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SEX, VIOLENCE, AND PHILOSOPHY IN YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS

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In the summer of 1987, television sets across America displayed a scene that might have held thousands of pugilistic enthusiasts immobilized in mid-air. Just before the HBO showing of the Mike Tyson-Bonecrusher Smith title fight, a middle-aged ectomorphic lady with gentle eyes and a soft voice previewed with incontestable professional authority the likely exchanges of left hooks, right crosses, and tooth-loosening uppercuts to the jaw. Thus did Joyce Carol Oates, devoted boxing fan since childhood and author of a recent book of reminiscences about the sport, cheerfully demolish a long-standing wall of gender demarcation.

It was appropriate that this televised vignette occurred simultaneously with the publication of *You Must Remember This*, a novel in which boxing attains serious cultural meanings. Clearly violence, that male preserve of power so purely rendered in the boxing ring, exerts a subversive appeal upon this author's feminist sensibility. In considering the role of violence in her latest family chronicle, it is important to trace Oates' distribution of responses to violence among her four main characters: two male intellectuals, one pubescent girl (a future artist), and one professional master of violence, the boxing champion Felix. Perhaps these four figures represent a composite of their author's personality, reflecting her extreme diversity as philosophical novelist, women's advocate, and boxing enthusiast.

For Joyce Carol Oates, violence is literally an issue of philosophical significance. An English major and philosophy minor at Syracuse University (where she earned valedictorian and Phi Beta Kappa honors), Oates sprinkles references to favorite writers and thinkers throughout this novel. Although Oates says that "art is mostly unconscious and instinctive,"¹ her dialectical pattern of allusions in *You Must Remember This* suggests a deliberate structuring of ideas along the lines of intellectual counterpoint. The two opposing heavyweights in this ideological match are Schopenhauer and Spinoza, each supported by appropriate handlers and seconds.

The Schopenhauer "group" includes such pessimistic thinkers as Thomas Hobbes, Mark Twain, Nietzsche, Theodore Dreiser and Jack London, Dostoyevsky (*The Devils*), Ecclesiastes, Shakespeare as tragedian,

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Sophocles, and Jonathan Swift.² In some instances, readers are left to infer their own melancholy connections to Twain's late misanthropy, to Dreiser's determinism, to Hobbes' sense of life as "nasty, brutish, and short," and to the final injustice of *Ecclesiastes*: "that which is crooked cannot be made straight" (I:15). But elsewhere, Oates explicitly refers to Sophocles' envy of non-being in *Oedipus at Colonus* (p. 349), twice to King Lear's madness (pp. 198, 211), and three times to Swift's notorious defamations of humanity, such as calling men "the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth" (p. 199).

But of course the most significant member of this reference group is Schopenhauer himself, who appears four times by name and once by implication (pp. 34, 80, 109, 111, 429). Schopenhauer's chief work, *The World As Will and Idea* (1818), proposed that the whole of reality is the expression of a Cosmic Will that manifests itself in irresistible natural forces ranging from gravitation in the world of physics to sexuality in the realm of organic life. For each individual the Will is identified with the pleasure, pain, and desire he knows within his own body; the universe outside his body cannot be so experienced and so comes to him as "Idea": "Besides will and idea nothing is known to us or thinkable."³ Everywhere on Earth the Will discloses its mindless, amoral character in the violence by which life maintains and propagates itself: ". . . Each animal can only maintain its existence by the constant destruction of some other. Thus the will to live everywhere preys upon itself. . . ." By extending this activity through the continuum of time, and thus deferring the blessed peace of eternal oblivion, sexuality is the most crucial evidence of the mindless amorality of the Will, according to Schopenhauer's scheme of things.

Counterpointed against Schopenhauer's and Swift's radical pessimism are a cluster of references centered upon Benedict Spinoza, arguably the most admirable philosopher who ever lived. Among his seconds are Bishop Berkeley (whose tree-in-the-forest argument is cited [p. 425]), St. Augustine (whose "God is a circle" metaphor appears [p. 222]), George Bernard Shaw (disciple of the Life Force [p. 38]), the American Transcendentalist writers Walt Whitman (p. 72) and Henry David Thoreau (pp. 72, 295, 298), William James (p. 111), and James Joyce (strongly implicit in the novel's closure). Strung through the text are six references to Spinoza himself, three of them explicit (pp. 76, 80, 198) and three implicit (pp. 108, 111, 431). William Blake's concept of Energy as "Eternal Delight" is also implicitly present in this Spinozan cluster, together with Blake's assertion that "without Contraries is no progression."⁵ Only in the light of her philosophical contraries can Oates' dialectic between violence and control in *You Must Remember This* be properly assessed.

