


2015

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### Citation Information

Kealey, Josephene T.M. (2015) "'I know you!': The Implications of Knowing In Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya: A Life*," *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*: Vol. 2, Article 5.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15867/331917.2.5>

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies/vol2/iss1/5>

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# "I know you!": The Implications of Knowing In Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya: A Life*



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It's always a pleasure when a new edition of a book one has studied is republished. Joyce Carol Oates's 1986 novel *Marya: A Life* was reissued in 2014 by Ecco. Scholars of Oates are thus compelled to make an argument for how this book (the 17th of Oates's fifty-plus novels) recommends itself for further reading and studying. Hopefully more work will be dedicated to it. The most significant work, so far, includes Joanne V. Creighton's *Joyce Carol Oates: Novels of the Middle Years* (1992) that has an eight-page assessment of *Marya* as "essentially a portrait of the artist as a young woman . . . ." (63) and Marilyn C. Wesley's *Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction* (1993) that includes an eight-page feminist reading of the book (127-134). Brenda O. Daly's *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (1996) also incorporates a five-page reading of the book as part of her feminist investigation of Oates's oeuvre (130-134), a line of argument that Creighton and Kori A. Binette continue in "What Does It Mean To Be A Woman?: The Daughter's Story in Oates's Novels" (2006). Eileen Teper Bender's early work, *Joyce Carol Oates: Artist in Residence* (1987), provides a seven-page reading of *Marya* as an imprisoned character caught in a series of oppressive relationships and situations (158-164), an interpretation that Gavin Cologne-Brookes tempers with his thirteen-page assessment of *Marya* (141-154) as self-conflicted, creating her own misery, in *Dark Eyes On America: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (2005).

This article, the first (to my knowledge) solely dedicated to *Marya*, uses a close-reading of Oates's Preface that she provided for the Franklin Library first edition of the book<sup>1</sup> to elucidate the book's exploration of what it means "to know." The Preface reads like a long explanatory note on the personal nature of the novel, a revelation Oates also simultaneously undermines with ambivalent language. For example, Oates states, "I don't believe *Marya* represents me." I would argue that the Preface, an unprovoked, intentional exposé of the book as possibly autobiographical, is meant to guide our reading of the story as an exploration of knowledge. It is in the Preface that Oates shows us how we are to approach her story—not in parsing fact from fiction, but in theorizing what it means "to know": specifically, that of claiming to know others and to know oneself.

Cologne-Brookes already takes up Oates's interest in knowledge in her post-1970 work. Using her story "A Theory of Knowledge" to articulate the author's "evolving consciousness," Cologne-Brookes argues that this story "is about the struggle to balance the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake with active and useful involvement in the social sphere" (56). Applying the philosophical writings of the American pragmatist John Dewey (1859-1952) to Oates's own philosophical interests, Cologne-Brookes explains that Oates's "dominating interest" in the novels between 1986 and 1990 became "the use of knowledge; the conditions under which and ways in which it may be most organically and effectively employed to direct conduct" (Dewey quoted in Cologne-Brookes 140). Cologne-Brookes characterizes *Marya* as a "monomaniac" (145). In his reading of *Marya*, *Marya* is the author of her own demise for refusing "the need for relationships" and dedicating herself solely to her work at the expense of others (146). Knowledge is therefore a tool for keeping herself apart from others.

My article takes a different perspective on Oates's theory of knowledge, although I come to similar conclusions about *Marya*'s character. Taking my cues from Oates's Preface that suggests the complexities involved in knowing another, I argue that the central struggle of *Marya*'s adult life is to detangle herself from the understanding of knowledge as a means to possess (others or the self). Although I agree with Cologne-Brookes that *Marya* creates her own misery, I believe Oates's interest in knowledge also includes how the self and the other relate without claiming to know each other in possessive ways.

*Marya*'s autobiographical elements make it an interesting subject. Eric K. Anderson notes in his review of *Marya* that "Identifying the specific differences [between Oates's life and the fiction] isn't important" (1) (if you are not into

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<sup>1</sup> It is unfortunate that the Ecco publication doesn't include the Preface.

