with the process. It also evokes the task of the writer sculpting his/her characters and thus allows Oates's story to be read as a metaphor for the creative process of writing.

The "Object of Desire"

- 3 The protagonist of "The Skull" bears some similarities, at least at the beginning of the story, to Poe's famous detective Auguste Dupin. As in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Oates does not spare the readers the gruesome details and the violence of the murder—the dead woman is objectified; she is described as a dismembered body, whose bones were scattered, and whose skull, compared to "broken crockery" (191) is brought to the scientist in a plastic bag. The "frenzied killer" and the "manic energy" (194) he expended "not merely to kill his victim but to obliterate her very being" (191) are very reminiscent of the alleged "raving maniac" (161) who murdered the old lady in Poe's story, mutilating her "so much so as scarcely to retain any semblance of humanity" (148). In Oates's story, it is Kyle Cassidy who, like Dupin, sets himself up as the hero, the only one capable of solving the crime by giving back its identity to the dead body. Both men consider their tasks as entertaining: "'A jigsaw puzzle. In three dimensions.' [Cassidy] smiled. Since boyhood he'd been one to love puzzles" (192).² This quotation echoes Dupin's words: "An inquiry will afford us amusement" (153). Moreover, just like Dupin, "the cynosure of the police eyes" (170), whose name "had grown into a household word" (170), Cassidy's skills in solving murder cases are widely acknowledged: "He'd been the subject of numerous media profiles, including a cover story in the Newark Star-Ledger Sunday Magazine" (193). The skull is thus first and foremost an object of scientific interest for the forensic specialist whose primary aim is to solve a murder case.
- 4 However, while Dupin does not explicitly look for fame, Oates mentions Cassidy's need for recognition, "his childish vanity, his wish to be not merely known but well-known, not merely liked but well-liked" (193). The emotional distance that characterizes Dupin can only be applied to Cassidy in the first paragraph of Oates's story. In "The Skull," scientific interest is soon superseded by a compelling attraction, a growing obsession, which Oates reveals by allowing the reader deeper insight into the protagonist's mind, through the recourse to free indirect speech. The use of peculiar syntactic structures, such as topicalizations ("Never had Kyle seen bones so broken" [193], "Strange it seemed to him" [194]), repetitions ("No fingertips—no fingertips—remained" [194]), the numerous question marks and exclamation points give access to Cassidy's thoughts, while the reader can still rely on the third-person narrative to bring a seeming objectivity. Oates also intersperses the narrative with passages in direct speech—between quotation marks or in italics—frequently used to enable the reader to "hear" Cassidy's voice when he addresses the skull: "NOW YOU HAVE a friend, dear. 'Kyle' is your friend"; "Maybe he took your rings. You must have had rings" (198). Not only do these narrative devices emphasize expressivity, but they also dramatize the protagonist's obsessive, almost monomaniacal mind.
- 5 What first aroused Cassidy's interest as an object of study gradually turns into an object of fascination. "Interest," Sybille Baumbach points out, "is not to be equaled with fascination. It is its prerequisite" (23). According to her, "fascination entails a higher

degree of defamiliarization than is required to arouse attention. It probes the boundaries of poetic and aesthetic negativity, and challenges our response-ability to visual and verbal stimuli" (24). When Cassidy touches the dead woman's hair, or when "[h]is lips brush . . . against the woman's cheek" (197), Poe's gothic tales come to mind, along with his famous assertion that "the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world" (19). In a tribute essay to Poe, "A Poe Memoir," in which Oates acknowledges the influence of the Gothic master on her own fiction,³ she explains that

[a] woman writer/reader is bemused to discover how very many beautiful dead or near-dead females abound in Poe's prose and poetry—in fact, there is not a "living" female character in all of Poe, of any significance. Attraction is to the (safely) deceased female from Roderick Usher's ghastly pale sister Madeleine . . . and the vampire-like Ligeia to the more innocent child-heroine of "Annabel Lee." (9)