From the relative proportions of her materials, it would seem that Oates has stacked her contraries heavily in favor of Schopenhauer. To all appearances, the blind pitiless Will has plunged the whole of reality under

its rule of moral insanity, whether in the private realm of sexual relations or the largest issues affecting the public weal. Elias Bond's sermon sums up the public scene in the 1950s: "The twentieth century thus far has been a half century of unmitigated horror. . . . The Great War, the Holocaust, the unleashing of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—these three events have been the touchstone until now of our humanity" (p. 337). And Lyle Stevick repeatedly uses Schopenhauer to explain the chaos of individual life around him: "There was Schopenhauer saying we are all in the grip of the blind Will, the Will of nature. . . ." (p. 34).

What Stevick finds most appalling about "the blind brainless pitiless Will" (p. 80) is its generation of the sexual instinct, "the mad blind unthinking desire of the species to reproduce itself" (p. 429). This Schopenhauerean view of sexuality is tragically amplified by setting the book in what has become the fatuously sentimentalized 1950s. From the female point of view the sexual mores of the time comprised a theocratically punitive code in Catholic communities like Oates' hometown. With sex education largely prohibited, with contraceptives legally denied to unmarried people, and with abortion anathemized by both church and state, female sexuality became the vehicle for countless personal tragedies. Oates' victims of these taboos experience every variety of sexual violence, from forced marriage and compulsory motherhood to the silent despair of sensual starvation, a syndrome best exemplified by the most pious Catholic, Mrs. Stevick, who for eighteen years has practiced the only form of fertility control that is both permissible and reliable: a celibate marriage.

The males of the Stevick family are victims of more overt forms of violence: the political violence of McCarthyism in Mr. Stevick's case; the military violence of the Korean War in brother Warren's; the macho violence of the boxer's code (amplified by Mafia connections) for Felix; and the environmental violence of the unprotected workplace for all of them: "grit everywhere you couldn't help but breathe. . . . the real poisons in the air you can't even detect" (p. 11). And four of the family members touch upon the final violence of suicide: grandfather Karl Stevick kills himself; Enid attempts suicide; Lyle rigs and tests his suicide rope; and Felix plans to crash in his car.

Looming apocalyptically over the whole decade was the newly conceived menace of nuclear holocaust, exacerbated by Stalin's appropriation of the Bomb in the darkest years of the Cold War. Mr. Stevick's bomb shelter seems less preposterous to those who remember that William Faulkner had begun the decade (in December, 1950) using the august pulpit of Nobel acclaim to inveigh against fear of the Bomb as the great succubus of the age: "There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?"

To move (with Oates) from that global scale of terror to the microcosm of the back yard offers little relief. From its opening sentence, about Enid's

"release into Death" by swallowing forty-seven aspirin tablets, Oates' novel is saturated with random violence. Amid Enid's suicide preparations, the prologue makes room for a particularly gruesome *auto-da-fe* that both symbolizes the general victimization and justifies Enid's death wish: "She remembered a mourning dove the boys had caught in the vacant lot then dosed with gasoline then lit with a match. The bird's wild wings flapping . . . ablaze, its beak opened emitting a terrible shriek" (p. 5). And the main text, from its opening paragraph forward, delivers a crushing list of Schopenhauerean confirmations: a ninth grade girl, probable victim of incest, "aborted with a coat hanger, maybe it was an ice pick" (p. 9); "Sunday morning he [an ex-GI] cut everybody's throat with a butcher knife not even sparing his eighty-nine-year-old grandmother" (pp. 9-10); pictures in *Life* magazine of "extermination camp victims . . . piles of the dead" at Buchenwald (pp. 10-11); reappearance of the mourning dove sprinkled with gasoline and set on fire (p. 12); a soldier and his woman companion gas themselves to death in a car (p. 13); a boy on a bicycle dies in a crash, "blood spilling out of his mouth, ears, like you'd squeeze paint out of a tube" (p. 16).

Worsening the impact of it all is the failure of Church, State, and family to afford protection from the world's chaos. The McCarthyist hysteria is particularly instructive in this regard, gathering within its ruinous compass all three of these most basic institutions. Wherever he looks, Oates' representative victim of McCarthyism sees Church and State colluding with his tormentor: "If Lyle Stevick went to mass he was likely to endure passionate sermons from the pulpit extolling Joseph McCarthy, that brave fearless bred-in-the-bone Catholic patriot" (p. 71). And within the family his wife sides with the adversary: "Hannah was an adamant supporter of McCarthy's as well, convinced the army was hiding any number of communists" (p. 197). Church teachings also pronounce damnation on several of the Stevicks with regard to both their birth and death: young Felix, as a son of a divorced Catholic, is devastated to learn that he "was illegitimate in the eyes of the Church: a bastard" (p. 164); and his father Karl, for preferring suicide to death by cancer, falls under the doctrine that "suicides are absolutely damned—in Hell, not in purgatory" (p. 51).