biographical criticism, I suppose). Yet, I am intrigued by the seeming necessity of Oates's Preface that admits to the book's autobiographical elements. Oates's Preface calls attention to itself for the very fact that the author included it. Oates wishes to tell us something about her book through her introduction to the story. She states: "*Marya: A Life* will very likely remain the most 'personal' of my novels . . . though it is not, in the strictest sense, autobiographical" (no pages). Oates then offers some correlations between people, places, and events in the book, and her own life: "It contains some autobiographical material, particularly in its opening sections, and it is set, for the most part, in places identical with or closely resembling places I have lived . . ." Simultaneously, however, to stress that *Marya* is not her autobiography in literary form, the author blurs whatever correspondence the reader might make between autobiographical narrative elements and the fictional parts. She effects this blurring through ambivalent word choice. Not wishing to declare the book autobiographical nor non-autobiographical, she uses the qualifying phrase "it is not, in the strictest sense, autobiographical." The author accedes to the autobiographical possibilities of *Marya* but warns us away from reading the book with our biographical criticism glasses on. As Cologne-Brookes appreciates, "Oates's ambiguity here [in the Preface] is part and parcel of the ambiguity of a novel the complexity of which . . . belies its seemingly straightforward narrative" (141).

Oates then deals with the possible correlation between herself and *Marya*, this time by denying that her character is a stand-in for the author. She writes without qualification that "I am not *Marya* Knauer . . ." but alters the phrasing in the mirrored logic: "and *Marya* is surely not I . . ." This "surely" is a term of emphasis, surely, but it is also a rhetorical phrase that presupposes questioning. It presumes the reader's assumption that *Marya* might be Oates's literary self. It also draws attention to the possibility that there are discernible connections after all between the author and the character.

Oates again undermines her effort to state emphatically that she is not *Marya*: "I don't believe that *Marya* represents me any more than do several of my female characters of recent novels . . ." Her "I don't believe" is less certain than her "I am not *Marya* Knauer" and similarly open to interpretation as is her "surely not I." Stating she does not believe *Marya* is her literary representation invites the reader to engage with the idea. Furthermore, Oates's comparison between herself and three other of her fictional characters is an exaggerated attempt at convincing us that she is "not *Marya* Knauer." She writes, "I don't believe *Marya* represents me anymore than do several of my female characters of recent novels—Sheila Trask, for instance, of *Solstice*, or Deirdre of the Spirits of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*; or even the unregenerate murderess Perdita of *Mysteries of Winterthurn*." Sheila Trask is an artist who manipulates a young woman and suffers serious depression. Deirdre is abducted from her adoptive family by a

balloonist and later becomes a spiritual medium. Sheila, Deirdre, and all too clearly Perdita are characters nowhere nearly as contemporary and easily linked to Oates as is Marya. Such a comparison between Marya and the three other characters is meant to suggest that comparing Marya to Oates would be as difficult (or nonsensical, really) as comparing the others to the author. However, the comparison isn't convincing or helpful simply because the latter are hyperbolic comparisons. When compared with Oates, Marya is more akin than Sheila, Deirdre, or Perdita.

After addressing the degrees to which she is to be disassociated from Marya, Oates then draws numerous parallels between herself and her fictional character, at least the "inner kernel of emotion" that she claims to share with Marya. Clarifying that Marya's "circumstances" are different from her own past life, Oates confesses, "many of Marya's thoughts and impressions parallel my own at her approximate age." The author wishes us to understand, this time unambivalently, that the inner life of Oates as a younger woman is Marya's story. The point of the book, Oates is trying to say, is not the plot, but the what and how and why of Marya's experiences. Oates references the American philosopher William James to elaborate: "For James it is the fluidity of experience and not its Platonic 'essence' that is significant, for truth is relative, ever-changing, indeterminate." When we read *Marya*, we are asked to pay attention to the personal nature of Marya's life, on the meaningfulness of how she experiences life, and not on the facts of her life.

Thus, the Preface is a theoretical guide to how we are to read *Marya*. The lesson Oates wants us to learn from her Preface is one about the failure of knowledge. In offering up the idea that *Marya* is personal but not autobiographical, by writing ambivalently about what might and might not be directly linked to her own life, Oates challenges us to question what it means "to know" someone else. Late in the Preface (late, perhaps, in case we still haven't "got it"), she states, "To write is to attempt to make contact between the world out there and the world in here, both of them mysterious, perhaps ultimately unknowable." We are not meant to be sure wherein Marya we might find Oates, nor are we meant to be confident readers of Marya herself. For post-modern sensibilities such as Oates's, to claim to know an other is deeply problematic.

The underlying mythos of Oates's query into the implications of knowing is the Genesis story. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Eve and Adam lose their innocence and must leave the Garden of Eden. Although the couple's demise is the result of their disobedience to God, they experience dramatic consequences for gaining knowledge. Oates's story is not focused on the content of knowledge, but on the acclamation of knowing. In *Marya*, to claim to know—to know an

other especially—is a threatening position that involves a violent acquisition of the other. Various characters in Marya's life—notably her mother, a college friend, and a lover—each claim to know Marya, resulting in a deeply troubling loss of her self. It is no coincidence that Marya's family name, Knauer, is also a phonetic pun on the phrases “knower” and “know her.” Oates exposes the dynamic between one “knowing” an other—the knower—and the state of being known—“her”—as an aggressive relationship where the known person is turned into the subject of the knowing self.