- 6 In "The Skull," as in Poe's Gothic fiction, attraction and repulsion are simultaneously present, which is the necessary condition for fascination to arise according to Baumbach: "Where ethics and aesthetics clash, fascination finds a fertile breeding ground. It is in this respect that aestheticised images of death . . . can exert a disconcerting, yet irrepressible pull, which can only be described as fascination" (3). The following passage illustrates this point: "On the windowsill, the dead girl's hair lay in lustrous/sinuous strands. Kyle reached out to touch it: so soft" (198). The sibilance conveys a sense of secrecy and a feeling of creeping silence reinforced by the use of the colon emphasizing the last two words—so soft—which sound like a whisper.⁴ As Cassidy works alone in his laboratory on the skull, whose parts are enumerated as a series of disconnected objects (forehead, cheekbones, nose), he amorously touches the strands of hair that are detached from the skull. The displacement of his sexual desire onto an object stimulates his imagination and partially satisfies his needs—the hair, like the skull, acts as a substitute for the unattainable woman.
- 7 The description of the hair as "lustrous," "sinuous" and "soft"—evocative of Baudelaire's poem "La Chevelure"—reveals not so much Cassidy's desire for its owner as a manifestation of fetishism. "Fetishes" is the word used by Cassidy's wife in a passage where she mentions her repulsion for her husband's fascination with death: "Your 'fetishes'—that's what they are. Skulls. Bones. Drawing of dead people. Dead women. I've seen them, they disgust me" (206). The drawings she evokes are "explicit anatomical drawings and color plates hidden away" (206), similar to the ones Cassidy used to stare at and copy from his grandfather's medical books as a young boy and whose memories remain vivid—"Decades later, Kyle sometimes felt a stirring of erotic interest, a painful throb in the groin, reminded by some visual cue of those old forbidden medical texts" (201). The "object of desire,"⁵ that is Cassidy's capacity to "aestheticize the unaesthetic,"⁶ reveals itself in like manner in his fetishistic eroticization of the skull: "Beautifully shaped it seemed to Kyle, like a Grecian bust. The empty eye-sockets and nose-cavity another observer would think ugly, Kyle saw filled in, for the girl had revealed herself to him" (201). What Cassidy's wife sees as obscene fascinates her husband because his perception is different—by seeing the skull or the drawings as potential artworks, he creates a distance, the "distance of the gaze" which, according to Baudrillard, abolishes obscenity (*Passwords* 27). Baudrillard defines obscenity as "the total visibility of things" (29), the "too real," which becomes unbearable without this distance; this "*mise en scène*" which can be provided by art. It is thus Cassidy's artistic gaze which enables him to experience desire for an otherwise

repulsive object such as a skull, since art, in Baudrillard's words, "is capable of inventing a scene other than the real, another set of rules" (28).

- 8 As unhealthy and unethical as it is, the protagonist's desire can be considered taboo—a word Freud describes as having two different meanings: "On the one hand, it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean" (*Totem* 30). The description of the dead woman's hair "clinging to his fingers with static electricity, as if alive" (195)—reminiscent of Gothic literature and its recourse to galvanism and electrical experiments—foreshadows the story's shift into the fantastic, or rather the uncanny,⁷ in a passage where Cassidy, alone in his laboratory, observes the dead woman standing in the doorway described as "[a] perverse and sickly sort of shadow like a gauzy forgetful mind" (199).⁸ The ghostly apparition is followed by a description of the woman's figure and a detailed description of her face, as in Poe's *Berenice*, with the same profusion of predicate adjectives and paratactic sentences as if separating the face into its constituent parts: "Her smile was sweetly shy, hesitant. Her chin was narrow as a child's, her nose was small and snubbed. Her skin was pale, smooth, luminous. Her hair in a wavy, lustrous tangle fell past her shoulders and looked as if it had just been brushed" (199-200).⁹ However, contrary to Poe's ghastly portrait of the dying *Berenice* as an object of repulsion, Oates's portrayal is that of a lively and desirable woman coming back from the dead.¹⁰
- 9 The apparition is first presented as real—"Kyle was beginning to see her now," "she stood about fifteen feet from Kyle in the doorway leading to his office" (199)—so that the reader does not realize the woman is only a figment of Cassidy's imagination until the latter wakes up. The episode thus belongs to the uncanny or as Todorov puts it, "the supernatural explained" (41), in that "the effect of the fantastic is certainly produced, but during only a portion of our reading" (42). In an article about Oates's frequent use of supernatural elements in her short stories, Tanya Tromble explains that "Oates occasionally uses the fantastic mode, with its inherent hesitation, to depict characters permanently trapped in liminal states, struggling with shifting identities. In this way, she attempts to account for the reality of the mysterious states of the mind" (99). In "The Skull," Cassidy's vision enables Oates to provide the reader with deeper insight into the protagonist's psychological state of mind, implying that the irrationality of his desire for the skull is likely linked to self-identity issues.