Perhaps the worst effect of Church training is seen in the adolescent Enid, whose way of coping with the discrepancy between daily life and Church dogma is to develop a split personality. As Enid Maria she attends mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, carefully "allowing the communion wafer to melt on her tongue" and faithfully going to confession (p. 36). But her alter ego, Angel-face, undermines her piety with ridicule: "Enid said her acts of contrition as rapidly as she could. . . . Oh shit, Angel-face said, yawning, grinning—when is this going to *end*?" (pp. 36-37). Shoplifting, incest, attempted suicide, and abortion soon figure as Angel-face's contribution to Enid's list of sins that are not confessed

and forgiven. Like Poe's Imp of the Perverse, the id-like side of this split personality appears finally ascendant. Rather than killing her physically, the suicide attempt destroys only the "good" Enid, permitting her psychological rebirth independent of Catholic authority, as if in deference to her alter ego: "Enid Maria you poor sad cunt, Angel-face said coldly. Why don't you die" (p. 54).

The other Stevick to "die" and be reborn is brother Warren, whose wound in Korea precipitates a new identity. Originally, he joined the battle in the spirit of an American Catholic patriot: "*If the UN (the US!) loses in Asia then Europe is next*" (p. 65). But his family finds it disconcerting when he begins to write of himself in the third person, sometimes enclosing his name in quotation marks ("Pvt. Stevick"), as though he considered himself an invented character. Eventually, like Enid, Warren undergoes a fundamental change of identity, though in a direction entirely different from his sister's. Initially it appears that Warren has changed for the worse, turning into a callous killing machine who loves to bayonet the enemy—"sticking Chinks when they're down but not quite dead" (p. 68). Even the boy's father now admits the change: "Whoever was writing those letters wasn't really their son" (p. 68). Then his second wound, at Imjin, removed Warren from Korea and completed his transformation.

The first sign of Warren's new birth is his physical reconstruction: "... He even had a put-together face as he called it—the seams about his jaw weren't perfectly aligned even after two operations, ... the bright plastic teeth ... perhaps *too* perfect to be believed" (p. 107). Speaking with Enid about his "death" in Korea" (p. 110), Warren looks back upon his soldier's career as a sort of irruption of the Schopenhauerean Will: "The enemy awaited them like night, like time waiting to obliterate the flesh. ... What was once human quickly became mere water rushing into water, filling the universe with a delirium of purposeless motion" (pp. 110–11).

Warren's new philosophy, which his priest-uncle Domenic suspects is "an Oriental sort of mysticism" (p. 109), appears to combine Spinozan pantheism with the Saintliness of William James. Spinoza's definition of "the highest good" as "the knowledge of the union existing between the mind and the whole of nature"⁶ finds its parallel in Warren's "revelation of a common bond that one flesh is all flesh just as one spirit is all spirit that is God" (p. 108). And the other imperative of Warren's new identity, "now I am born again, he thought. ... And for what?" (p. 109), is a set of precepts modelled after William James.

The Jamesian connection seems most compelling in Warren's memory of the chaplain's sermon: "We must hand on to future generations all that is sacred of the past. ... We are one, we are many. ... *We the living are the only link in the precious chain between the past and the future*" (p. 111). The phrase "we are one, we are many" evokes William James' formulation of the One and the Many, which he considered "the final question of

philosophy," the question whether the universe is finally a single entity (monism) or whether it consists of myriad discrete units, each with its separate integrity and purpose (pluralism).⁷

The Pragmatic effect of James's Pluralistic view is his activist stance toward religion: "I believe that each man is responsible for making the universe better and that if he does not do this it will be in so far left undone."⁸ This view of life, in turn, shapes the concept of Saintliness that William James elucidated in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Replacing the monastic asceticism of medieval times, James says, is the idealization of "helpfulness in general human affairs," so that "to be of some public or private use is also reckoned as a species of divine service."⁹ Not only does Warren's work in Adlai Stevenson's campaign fit this precept about public service, his larger purpose also sustains the Jamesian edict about general human affairs: "We must reduce human suffering here on earth in the flesh!—in our lifetimes!" (p. 109). And Warren's first step toward that objective is to echo James' call for a moral equivalent of war:¹⁰ "This means," Warren said, "the end of war, the abolishment of the weapons of war" (p. 108).

The other intellectual in this novel, Mr. Stevick, shares Warren's fear of war but not his hope for a political answer. Hoping at most that "the madmen running the world held off with their bombs for another two or three months" (p. 289), he contracts his perimeter of defense to the scale of the family: "First the bomb then the firestorm then the fallout radiation, inescapable, . . . all a man had in his control was . . . whether he could save himself and his family from nuclear death" (p. 286). But clearly Mr. Stevick's backyard bomb shelter is more than a political-military defense mechanism. It also, with the reference to "control" in this passage, relates to the central struggle of the novel. The governing theme that all these people share in common—intellectuals like Mr. Stevick and Warren, and non-intellectuals like Enid and Felix—is their struggle in the face of violence to achieve control. Whereas the intellectuals ransack religious and philosophical sources for some sense of control, the non-intellectuals devise private systems of sanctuary from the chaos of the world.