Innisfail, Marya's hometown, is a violent place where the vulnerable are victims of family members and friends. As a child, Marya is eventually abandoned by her aggressive and unsympathetic mother (Vera) who tries to control her daughter by reminding Marya that she “knows” her: “‘Don't you love me? Why don't you love me?’ her mother would ask, staring her direct in the eye, shaking her. ‘You do love me—you're just the same as me—I know you!’” (8). In another context, Vera's “I know you!” would offer security to the child Marya. Instead, its purpose is to destabilize Marya's sense of autonomy, ringing as it does with accusations and assumptions. In order to claim Marya's love, Vera presumes to expose, accuse, then possess Marya's person. Marya learns from her mother that to be known signifies a loss of self, that relationships that propose familiarity, even love, deny her personal freedom. Made thus manifest by her mother, the state of being “known” becomes a nightmarish condition that continually haunts Marya through her adult life.

Beyond her mother's inadequate parenting, Marya's life in Innisfail is cruel and violent. Her father is beaten to death when she is nine years old (13-14); as a young girl, she is routinely sexually molested by her cousin (whose parents adopt Marya and her two younger brothers) (Chapter Two); her adoptive aunt treats her throughout her adolescence as a nuisance in their household; at primary school, she is regularly beaten up by older students (27); and in high school, at a good-bye party, she barely escapes group-rape by the boys in her graduating year (140-141). If Innisfail is home, the place where one is known most familiarly, then home threatens and betrays. Not a refuge from the potential assault of strangers, home breaks down its own members. We are not surprised that Marya leaves Innisfail after high school (she attends university in New York). From her childhood experiences, Marya establishes a connection between familiarity (i.e. home, mother) and being known (i.e. possessed, abused) that marks her adult career and relationships.

Marya develops a coping strategy for dealing with recurring violence that she characterizes as the state of being “not-there:”

She slipped away, she was there but not there, not-there became a place familiar to her. . . . Sometimes it had actual space like a hollow space she could curve into. . . . She couldn't be surprised and she couldn't be hurt . . . .

She could be not-there yet fully present to others . . . . [S]he could do anything in safety being not-there. (27)

What Marya exercises in being *not-there* is a disassociation between her physical presence and her psychological presence. Notice she is not *not-here*, but rather *not-there*, immediately placing distance between herself and her experiences. She wishes to separate her body's experiences from her direct mental involvement with whatever the physical part of her is experiencing. Marya's state of being not-there has everything to do with the assault she suffers by those who "know" her; it is her attempt at being unknown. If she separates her mind from her body, then she may imagine that no one has access to her real self. As a child, Marya learns to take comfort in removing her true self—"the world in here"—from "the world out there" (Preface).

Being *not-there* is an alarming psychological state for a young girl since it predicts personal break-down. However, Marya's coping strategy affords her a method to formulate anonymity that in turn enables her to establish herself successfully outside of her hometown. Upon leaving Innisfail—her life there culminating with the group assault of graduating boys<sup>2</sup>—Marya finds steady and quick success as a university student and then as a scholar in her own right. In an earlier section of the book (Chapter Three), Oates stresses how impossible it would be for Marya to succeed in or even survive Innisfail. In this chapter, we are introduced to Marya's high school teacher who has ambitious expectations for his students:

Mr. Schwilk talking [to his students], showing off his superior knowledge, using big words, making references to places . . . nobody in Innisfail knew anything about or cared. Only Marya listened . . . She thought, That was how my father died,<sup>3</sup> it was honor, it was—something of *spirit*: but nobody wants to talk about it. (56)

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<sup>2</sup> I feel compelled to note that one of boys who assaults Marya screams at her, "Who the hell do you think you *are*?" as she fights them off (141). Out of the repulsive and violent context, the question is poignant. It is my contention that Oates's *Marya: A Life* was greatly influenced by Alice Munro's 1978 story cycle *Who Do You Think You Are?*

<sup>3</sup> Marya's father, the book hints, was beaten to death because of his repeated attempts at unionizing fellow mill and mine workers (7).

Mr. Schwilk suffers a break-down for all his wasted efforts on students who ruthlessly mock him: “Mr. Shwilk had collapsed of strain, overwork, and exhaustion—total physical exhaustion” (76). Marya appreciates the man’s passion but “strikes [him] off [her] list” (76) because of his weakness in the face of the constant persecution. Mr. Schwilk’s experience confirms that Innisfail is no place for anyone with ambitions to rise above mediocrity. Marya’s move to New York is thus personally essential.