The Throes of Absent Presence

- 10 Cassidy's obsession with the skull, his wish to reconstruct "what the murderer had broken" (194), seem to reflect his desire to fill the void in his life and to compensate for his own lacks. From the beginning of the story, the skull is characterized by absence through the use of numerous negative determiners ("No hair remained," "no scalp" [191], "No fingertips" [194] etc.) which echo Oates's portrayal of the protagonist, also defined by the negative ("*He was not old*. Didn't look old, didn't perceive himself as old," a man "not to be labeled" [192] etc.). The skull symbolizes absence and as such, enables Cassidy to project his own emptiness onto it. As Bronfen puts it, "[b]ecause the corpse [and a fortiori the skull] is a figure without any distinguishing facial traits of its own, one could say that semiotically it serves as an arbitrary, empty, interchangeable sign, an interminable surface for projections" (64). The fleshless skull, being ungendered and desexualized, represents the antithesis of femininity. Cassidy's endeavor to reconstruct

it, and to re-feminize it can thus be seen as a way of occulting his fading virility and asserting his elusive masculinity.¹¹

- 11 Described as a philanderer ("he'd had something of a reputation as a womanizer until recent years" [192]), he is suffering the effects of abstinence, "for often he felt still the pangs of sexual desire" (197). The comparison of his head with a phallus, shaved to conceal his baldness, "veined, with a look of an upright male organ throbbing with vigor" (192), symbolizes his attempt to cope with his fear of castration. The skull then represents a phallic substitute, a fetish, in the Freudian sense of the term, and as such "remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it" (*Fetishism* 152). In electing the skull as an exclusive object of desire, capable of making "[h]is heart beat with the avidity of a young lover" (207), Cassidy attempts to cope with his age-related loss of virility since, according to Lacan, "[w]hat is in question in the castration complex is supposed to be, in the subject, the fear given rise to by the disappearance of desire" (223).¹²
- 12 In order to prevent desire from disappearing, Cassidy creates the object of his desire—he reconstructs the skull *ex nihilo* and draws sketches of the face, conforming it to his idealized concept of femininity. He is thus close to a Pygmalion figure. Indeed, the woman he sculpts is more the product of his imagination and the projection of his desires than the attempted reproduction of the dead woman's face: "When you looked from the sketches drawn in colored pencil to the actual woman in the photographs, you were tempted to think that one was a younger, sentimentally idealized version of the other" (204). Relying on Lacan's theory that "Femininity becomes a place in which man reads his destiny, just as the woman becomes a symptom for the man," Bronfen explains that "[w]oman as object of desire is a symptom for man's yearning for full identity, for ego coherence and for narcissistic pleasure along with the failure necessarily built into this undertaking" (212). She goes on:
- If woman in her idealised form, absent, elevated and inaccessible, stands in for male lack—occults a knowledge of the split of the self and masks a knowledge that all sexual relations as self-realizations are lacking—her defamed or denigrated aspect articulates precisely this split, so that her exclusion is a precondition for man's sense of eternal existence, his soul, to come into being". (212)
- 13 The self here is masculine while the woman represents Otherness, following the cultural gender stereotype, and her role consists in defining the masculine self. When Oates writes that "[Cassidy]'s secret interests were hidden, he believed, inside the other" (201), the "other" can be understood as being essentially feminine. Yet, it is worth noting that, in Oates's fiction, the desire to craft an idealized other is not always gender-related. The object of desire is not always female and the attempt to compensate for one's lack is not exclusively masculine. In the novel *Zombie* for instance, the male protagonist abducts his victims and endeavors to turn them into devoted "sexual slaves." The victims here are all young men. And, in *The Man Without a Shadow*, a renowned female neuroscientist sets her sights on an amnesiac patient, who gradually becomes an unethical object of desire—she falls in love with a version of him she has created.
- 14 Paradoxically, Cassidy's Pygmalion-like attempt to craft the idealized Other also reveals his narcissistic inclinations—although narcissism, or the idealization of the self is *a priori* a rejection of otherness and does not allow attraction to an object of desire, Cassidy's creation of an idealized other can be considered as a projection of his own