Prior to her first encounter with Eros, Enid's sanctuary from the world's violence was her bedroom with its escape-fantasy wallpaper: ". . . Inside the wallpaper. . . there were pathways, curving mountain roads, places to hide, rivers, trees, mountains, cliffs, lakes, islands" (p. 23). Its contrapuntal opposite is the vacant lot nearby that symbolizes the learning ground of reality: the site of the bird-burning, of the two suicides in an automobile, of random sexual cruelty. And next to the lot is the footbridge crossing the river under the railroad track, a terrifying symbol of the transition to adult life that lies ahead but which here submits to the power of the wallpaper: "Then suddenly. . . she was alone on the footbridge frightened a train might rush by overhead before she could get off, but

no train ever came wasn't that the promise?—not here in her room in her bed . . . feeling her soul slip thinly from her into the wallpaper where there was no harm, never any danger" (p. 23).

Predictably for this fourteen-year-old, the first train to come over that bridge is an express train named Desire. Pubescent Enid goes ominously out of control as she discovers masturbation, "the secret muscles between her legs frenzied and racing, contracting against her fingers" (p. 56). Having already crossed that bridge, the older Stevicks demonstrate variations on the theme of sexual chaos. Following a conventional pattern, older sister Geraldine has turned her unwed pregnancy into a happy if mindless role as Catholic wife and mother. Ironically, father and mother Stevick had followed the same hapless path into matrimony, and Enid's favorite sister (Lizzie) seems likely to follow the family drift toward sexual danger: she last appears as a stripper working near Times Square.

But Schopenhauerean sex is not the only bringer of chaos into the lives of men. Political violence emmeshes the Stevick family in a wide range of effects exacerbated by the Korean War. The electrocution of the Rosenbergs (whose death sentence derived subliminally from the slaughter of American youths in Korea) becomes Enid's model of self-willed death: "Enid loved the Rosenbergs because they wanted to die and . . . were going to die by their own decision really" (p. 125). The triumph of Eisenhower over Adlai Stevenson—another event affected by the War—leaves brother Warren "awash in humiliation, shame, anger, for what did anything matter now? The greatest American of his time had been scornfully repudiated by his fellow citizens" (p. 116). And the War-inflamed McCarthyist hysteria assaults not only Lyle Stevick's political sensibility but his whole motive for living. Arrested on a crackpot charge of "suspected subversion" and "promulgating of Communist propaganda" (p. 70), Lyle emerges from his interrogation so "finished . . . broken . . . humiliated" (p. 76) as to contrive the second near-suicide scene: "He tossed one end of the rope over a beam . . . tested it hard, pulling on it, grunting" (p. 80).

At this moment, Lyle's salvation hangs on a precarious impasse of philosophical contraries, Schopenhauer versus Spinoza: "*All things yearn to persist in their being* save for those liberated from the blind brainless pitiless Will" (p. 80).¹¹ Though his life depends on it, the victory of Spinoza over Schopenhauer deepens Lyle's humiliation in this episode. "*All things yearn to persist in their being*, Spinoza had said . . . and it was true, it was true, therein lay mankind's shame" (p. 76). Spinoza's vitalism, after all, may only be an emanation of Schopenhauer's blind pitiless Will, and to think of the Will as God (as Spinoza did) does not redeem its moral insanity: "There was Schopenhauer saying we are all in the grip of the blind Will, the Will of nature which their pious Uncle Domenic [a priest] would never acknowledge, seeing the Will as God—the Will as God! a sorry notion" (p. 34). Yet from their struggle against Schopenhauerean force, whether

that force is internalized in one's sexuality or objectified in one's historical environment, Oates's characters derive their life-meaning. Whereas Spinoza had denigrated men's lack of control over feeling—"The impotence of man to govern or restrain the emotions I call bondage"¹²—Oates honors the struggle to control emotion, however unavailing: "I believe that the storm of emotion constitutes our human tragedy, if anything does. It's our constant battle with nature (Nature), trying to subdue chaos outside and inside ourselves, occasionally winning small victories."¹³