Moreover, underlying Marya’s need to leave Innisfail lays the narrative of the American mythos of self-advancement. In *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis discusses the dialogue conducted in American letters, between 1820 and 1860, about “a native American mythology” (1). This myth, Lewis clarifies,

saw life and history as just beginning. It described the world as starting up again under fresh initiative, in a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World. . . . America, it was said insistently from the 1820’s onward, was not the end-product of a long historical process . . . ; it was something entirely new. (5)

Lewis then explains what sort of individual was this new species of American:

The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. (5)

For Oates’s Marya, her venture into city-life is in keeping with this narrative. By moving away from Innisfail, Marya also separates herself psychologically from home to make herself anew in the anonymous environments of academic life. If we recall the Genesis story, we might imaginatively conceive of Innisfail as Eden after the Fall. The small town as “home” initially fails because of Vera’s damaging treatment and abandonment of her children. Thus, the thematic interplay between Home-as-(Fallen) Eden and Home-as-Mother is a helpful correlative for tracing Marya’s journey to the city and then back home again (to



find her mother) as metaphorically relevant (and not just plot). If home is where one is known and persecuted, then the city—the place that is not-home—is where one is anonymous and (supposedly) free.

Marya's first relationship away from home is with Imogene (Chapter Six), a beautiful and popular university student who is attracted to Marya. Marya is a foil for Imogene's socialite, flirtatious, unserious attitude towards life. Marya in turn is flattered by Imogene's interest in her, but eventually sabotages the relationship: "Friendship, Marya wrote in her journal, her heart pounding with rage—play-acting of an amateur type. Friendship, she wrote—a puzzle that demands too much of the imagination" (165). Afraid of the sudden familiarity and intimacy that Imogene demonstrates, Marya is emotionally winded by the friendship: "I can't afford you" (194). At their final mutual betrayal of each other, during a physical fight, Imogene cries out to Marya, "*I know you!*" (199). Their fight echoes Marya's struggle against her attackers during the high school graduation party in Innisfail; for, she shouts at Imogene trying to attack her, "Don't you touch me, you! What do you mean, touching *me!*" (199). Marya does not wish to be known. She is troubled by and resists familiarity, emotional or physical, thus she is angry that Imogene would assume to strike her physical self as much as she had tried to influence Marya's feelings about her personally.

Marya's conflicted feelings about Imogene coincide with her distress over her creative writing. While studying, Marya dedicates some of her time to submit short stories for publication and is successful (191). But the effort involved in writing taxes her:

Lately her "serious" writing frightened her. Not just the content itself—though the content was often wild, disturbing, unanticipated—but the emotional and psychological strain it involved . . . . [She] felt that another pulse beat would push her over the brink—into despair, into madness, into sheer extinction. (191)

Her relationship with Imogene, which she is unable to accept, parallels the intensity of her writing process: "What is fictitious in a friendship, Marya pondered, and what is "real": the world outside the head, the world inside: but

whose world? From whose point of view?" (193). While writing, *Marya* experiences a disturbing giving-over of herself, an experience with which she feels threatened even in her friendship with Imogene:

Imogene's friendship, which she knows she cannot keep for very long. . . Imogene who has a reputation for being as recklessly improvident with her female friends as with her male friends . . . . Why make the effort, *Marya* reasons, when all that matters in life is one's personal accomplishment? (178)

Detangling herself from Imogene's affections, brutally so even, affords *Marya* a return to her academic focus: "*Marya*'s record remained perfect [after a period of distress during her break-up with Imogene]" (200). Imogene fares considerably less well: "Imogene did poorly at the end of the semester, failing two subjects; and in place of transferring to another university she quit college altogether" (200).

We are not to applaud *Marya*'s academic success unequivocally. As Cologne-Brookes states, *Marya*'s "determination is a form of desperation" (145). In the Preface to the book, Oates laments *Marya*'s abandonment of her creative writing: "but I am not *Marya* Knauer (who stopped writing fiction because it disturbed her too deeply) . . . ." *Marya*'s abandonment of her friendship with Imogene, regardless of how we might critique the latter's character, underscores *Marya*'s unresolved dilemma about herself. Striving to create an identity unaffected by others, distanced from anyone who might claim to know her (Imogene herself shouts that precious and disturbing phrase, *I know you*), *Marya* must break-up with Imogene. Leaving off her creative writing is equally critical because the process elicits too much feeling: "Nothing is worth this [strain involved in writing], she thought, staring at herself in the mirror of the third floor bathroom—a ghastly hollow-eyed death's head of a face, hardly recognizable as *Marya*, girl of nineteen" (191). Friendship, which demands openness, and creative writing, which also demands a giving of oneself, are too dangerous for *Marya*.