self, a mirror image of his ego.¹³ He thus ensures that his creation remains under his control, unlike the deceptive women who surround him. Unattracted to his wife ("His relationship to Vivian had never been passionate. He'd wanted a wife, not a mistress" [199]), he admits having been aroused by "sexually attractive, needy, manipulative women" (197), two of whom are mentioned in the story and portrayed as assumed prostitutes. Yet, what seems to trigger his attraction is the desire to be admired. The words uttered by his "creature" as she appears in his lively dream— "Dr. Cassidy! Dad-dy. See, I revere you?" (200) echo the ones pronounced by the last woman he had had a sexual relationship with: "'Dr. Cassidy.' I revere a man like you" (199). The use of quotation marks, to emphasize his academic title, and of a simile indicate that the man himself was not the object of the woman's admiration, contrary to the creature in his dream.

- 15 The use of the word "daddy" by the latter raises another question—that of the role of Cassidy's illegitimate daughter whose absence is at the core of the story. She is mentioned only twice, as the daughter "whom he'd never known" (192) and as his "lost daughter," the unnamed "infant girl," who "would never have been told who her true father was" (202-03), though her presence is felt throughout the story. The adverb "never," compound of not and ever, abundantly used in the text among other markers of negation, shows that absence is not only central to the story but also felt continuously over time by the protagonist. Cassidy's desperate attempt to revive and animate the skull can thus be understood as a way to fill the void and cope with the absence of the daughter. Oates makes a clear parallel between the two women. The skull is designated as belonging to "someone's daughter" (195), and the connection becomes obvious when Cassidy's reflection abruptly skips from the skull to his daughter: "Was she living, and where?" (201). Oates goes on, making the link explicit: "His mind drifted from the skull and onto her, who was purely abstract to him, not even a name" (201). By associating the skull, the object of Cassidy's desire, with his daughter, Oates brings up the idea of incest. Yet, the theme of oedipal incest is already inherent in Cassidy's Pygmalion-like act of falling in love with his creation. As Bridget Tompkins explains, "Pygmalion is Galatea's creator and her figurative father, which adds an obvious incestuous flavor to their immediate marriage" (171). In Oates's story, the theme is all the more obvious as the object of desire is explicitly associated with the daughter.

The Absence Par Excellence

- 16 Oates's collection of short stories *I Am No One You Know* "explores the theme of self-identity and the identity of a mysterious 'other'" (*Joyce Carol Oates: Conversations* 236). By identifying the woman's skull, Cassidy wishes to acknowledge the existence of the victim, and thereby, his daughter's. Being deprived of identity, the very existence of the woman is at issue. Not only was she murdered but the killer acted "as if [he] had wanted not merely to kill his victim but to obliterate her very being" (191). He had "smash[ed] the victim's skull, face, teeth to make identification impossible" (194). By reconstructing the skull, and giving the woman an identity, Cassidy attests her finite existence; he enables himself to feel her absence; an absence which is, in Todorov's words, "both absolute and natural," "the absence par excellence: death" (99).¹⁴ Without an identity, she is "no one." As Badiou puts it, "death happens to the 'living,' or in any

case, to the existing;" "One will thus say that death is the coming of a minimal value of existence for a being endowed with a positive evaluation of its identity" (71). Once identified, the woman's existence, and therefore her death, is acknowledged. Consequently, the story also reads as an oedipal quest for knowledge (and self-knowledge) and the inherent question of the legitimacy of the quest.