Lyle Stevick's small but crucial victory is his role as provident father, gained against severe constraints. To Felix's question "what's it like being a father?" (p. 282), Lyle claims "it's the crucial thing in my life" (p. 283) but admits the defenselessness of this condition: "Christ, it makes you sick and dizzy thinking about it, you want them to be happy, to be safe, but you can't control. . . a god-damned thing that happens to them" (p. 284). The greatest threat to fatherly control is poverty. True to her own working-class origins (her father was a tool-and-die designer who belonged to the UAW), Oates has observed that "the greatest realities are physical and economic. . . . Intellectuals have forgotten. . . how difficult it is to make one's way up from a low economic level. . . . It's so difficult. You have to go through it. You have to be poor."¹⁴ Lyle Stevick bears out her thesis, trapped for life in the shabby store he rents in "an old building [that] was a constant heartache to him—rotting shingles and unreliable furnace, the damned cellar that flooded with every heavy rainstorm, the termites, mice, rats" (p. 37). Yet he has made strong efforts to train his mind in literature, history, and philosophy (making him vulnerable to McCarthyite suspicion); has developed a salesman's winning personality (as toastmaster at Annemarie's wedding, "he was in control" [p. 47]); and has assumed the crushing burden of fatherhood: "Was there a greater horror, a worse nightmare?—a father powerless to protect his children. Jesus, his nerves tore like silk at the thought" (p. 81).

Because the police have raided his store, Lyle's secret "place of refuge" in the basement is desecrated (p. 80), causing his creation of a more defensible sanctuary, his backyard bomb shelter. Its correspondence to Enid's bedroom attests its psychic meaning: "It was Mr. Stevick's practice to check out the shelter every day before supper. Sometimes he lay on one of the lower bunks. . . his eyes half closed, seeing the silver-papered walls as if they weren't walls at all but a mysterious part of his own soul" (p. 325). Driven by the world's chaos into a hole in the ground, here at last Lyle Stevick attains a measure of control.

Of the four main characters, Felix Stevick displays the strongest degree of control, sustained against the maximum violence of the boxing career that he chooses for his vocation. Felix's secret of control centers on his emotional independence, beginning with his self-discipline in the ring: "If he gets hotheaded he's through but if he stays cool he'll be all right—he

knows that" (p. 25). He also is totally self-contained in his relations with others: "It was said of Felix Stevick that you never got to know him, the man he was behind his smile and bared teeth" (p. 54). And of all the main characters he is least inclined toward philosophy. Concerning the question of life's purpose—whether (as Claudette says) "human beings are here to love one another, . . . to bear new life in the image of God"—Felix is contented in his ignorance: "Felix said he hadn't any idea why human beings were on earth" (p. 176). Not thinking too much is his version of a bomb shelter.

With his penchant toward male violence, his amoral (eventually incestuous) sexual virility, his disinterest in abstract ideas, and his lack of self-consciousness, Felix comes the closest of any characters to embodying the pure Schopenhauerean Will. He does, however, experience a sense of changed identity after his first sexual encounter with his niece: ". . . He couldn't believe he was doing it—any of it. Standing off to one side astonished, not even disgusted or ashamed, just not believing he was capable of such a thing" (p. 162). This loss of control over his own identity leads to a generalized formulation: "Is there any mystery like who you finally turn out to *be*, Felix wondered" (p. 401). So Felix too shares in the general search for control.

The first time Felix lost self-control it cost him mightily: "The great mistake of his career. . . turned out to be the final mistake of his career, getting angry with an opponent getting emotional trading punches. . . suckered into a brawl with Gino Corvino of all people" (pp. 166–67). Enid's suicide attempt produces the central experience of lost control for Felix, changing what had been a casual rape into "this connection between them now, this bond": "He supposed he did love her—in a way. Seeing how she'd . . . almost died, for him—for the idea of him—which no other woman or girl had ever done" (p. 168).

For both parties to this relationship, a battle for control underlies the erotic affinities that bond them together. In the absence of any ideology, Felix places his hope for control in a private symbol of sanctuary, his automobile. From the first, his identity has rested largely upon that quintessential American motif. In the wedding scene where uncle and niece first have erotic contact with each other—dancing to the music from which Oates derived her title ("As Time Goes By")—Felix displays his playboy sensibility in the style of his car (a "new Studebaker convertible. . . with maroon trim and a dazzling amount of chrome") and in his indifference to traffic law, double-parking the car for the duration of the wedding (p. 51). As soon as his income permits, he moves up to a fancier model, "a royal blue Packard hardtop with a V-8 engine, beige leather interior, wide whitewall tires" (p. 95), which becomes his instrument of seduction regarding Enid: "'Want to go for a ride, sweetheart?' Uncle Felix with car keys in hand. . . 'Want to be my sweetheart, sweetheart?'" (p. 100).

For the three-year duration of their affair, Felix and Enid continue to spar for control in terms of his automobile. At the outset, he plans to match her suicide attempt (if it is successful) by crashing his car (p. 161). Later, while cruising in his Cadillac, he sees her with some boys at school, "all of them talking together, laughing" (p. 312), and he forcibly carries her off from these sexual rivals with another burst of skilled but lawless driving: "Ten miles above the speed limit, snaking his way in and out of traffic. . ." (p. 314). Although she bolts from the car at a red light, he drags her back inside and takes her to a place where his car equates with sexual dominion: "Beyond the deserted playing fields they made love in the front seat of Felix's car exactly as he'd wanted" (p. 321). But it is an ominous sign for his sexual sovereignty when Enid begins to take driving lessons (p. 267).