Post-Imogene, *Marya* immerses herself in her studies and academic writing, putting aside personal considerations of herself and of others: *Marya* "had learned to think of herself as genderless, just as knowledge itself was genderless; just as the scholarly life was genderless. In truth she had learned in graduate school to think of *herself* scarcely at all—she was too absorbed in her work"

(202). But, as we learn rather quickly in this new chapter of Marya's life (Chapter Seven), she is immediately attracted to others who exhibit authority over herself. Imogene's sudden and imposing friendship not only flattered the isolated Marya, but her abrupt intimacy was, at first, irresistible to her. To be desired in a way her mother didn't want her, to be known and loved are strong pulls for Marya. As a graduate student, she falls again into an intense relationship, this time with one of her professors, Maximilian Fein.

This relationship, as with Imogene's, is not initiated by Marya:

She hadn't intended to fall in love with Fein, or even to fall under his spell, as so many people, male and female, evidently did. That wasn't Marya Knauer's style, that wasn't quite the way she saw herself in this phase of her career . . . . But of all her professors Fein was the one who most insisted upon a personal relationship. (203)

He asks her to house-sit for him and his wife while they are away and leaves an intimate note for her to find in their bedroom:

My dear brazen Marya—If you hold this in your hand, if you have ventured so far, I think it futile for us to keep up certain pretenses. I know you—I seem to have recognized you from the first—do not be frightened, my dear (do not be less brazen) if I shortly make my claim upon you. (219-220)

We again encounter that damning phrase, "I know you." Used by Vera and Imogene as a presumably exposing and certainly accusatory declaration, the phrase in this context wishes to confine Marya to Fein's imposing definition of her, to the frame of identity into which he places her. It is no coincidence that the next time Marya sees Fein, after finding his letter, she and her fellow students are engaged in a debate with Fein about free will.

. . . might there be an unexpected freedom in determinism, after all? It was Fein's playful position that if one's fate was decided beforehand, one was then free to do whatever one wished: for how was a "mistake" possible? How could "sin" exist? (224)

Fein's theories are in direct contradiction (intentionally, by Oates's crafting) to William James's philosophy, which Oates mentions in the Preface:

For James it is the fluidity of experience and not its Platonic "essence" that is significant, for truth is relative, ever-changing, indeterminate; and life is a process rather like a stream. Human beings forge their own souls by way of the choices they make, large and small, conscious and half-conscious. James's philosophy is ideally suited to the New World in which identity (social, historical, familial) is not permanent; it is a philosophy of the individual, stubborn, self-reliant, and ultimately mysterious.

Fein believes in the "objectivity of Truth" as well as "academic or scholarly freedom" (225), but Fein's ideas of freedom and truth are focused on moral responsibility, or rather the doing away with personal moral responsibility. Fein's "I know you" underscores his authoritarian personality that does not allow, in the end, for the desired other to deviate from his expectations and needs. If *Marya* is known, then she is identified in a permanent, ossified way.

Fein imagines *Marya* as a "powerful *mater dolorosa* by the Spaniard Murillo" (229), "*Marya* the beautiful one, *Marya* the adored" (232). *Marya* initially delights in this figuring of herself. She reacts to his description by "laughing in delight—being confronted with a *Marya* not herself, a fictitious *Marya*, worshiped if not precisely loved" (230). Fein doesn't know *Marya* well enough to understand that the guise he offers her—the *mater dolorosa* figure—enables *Marya* to hide herself underneath his proposed characterization of her. We understand that, when with Fein, *Marya* performs: "She hears herself speaking—she seems to see herself behaving in certain prescribed ways—but it is not altogether real to her . . ." (230). Fein in turn senses *Marya*'s personal reticence, as he asks her, "Are you ageless, then? A creature out of mythology? . . . You sometimes behave as if you were. As if your own self, your human self, were temporarily in abeyance" (234). Fein's rhetorical questions are ironic because he has desired *Marya* into the *mater dolorosa* frame, a figure of art portrayed as quiet and reticent, unassuming and undemanding, all of which suits him.

Their relationship becomes increasingly disturbing when Oates draws deliberate parallels between their sex and the abuse *Marya* suffered as a child at the hands of her cousin, Lee:

Sometimes he couldn't make love to her [because of his advanced age]. . . . He tried, he tried, half sobbing and clutching at her, pummeling her flesh, he tried and failed: she knew he despised her for his failure, she knew her breasts and belly and the insides of her thighs would carry the bruises for days. . . .