- 17 In becoming Sabrina Jackson, the woman ceases to be an object of desire for Cassidy. He addresses the dead woman as he discovers her real face: "You? Always it was you" (204). His surprise is perceptible in the use of the pronoun you followed by a question mark and emphasized by the use of epanalepsis. The topicalized adverb "always" echoes the numerous occurrences of the adverb "never" and obliterates the absence. Cassidy's unsatiated desire turns to disappointment when he is showed a photograph of Sabrina Jackson. A photograph, according to Barthes, is "violent," "not because it shows violent things, but because in it, nothing can be refused or transformed" (*Camera* 91). Cassidy first attempts to cling to his illusion in order to prevent desire from disappearing: "He wanted to love her. He wanted not to be disappointed in her" (209). Sabrina Jackson's heavy makeup and provocative outfit represent what Barthes calls the "stadium," which gets the viewer's initial attention. This stadium is the cause of Cassidy's disappointment in that it relates the once idealized woman to the assumed prostitutes he used to be involved with—she is "[t]he type who wouldn't ask a man for money directly; but if you offered it, she certainly wouldn't turn it down" (205). Like Barthes looking at a portrait of his late mother, Cassidy endeavors to find similarities between the real woman as she appears on the photograph and the woman he "remembers." Cassidy's thoughts ("Still, there was the narrow forehead, the snubbed nose, the small, receding chin" [204]) echo Barthes's words: "Did I recognize her? According to these photographs, sometimes I recognized a region of her face, a certain relation of nose and forehead, the movement of her arms, her hands. I never recognized her except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her being, and that therefore I missed her altogether. It was not she, and yet it was no one else" (*Camera* 65-66). The smile on Sabrina Jackson's face is in Barthes's term the "punctum," the subtle "detail" which sustains Cassidy's desire. In it, he notices "[t]he bravado of not-knowing how we must die: how our most capricious poses outlive us" (204). By using the first-person pronoun, Cassidy reveals his own fear of death—a statement Oates corroborates ("The skull he pursues with such single-minded devotion is, in a sense, his own skull, his impending mortality" [*Best* 323]). According to Barthes, the photograph represents "an anterior future of which death is the stake" (96), "each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death" (97).
- 18 This idea may be pushed further—Cassidy's fear and his pessimistic vision of the world, "that region of infinite chaos, sorrow, and cruelty" (197), goes beyond the mere fear of death. In "The Aesthetics of Fear," alluding to H. P. Lovecraft's Gothic tales, Oates suggests that "[w]hat we most fear . . . is not death; nor even physical anguish, mental decay, disintegration. We fear the loss of meaning. To lose meaning is to lose one's humanity, and this is more terrifying than death" (*Where* 35). She goes on, "It is the anxiety of the individual that the very species may become extinct in our complicity with the predator . . . within." In the last paragraph of "The Skull," Cassidy appears in a more threatening light, reminiscent of the pedophilic protagonist of Nabokov's novel *Lolita*; as he observes a young girl on a bicycle, "[s]uch longing, such love suffused his heart! He watched the girl disappear, stroking a sinewy throbbing artery just below his

jawline" (212).¹⁵ The "throbbing artery" echoes the throbbing veins previously mentioned and symbolically associated with sexual desire.

The "Tell-Tale" Skull

- 19 In an interview published in the *Ohio Review* in 1973, Oates discusses her "theory of art"—"all art is dreamlike, springs from the dreaming mind . . . you experience a certain fantasy, you can't manage it, can't comprehend it; it's a mystery; so, if you are talented in some way, you realize you might as well try to externalize it to see if anyone else recognizes it" (*Conversations* 48). The protagonist of "The Skull" is portrayed as an artist, once "embarrassed" by the "emergence of talent" and capable of drawing and sculpting "surprising likenesses" (201). Cassidy chooses to "externalize" his artistic skills in the field of forensic science where his task consists in "re-assembling" fragments of bones. In her analysis of Italo Calvino's short fiction, Tompkins points out the "similarity between building a female form from pieces of ivory and the process of piecing together a female character from fragments" (26).
- 20 Cassidy's task can thus be seen as a metaphor for the creative process of writing, equating the protagonist with Oates herself.¹⁶ In *The Faith of a Writer*, Oates describes the act of writing as an art which does not rely on mere "genius": "prose fiction is also a craft, and craft must be learned, whether by accident or design" (94). Indeed, Cassidy, the scientist who reconstructs a skull from fragments using his skills to craft his own version of beauty, bears some obvious similarities with the writer who combines words, gathering fragments of "already existing discourse" (Tompkins 26) in order to produce a text, and using his imagination to flesh it out. Oates also evokes the writer's need to base "his or her prose style and prose vision upon significant ancestors" (*Faith* 26).¹⁷ Although no other literary work is directly mentioned in "The Skull," numerous references to other texts can be felt. Allusions to Poe or Nabokov have already been made, as well as references to the myths of Pygmalion, Narcissus or Oedipus. Oates also includes her own motifs and themes. The story contains allusions to other art forms that contribute to the building of the story—the importance of drawing in the emergence of Cassidy's "talent," the presence of classical music to accompany the creative process, or photography whose realism plays a significant role in the characters' apprehension of death. Not only is the story composed of these fragments, which emphasize the artificiality of the writing process, but the narrative technique itself embraces the idea of fragmentation, characteristic of postmodern fiction, illustrating Oates's idea that "[i]n a sense all writing—all art—is "postmodernist"; it's artificial ("Written interviews" 550). The numerous flashbacks into Cassidy's past, the insertion of direct speech, divide the narrative into pieces. Also significant is the typography, with the presence of capitalized words, italics, ellipses, quotation marks etc. All these disparate elements combine into a "patchworked" text that evokes the reconstructed skull. The missing elements of the story, left to the reader's imagination, echo the missing pieces of bones Cassidy has to compensate for.
- 21 The skull is thus a metaphor for the text itself, meticulously crafted by the artist. Once the task has been completed, the protagonist sets his sights on a new object of desire in the same way that the writer proceeds to craft another story. Cassidy's unwholesome obsession for the skull echoes the "forbidden' passions" and the "ill-understood drives" which trigger the author's urge to write (*Faith* 23-24). The short story itself is also a