It is appropriate that Felix loses control of his car and of his love affair simultaneously. The day after his Mercury is totaled in a crash, Felix learns from his niece—while they are riding in his brand new Lincoln Continental—that she is pregnant. His reflex is to "slip the punch" of this news as he had always done in the ring, or as he just yesterday shucked off his minor accident injuries: "You mean you think you're pregnant" (p. 333). But her long, vain wait for her menstruation effects growing independence. Identifying herself with the dove the boys had set aflame (p. 370), she refuses to fellate him (p. 347), instead developing a deep revulsion toward their affair: "*You poor stupid cunt, you asshole—the voice of that other Enid rose bitterly—letting him fuck you like that. Letting him do whatever he wanted!*" (p. 346).

After the breakup of his romance with Enid, Felix's loss of control culminates in episodes of uncontrolled violence related to his automobile. In the first of these, he uses his boxing savvy to beat savagely the pimp of a girl he plans to pick up, but he loses the girl: "He turned to ask the girl did she need a ride anywhere?—but she was gone" (p. 404). Later, after a series of bloody barroom fights, he is arrested for "'reckless' and 'impaired' driving in the city. . . sixty-five miles an hour in a thirty-mile zone," a transgression made worse when "he told the judge right then he'd drive his fucking car whenever he wanted" (p. 408). Shortly thereafter, two near-accidents convince Felix to give up driving his car altogether—"[he] left it parked in the street, walked away" (p. 408)—and his car-less condition seems to correlate with general haplessness as he sustains a severe beating by a cripple and his buddy in the men's room, "a man lying on a filthy tile floor being kicked by two rummies, kicked and hit with a clumsy flying crutch" (p. 410).

If this ending of Part III (entitled "Shelter") were also the end of the novel, Oates' Schopenhauerean bias would be confirmed beyond a doubt. The four main characters—Felix, Enid, Warren, and Mr. Stevick—would then comprise a quartet of victims of the blind, mindless Will, overcome

by violent forces beyond their control: poverty, alcohol, sexual compulsion, the malefactions of contemporary political history. The brief Epilogue, however, appears designed to counteract the Dreiserian impact of the main text. Even Schopenhauer acquires a positive sheen in his final tacit appearance. Enid's new beginning at the Westcott School of Music, culminating in her closing epiphany at the piano (p. 424), evokes Schopenhauer's glorious tribute to music as the greatest of the arts: "The composer reveals the inner nature of the world . . . in a language which his reason does not understand. . . ." ¹⁵

The primary purpose of the Epilogue, however, is to celebrate what is most worth remembering in *You Must Remember This*. To this end, the four main characters appear in quick succession for the common purpose of paying homage to the power of family love. Oates delivered her own sentiments on this subject in several interviews. To Joe David Bellamy, she said: "One always thinks of a few other people, day after day; there's no escape. A father, a mother, a few beloved people—that is the extent of the universe, emotionally."¹⁶ Alfred Kazin, likewise, transcribed her remarks about "the emotion of love, . . . the essence of what I am writing about. . . . I look back upon the novels I've written, and I say, yes, this was my subject."¹⁷ And in *Commonweal*, she mentions her "whole lot of short stories about love . . . mainly in family relationships: mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and that sort of thing."¹⁸ Characteristically, it is Warren who best formulates Oates' theme in the Epilogue. Writing to Enid, he ruminates: "The blood ties are so powerful and deep and mute. Something terrifying there. How we feel about one another" (p. 416).

From their respective distances, Warren (in Philadelphia) and Enid (in Rochester, during her first absence from home) observe the paradox that only in separation can love gain definition. In the Prologue, when the family was together, they were dangerously detached from each other: Enid's suicide preparations occur while her family is gathered about that newly-created hearth-substitute, the TV set, enjoying Arthur Godfrey (p. 4); and her word of salvation in lieu of the Catholic creed ("Only say the word and my soul shall be healed" [p. 5]) is death. In the Epilogue that word has changed to love. While away from her family, Enid intuitively understands her father's affective reason (beyond money-saving) for wanting her to attend the local teachers' college (p. 417), and she likewise infers the meaning of the quilt her mother had sent with her: "So many hours of Hannah Stevick's life sewn into it . . . so much love, how could *they* [the daughters] ever repay her?" (p. 419).

Even Felix, battered unconscious as the main text ends, is born to a different identity when he recovers consciousness in the Epilogue. Originally a paradigm of self-containment, Felix now plans to be a family man: He will get married, move to a new city, and invest his money only in legitimate

enterprises, though his attachment to the Stevicks continues as before in his offer of money to help Enid through college.