He gripped her hard, his weight was considerable for so thin a man, Marya held her breath, held her breath so as not to be hurt any more. (238)

We can compare the scene to the following, in Chapter Two:

Marya lay without moving. . . . She wasn't really hurt; he didn't really do anything to her, only rubbed himself fast and hard against her, chafing the soft skin on the inside of her thighs, poking against the crotch of her white cotton underpants. . . . If he hurt her she couldn't stop herself from crying but he rarely hurt her badly. . . . She was meek, docile, shrewd, not really there. (26)

The parallel underscores the unhealthiness of Marya's relationship with Fein. If we were initially unsure what to make of the sophisticated professor who appreciates Marya's talents, the male-centric sex signals our attention to Fein's egomania (if his adultery didn't already do the same). Although Marya does not wish to be rid of Fein (at least not right away), we are meant to understand the imbalanced nature of the relationship.

Fein's sexual aggression is not Oates's greatest write-off of Fein. In trying to establish herself professionally, Marya writes a political piece for publication that Fein arrogantly dismisses as drivel (236). Again later, he publicly scolds Marya at a lunch with a colleague. Fein's earlier passionate plea on behalf of "objective Truth" takes a direct turn at this lunch during which he agrees with his colleague that "scholarship as well as art [are] very likely, at bottom, only play and improvisation an illusion: it *played* at meaning in order to justify its extraordinary demands of time, spirit" (249). Marya is shocked and tries to suggest that Fein is mis-speaking: Marya "said that he was simply pretending to be cynical—it was only a pose—she *knew*—she *knew* he didn't mean what he was saying. . . ." (249). Fein belittles her in turn: ". . . Fein interrupted her again, to say in a low rapid furious voice that she was displaying the mentality of an average citizen of the fifteenth century—or perhaps it was that of the average citizen of twentieth-century America" (249). Marya is pained by this betrayal and by the rude realization that she does she "know" Fein: "So he lectured Marya, and she sat humiliated and shaken . . ." (249). Their relationship does not recover and in fact comes to an abrupt end thereafter with Fein's death (251).

At the final stages of their relationship, during which they argue frequently, Marya intuits something about Fein: "'You want me to be like yourself, a form of yourself, don't you!' she whispered fiercely. . . ." (247). She begins to understand that their relationship is an unhealthy strain on herself. She experiences serious psychological distress during the latter half of their affair:

“These days, these weeks,” she says to herself, “I am in control of the situation. I am in control, in control, of the situation” (239). The repetition of “in control” points up her loss of control as Marya finds herself collapsing under the pressure, losing mental lucidity and succumbing to nightmarish visions (251).

When Marya first becomes seriously anxious about the bond between herself and Fein, she composes an imaginative letter to Else Fein that demonstrates some confusion between desire and object:

Dear Else Fein, Marya composes, You must know by now that your husband no longer loves you, you must know that . . . he loves . . . Marya begins again: Dear Mrs. Fein, you must know . . . . Dear Mrs. Fein, Don't you know how he loves me . . . adores me . . . don't you know me, Marya . . . am I not beautiful to you too . . . am I not your Marya, your Marya . . . . (241-242)

As her relationship with her supervisor becomes more strained, she increasingly and obsessively composes letters to Else<sup>4</sup> (either imaginatively or on paper, though Else never receives the messages) until she transfers her infatuation with Fein over to Else. She contemplates at one point, “One day Else Fein will come to me and make her own claim,” a phrase that echoes her lover's hidden letter in the bedroom bureau (243).

Furthermore, it is Else who informs Marya of Fein's collapse and takes her to the hospital where he is dying (251-253). In Else's car, Marya pretends she is on a boat with Else: “She didn't know their destination. She had not been told. She shut her eyes and made her secret wish: that their journey would never end” (253). Her dream in Else's car hints at her longing for maternal care and security. Evidently standing in as the maternal figure largely absent in Marya's life, Else reminds the reader of Marya's trajectory away from home as an abandoned daughter towards the autonomous, anonymous life she strives to lead.

Marya develops another serious relationship later in her life, but this time the relationship is balanced. In Chapter Ten, Marya has left her teaching position to write political pieces as a freelancer and travels with her lover (313). She seems finally content and confidently settled in her milieu. At this stage in her life, she has developed an interest in human torture. The bulk of Chapter Ten describes her attendance at a conference where delegates describe and condemn corrupt world governments with an emphasis on the torture these governments use against their detractors. Marya's professional interest in the conference coincides with the

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<sup>4</sup> It is peculiar that Oates's narrator speaks of Maximilian Fein as Fein, but of Else as Else Fein or Mrs. Fein.

direction of her work as a writer; she is known as a “cultural critic” (297). More personally, however, torture is an extreme form of knowing an other. Its intention, in part, is to expose a self’s hidden “world inside” by extracting it painfully as if the truth of a person can be thus found (and destroyed). Marya is therefore appropriately interested in this conference and in torture because, conversely, she is interested in anonymity.