fragment of the collection in which it appears. The "I" in the enigmatic title *I Am No One You Know* can stand for the mysterious "other" which appears in each story, as well as for the protagonist himself, whose identity is put into question. Yet it can also stand for the writer herself whose identity fades behind the text—the object of desire she created becomes the reader's. If, according to Barthes and Foucault, the author eventually dies, disappearing behind the text, his/her "absent presence" can still be felt; he/she becomes "a desire of the reader's, a spectre spirited back into existence by the critic himself" (Burke 151). The writer thus provides the raw material for the reader and the critic who interpret and reconstruct the story each in his/her own way, making Cassidy's task a metaphor for the creative process at large.

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NOTES

1. The cuts made by the editors at *Harper's* to the original text are of significant interest to analyze the nature of the protagonist's desire for the skull. Although Cassidy's obsession remains central to the plot, some elements revealing the perverted side of his connection with the skull as an object of desire have been carefully removed, starting with the subtitle "A Love Story." Among them, two long passages delving into Cassidy's past and presenting his attraction for the skull as responsible for the damaging of his marriage, as well as an episode in which Cassidy dreams an idealized, eroticized version of the dead woman.
2. Cassidy is also reminiscent of Xavier Kilgarvan, Oates's detective in *Mysteries of Winterthurn*. In *(Woman) Writer*, she explains that "[f]rom boyhood onward he is fascinated by the prospect of mystery and its 'solution' or exorcism; his imagination is inflamed by the obdurate nature of certain puzzles—why? where? who? with what consequences?" (274)