But the main event of the Epilogue is the resurgence of Eros—the origin of all family life—in the middle-aged parents. As if to contest the issue, the philosophers hitherto scattered throughout the text assemble for a final review and, it turns out, a final dismissal. As against the power of Eros, all the philosophers and their ideologies are insufficient and irrelevant. Bishop Berkeley the Idealist is the first to go, his dilemma of the tree falling in a forest (is it real if nobody sees it?) being dismissed by Hannah as “a fool question” (p. 425). Then Lyle undercuts Schopenhauer’s theory of sexuality with the thought that “surely there was more to it than that—else why such anguish, such hope?” (p. 429). Lyle further questions Spinoza’s idea of man loving God without being loved in return: “The beauty of God, that He didn’t answer back? Where was the logic there?” (p. 431). This reference recalls Oates’ dedication in *Son of the Morning*: “For One Whose absence is palpable as any presence.” And, of most immediate relevance, Lyle challenges the cause of his eighteen years of married celibacy, the Roman Catholic doctrine against birth control: “The celibate priests telling the faithful what to do. . . birth control absolutely forbidden. . . . If you died you went straight to hell” (p. 431).

But in the conclusion, the deadliest adversary of Eros (and hence of family feeling too) is neither Schopenhauer nor the Church. Rather, it is Jonathan Swift’s nauseous revulsion against human carnality, which Lyle Stevick relates to the overweight, middle-aged wife whose body he means to penetrate: “Everywhere so much bulbous fatty flesh you could sink into forever and be suffocated” (p. 435). It is a prospect that nearly does defeat Lyle’s erection: “Jesus he was losing it—the beat, the rhythm— . . . his penis growing limp, sweat running down his sides” (p. 435).

What rescues Lyle from this failure, allowing him to resume control over his erotic life, is a final rush of desire patterned after James Joyce’s closing scene of *Ulysses*. In her essay “Jocoserious Joyce,” the final entry in *Contraries*, Oates implies her debt with her opening sentence: “*Ulysses* is certainly the greatest novel in the English language, and one might argue for its being the greatest single work of art in our tradition. How significant, then, and how teasing, that this masterwork should be a comedy.”¹⁹ For all the suffering and violence in *You Must Remember This*, Oates also sees her work as finally a comedy. Like Bloom’s slaying of the suitors in *Ulysses*, the Stevicks’ rout of the sober philosophers allows the comic spirit to surface. As her essay on Joyce puts it, comedy “celebrates life: the livingness of life, not its abstract qualities.”²⁰

As a woman writer, Oates permits herself one significant variation on Joyce’s slaying of the suitors motif. Instead of Bloom driving his wife’s lovers out of her mind by his “deposit of semen within her natural female organ” (ending ten years of coitus interruptus), here it is the wife who drives

her husband's fantasy lovers out of his mind by resuming coition after eighteen years of celibacy. For several weeks they had been trying to make love, with Lyle's virility inadequate to the occasion (p. 429), apparently stunted not only by the long practice of celibacy but by his loss of control over his household: All his children gone their own way, flouting his wishes; and his home precincts invaded and defiled by the McCarthyist incursion. (His wife's partiality toward the rabid Senator breathes life into the old cliché that his wife does not understand him.)

His potency appears to recover only through stimuli originating outside the family, in random acts of mental promiscuity. His erstwhile customer Elvira French heads the list of fantasy partners, but most of them are random strangers, "women in the street, . . . women in his store, on television every night" (p. 428). As he attempts coition with Hannah in his bomb shelter—the one place in the world where his mastery remains sovereign—Lyle's potency appears to depend on these fantasies, particularly the one that originated at his brother's funeral: "Jesus!—that young woman with the pale skin, crimson lips, . . . soft voluptuous body" (p. 432). Frantically fighting off detumescence, he summons up Elvira French once more, "slipping her arms around him, teasing him with her lips and tongue" (p. 433), whom he shortly complements with the hat-check girl "in her provocative costume flirting with him" (p. 433), all the while trying "not to think of poor Hannah enduring his exertions. . . the cords in her neck taut and her. . . fatty legs rudely asprawl" (p. 433). But in the end Jonathan Swift perversely intrudes upon his fantasies, defeating his tumescence for the despairing last time as he "was seeing himself like poor Lemuel Gulliver crouched atop an enormous breast, the nipple alone enormous, monstrous" (p. 435).

Barely a paragraph from the end of the book, this failure of Eros seems terminal. What converts it to triumph is something relating to Oates' title, the interpolation of memory. The last item in Lyle's series of fantasy erotica is not fantasy at all, but the true memory of his first coition with Hannah. His erotic recollection is notably more enhancing to his lover than was Molly Bloom's to hers ("I thought well as well him as another"):

"—But Oh sweet Jesus! suddenly there was Hannah Weir eighteen years old. . . glancing at him half smiling, love for him shining in her eyes. . . his mouth dry with excitement his heart hammering. . .