For instance, during the conference, she admires the English translator who interprets the international speakers:

the translator inhabited another degree of consciousness. He was protected by his glass booth and his electrical equipment. Nothing was so unspeakable . . . that the translator could not deal expertly with it . . . . If he was alarmed, or disgusted, or sickened, or humanly terrified, he gave no indication . . . .

Or was he untouched, Marya wondered . . . . (297)

Seeking always to disassociate herself from personal traumatic experiences, Marya sees the translator as embodying the ideal manner towards suffering. Indeed, she envies his ability to listen to and then translate the gruesome details he hears dispassionately, a skill she wishes were translatable to first-person experience: “She wanted to learn the simultaneous translator’s sleight of hand before it was too late. She wanted to convert human pain into human words, she wanted to convert the memory of intense emotion in the past into intense emotion in the present, and to be herself unmoved” (298). Marya is unable after all to effect this clinical separation of herself from experience, and she endures a break-down during the conference: “She was beginning to feel ill. It was futile to think otherwise. Her skin felt clammy, her heart beat erratically, waves of dizziness rose and fell and rose again . . . . I can’t break down, Marya thought, knowing she was breaking down . . . .” (310). After her break-down, Marya returns home to New York and visits with her doctor for a check-up that clears her of any ailment.

The first fifteen pages of Chapter Ten are dedicated to the build-up towards Marya’s break-down, but afterwards Marya plays down the event: “Marya had no theory [for why she collapsed]. She put the humiliating episode behind her, she thought it best not to dwell upon causes or consequences” (316).<sup>5</sup> The episode is thus summed up and dismissed. Why then the narratorial fuss about her collapse? At this point, Marya’s long-standing practice at being *not-there* has evolved into a deeply entrenched ability to keep her private self at bay from everything and everybody else, including herself. For example, we are told

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<sup>5</sup> This episode recalls Mr. Schwilk’s break-down in Chapter Three. Marya’s cold dismissal of her teacher parallels her clinical response to her own break-down.

that she had been thinking of her mother more regularly, wondering about Vera's fate: "Was she dead or alive; was she living anywhere in the state . . . . Perhaps she was in prison still [as per local rumors]. Or in a mental hospital" (320). We are also told that Marya considers her musings about her mother to be a matter of personal weakness: "She only thought of her mother (even the expression "mother" was forced) in weak moods, when she clearly wasn't herself" (320). In the next paragraph, we are amusingly informed that "These days, Marya thought, she often wasn't herself" (320). Moreover, we are told that Marya "ignored all notions that did not correspond to her knowledge of herself. She believed she was tough and shallow and unreliable, capable of total self-absorption . . . and consequently incapable of serious grief" (321). We might argue that Marya does not know herself.

The next chapter, Chapter Eleven, is the final one.<sup>6</sup> For once unattached to any lover and working independently, Marya intends to find her mother because she feels "time is running out" (327). She returns to Innisfail for an unusually extended period of time in order not only to locate her mother but to re-locate herself. Despite the worldly success and confidence she has finally established for herself, Marya seems at a loss about herself. The narrator comments, "Marya had not thought of her mother for years, or so she believed. Now, for no reason, for no logical reason, she thought of her constantly" (326). We know from Chapter Ten that Marya indeed had already begun to think of Vera before Chapter Eleven (which follows her collapse at the conference). Oates presents Marya's state of mind as confused. That Marya does not *believe* she had thought of her mother in a long while indicates that she is uncertain about herself. That she considers her reason for thinking of her mother as an illogical one suggests that Marya believes she is in control of her thoughts and emotions. However, Vera has insinuated herself into Marya's consciousness seemingly unprompted.

In inquiring about her mother, Marya considers her situation in comparison to other children who have been abandoned and adopted (327). She asks acquaintances of their experiences as adopted children in an attempt to make sense of her own situation:

Casually, betraying no emotion, as if she were merely assembling ideas and theories and "interesting" stories, Marya made inquiries about adoption . . . .

The subject was painful, why was Marya so curious?

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<sup>6</sup> I appreciate that Oates finished her novel with an eleventh chapter, and not with a classic twelfth. It perfectly suits the story's open-ended conclusion.