3. "Poe suffuses my fiction, in particular my 'Gothic' fiction . . . , as a kind of distant model, not an immediate predecessor" (9-10).
4. Interestingly, these two words, which convey the erotic nature of Cassidy's feelings for the skull, do not appear in *Harper's* version of the story.
5. The association of the terms "abject" and "desire" appear to be rather oxymoronic since according to Julia Kristeva, abjection "does not have, properly speaking, a definable object" (1) and "desire is always for objects" (6). What Cassidy sees as objects of desire can only be considered abject by the others—"The corpse . . . is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (4).
6. I borrow the title of the collection of essays *The Abject of Desire, The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetics in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, edited by Konstanze Kutzbach and Monika Mueller.
7. "Uncanny" is used in Todorov's sense of the term: "[In the uncanny], events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar" (46).
8. The reader cannot but recall Poe's *Berenice*, appearing before the narrator's eyes in the library.
9. "The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once jetty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets, now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly . . . The eyes were lifeless, and lusterless, and seemingly pupilless, and I shrank involuntary from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin, shrunken lips" ("*Berenice*" 646).
10. The claustrophobic atmosphere of Cassidy's laboratory is also evocative of Poe's tale. Henri Justin mentions the importance of the room as a mood-invested space for Poe, which mirrors the narrator's obsession. In the same way, Cassidy's desire manifests itself only in the intimacy of his office and its adjacent laboratory. When he leaves the place, he becomes unable to focus: "Yet it seemed to be happening that when Kyle was away from the laboratory, his hands began to shake just perceptibly, as in the aftermath of tension, or terror. And once he was away from the unsparing fluorescent lights, his vision wasn't so sharp" (195).
11. In "Feminism, Masculinity and Nation in Oates's Fiction," Ellen G. Friedman retraces the evolution of the author's male characters from the "hegemonic masculinity" of the powerful father-figure of the early stories in which women's agency is almost inexistent to the more vulnerable ordinary man often deprived of his masculine authority. In "*The Skull*," not only is Cassidy rejected by his wife and humiliated by the victim's mother, but he is presented in the last scene as a diminished old man, pathetically coveting a very young teenage girl when all current attempts at seducing women are desperate. Friedman analyses this shift in the portrayal of gender power in Oates's fiction as the reflection of the underlying social changes in American society and of the rise of feminism.
12. This idea is reinforced in the second part of the story, after the dead woman's identity has been revealed, and has put an end to Cassidy's fantasy ("A pulse beat suddenly in his head. Disappointed! For Sabrina Jackson wasn't the one he's sought" [205]). With the disappearance of the object of desire, Cassidy faces what Lacan terms "the symbolic lack of an imaginary object" therefore giving rise to his latent fear of castration—"His oblong shaved head had never felt so exposed and so vulnerable, veins throbbing with heat" (208).
13. This idea is reminiscent of Lacan's theory of the mirror image, in which the ego is considered an object, distinct from the subject, to which the subject can identify.

14. The need to acknowledge the existence of the unidentified corpse by assembling the bone fragments, as well as the pathological way in which the protagonist touches and addresses the skull is reminiscent of another Oates story, "The Temple," in which a woman proceeds to dig out a broken skull, described as "unnamed, unmarked, unacknowledged, unknown." In this story, the woman "tenderly, meticulously . . . arranged the skull and bones into a human being" and "though most of the skeleton was missing, it would never seem to the woman that it was so" (*American Gothic Tales* 348).

15. "I liked to see her spinning up and down Thayer Street on her beautiful young bicycle: rising on the pedals to work on them lustily, then sinking back in a languid posture while the speed wore itself off" (Nabokov 188); "and my heart was bursting with love-ache" (207).

16. Similarly, in (*Woman*) *Writer*, Oates presents the protagonist of *Mysteries of Winterthurn* as an artist: ". . . Xavier's temperament is also that of an artist. His cases are, perhaps, stories, parables, 'mysteries' that yield their meaning only after much frustration and mental anguish . . . the meaning being the very pattern of the work of art, its voice, its tone, its spirit. Hence my feeling of intense identification with him . . ." (375).

17. Barthes points out the use of the word "corpus" to refer both to a human dead body and to "all the texts which have given pleasure to someone" (*Pleasure* 34).

ABSTRACTS

La nouvelle de Joyce Carol Oates, « The Skull: A Love Story », possède indéniablement des accents poésques. Cependant, plus qu'un simple récit gothique ou policier, cette nouvelle est avant tout le portrait psychologique convaincant de son protagoniste. Suivant la théorie de Barthes selon laquelle désir et récit sont intimement liés, cet article vise à montrer que la nouvelle de Oates peut aussi être lue comme une métaphore de l'acte d'écriture. Prenant comme point de départ les fragments d'un crâne brisé, Cassidy se base essentiellement sur des suppositions pour recréer une version idéalisée de la défunte. Le récit met l'accent sur le manque, et le désir ici naît de l'absence. L'empressement du protagoniste à combler les failles de l'enquête fait écho à son désir de combler ses propres vides affectifs. En tentant vainement de s'appropriier l'objet de son désir, Cassidy semble plutôt vouloir flatter ses penchants narcissiques et son désir masculin de « révérence ». En outre, le parallèle que dresse le récit entre la victime et la fille illégitime de Cassidy – sa « présence absente » pour emprunter le concept de Derrida – soulève la question de l'inceste œdipien déjà contenue dans le paradigme de Pygmalion tombant amoureux de sa propre création, renforçant ainsi la métaphore de l'écriture puisque, selon Barthes, « tout récit ne se ramène-t-il pas à l'Œdipe ? »

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