“I suppose because time is running out,” Marya said. (327)

Not having thought of her mother in years (as she claims), she seems to be wanting to make-up the lost time of not having considered herself abandoned and adopted (but rather autonomous and anonymous). Marya makes an important personal transition here in shaping her search for her mother as an effort to connect her own identity to Vera. She is as curious about who Vera is (25 years later) as she is about who Marya is as the daughter of Vera: “Marya knew that her mother resembled her; which is to say, she resembled her mother. Consequently there should have been no inordinate mystery . . . ” (327). When she is warned by a friend that discovering her mother “will change your life more than you can calculate” (325), Marya answers, “That’s the point;” she accedes to this “crack-up”—a type of break-down<sup>7</sup>—as a positive and necessary disruption to the person she has made of herself.

After receiving information from her aunt about Vera’s whereabouts, Marya posts a letter to her mother (“in truth, numberless versions of a letter” [337]). She is unsure about her intentions in writing her mother—“she discovered that she didn’t know what she wanted; she hadn’t the faintest idea” (338)—but upon receiving a reply from Vera, she feels “As if a dream secret and prized in her soul blossomed outward, taking its place, asserting its integrity, in the world . . . ” (338). I read this blossoming dream as a metaphor for the person Marya has wished to be but had buried in her survival personality of *not-there*, genderlessness, and anonymity. Creighton and Binette agree: “The mother’s story is never entirely a separate entity, but there is hope in the daughter’s attempt to incorporate her mother into her life. This return is not a regressive movement; on the contrary, it is a step toward autonomy through the necessary revision of this most powerful relationship” (454). The excitement and dread she exhibits upon receiving her mother’s reply points to her desire to know Vera as her mother: “She placed the envelope carefully on a table and sat in front of it staring, smiling, a pulse beating in her forehead” (338). Marya delights in seeing her name written on the envelope: “How odd to see her name—Marya Knauer—*her* name—in a handwriting that belonged to her mother, a handwriting she did not recognize” (338). Here, Marya marvels at her identity being scrawled out by her mother’s unfamiliar penmanship, a conflicting moment of familiarity and strangeness. She is open to the possibilities of knowing and being known without the stress of her past relationships. She is nervous but in opening Vera’s envelope, she allows herself to open to the person of her mother: “Finally she opened the envelope. She took out a sheet of white stationery with trembling fingers, and there was a color

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<sup>7</sup> Marya says to herself, “Marya, this [meeting with your mother] is going to cut your life in two” (338).

snapshot as well, she dropped it clumsily to the floor, stooped to pick it up, suddenly frightened, her heartbeat quick and suffocating” (338).

The final image of *Marya* is Marya looking hard into the blurred photo of her mother: “The print was just perceptibly blurred as if whoever had taken the picture had moved the camera at precisely the wrong moment. Marya went to the window, holding the snapshot to the light, and stared and stared, waiting for the face to shift into perfect focus” (338). Marya gathers from Vera’s snapshot that she resembles her mother in looks—“Marya’s own cheekbones and nose. Her eyes” (338)—but since the photo is blurred, we understand that Marya will not find her permanent identity in Vera. Marya tries to see Vera’s face in perfect focus, but the whole story of *Marya* warns us against the desire and assumption that one can finally, permanently, truly know someone else, even one’s own self. It is appropriate that Vera’s photo is blurred, and appropriate still that Marya struggles to put her mother’s face into focus. Oates wants Marya to struggle, after years of failing to struggle past her personal demons, and to understand that a blurred other is a healthy reality of individual identity. As Cologne-Brookes states, Marya’s “story . . . has been marred by a lack of self-knowledge revealed in her relationships with others” (153). Up to now, her “worldview betrays her until finally she, too, recognizes this and . . . seeks to revise it” (143) by reconnecting with Vera. The conclusion to *Marya* embodies “a remarkable revisionary quality” as Marya “display[s] a readiness to move forward” with her life (Creighton and Binette 454).

From the story’s onset, Marya actively suffers the loss of her mother and the pain of abandonment. She creates a not-there self in order to cope with abuse and betrayal—at the hands of her mother, indeed, as well as those of Lee, of Imogene, and of Fein—that stifles her identity as someone’s daughter who needed her mother to protect and guide her. Her final break-down at the international conference, despite her own easy dismissal of the event, realizes Marya’s transition “back home.” We are not privy to Marya’s actual meeting with Vera, but such a meeting is unnecessary to the accomplishment of the final scene. The blurred photo complements Oates’s treatise in her Preface about what it means to know, what are the consequences to the other when one claims to know her. We will never know Vera; nor will we know this new Marya who is experiencing simultaneously a return home and a transition towards another future, if we ever knew her at all.

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