And now it was over. It was over. Lyle Stevick lay spent and panting beside his wife. . . his heart still pounding in triumph, all his veins flushed with surprise and well-being and gratitude, he said, 'Thank you, Hannah,' he said, 'I love you, Hannah,' and after a moment came the quiet nearly inaudible reply, 'I love you too'" (pp. 435–36).

With this *Ulysses*-like ending, Oates' family chronicle completes a pattern of radical transformations from isolation and suicide in the Prologue to sexual and familial renewal in the Epilogue; from death-wish to life force; from Thanatos to Eros; from loneliness to love; from violence to shelter;

from chaos to control. One could argue that the closure is not earned and does not suffice to outweigh the humiliation and loss pervading the bulk of Oates' novel. And the roll call of family afflictions does in fact look daunting: unwed pregnancy, incest, abortion, poverty, alcoholism for Felix, sexual deprivation for Lyle, the maiming of Warren, the death of Domenic, the general loss of religious faith, the perversity of contemporary politics, the debasement of contemporary culture (especially evident in the new medium of television). But in the end those melancholy motifs are only the materials of Oates' realistic art. What matters most is the creation of values, sifted from that passing stream of life by the agency of memory—for "to exist without memory isn't human," Enid tells herself (p. 273).

As the ultimate locus of valuation, Oates' Epilogue acts as the key to the work as a whole, providing the sole justification for the imperative in her title: you must remember this because only in hindsight can the meaning of experience become clarified. This redemptive power of memory in turn resists another violence, "time itself waiting to obliterate the flesh" (p. 110). As against this "matter of corrosion, of wearing away" (which Enid extends to geological dimensions, "base rock. . . one billion one hundred million years old—think of that" [p. 103]), Oates underscores the power of art and memory to frieze the time in Joycean-Proustian fashion. Warren (listening to Adlai Stevenson), Enid (riding to the scene of her sexual initiation), and Annemarie Pauley (on her wedding day) all echo the theme: "This is the happiest day of my life" (pp. 46, 103, 114). Among modern masterworks on the theme of time and memory—*Four Quartets* and *The Sound and the Fury* as well as *Ulysses*—Proust's major opus received special mention in her *New Fiction* interview: "There has never been a novel so fantastic as *Remembrance of Things Past*. It is all things, a complete life. . . and [Proust] is very much alive."²¹

Through concluding with Lyle and Hannah's version of Bloomsday and otherwise consecrating the remembrance of things past, Oates affirms her belief, stated in her Preface to *New Heaven, New Earth*, that "the serious artist insists upon the sanctity of the world—even the despairing artist insists upon the power of *his* art to somehow transform what is given."²² Like her favorite masters, Proust and Joyce, Oates thus renders her final resolution of contraries in the fact of artistic achievement, employing the Apollonian powers of art and memory to capture live the Dionysian evanescence of time. Given the clarity and scope of this novel, the book in the hand is Oates' final, best answer to the search for control.

Notes

¹Joe David Bellamy, "Joyce Carol Oates," in *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 19.

²Joyce Carol Oates, *You Must Remember This* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987). The allusions cited in this sentence appear on pp. 34, 38, 72, 74, 111, 198-99, 211, 277, 324, 349, 432, and 435. Hereafter, page references to this book will be cited in parentheses within the text.

³Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr., ed., *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 392.

⁴Ellmann and Feidelson, p. 394.

⁵Joyce Carol Oates, *Contraries: Essays* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. vii. Oates' Preface to this volume ends with mention of "the artist's secret life-drama, the private mythology. . . fueled by the spirit of contrariety that lies at the heart of all commitment."

⁶Daniel J. Bronstein, Yervant H. Krikorian, and Philip P. Wiener, ed., *Basic Problems of Philosophy*, Second Edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1955), p. 92. Hereafter cited as Bronstein.

⁷William James discusses these issues in his essay "Pragmatism and Religion," notably on pp. 189-91 of *Pragmatism* (New York: New American Library, 1955).

⁸William James, *Pragmatism*, p. 181.

⁹William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor Books, 1958), p. 275. Hereafter cited as *Varieties*.

¹⁰For James' comment about war, see his *Varieties*, p. 284.

¹¹Oates' italicized reference is to Spinoza's *Ethics*, Book IV: "We call a thing good which contributes to the preservation of our being, and we call a thing evil if it is an obstacle to the preservation of our being." See Bronstein, p. 97.

¹²Bronstein, p. 93.

¹³Bellamy, p. 25.

¹⁴Alfred Kazin, "Oates," in *Essays Today*, ed. William T. Moynihan (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 137.

¹⁵Bronstein, p. 357.

¹⁶Bellamy, p. 29.

¹⁷Kazin, p. 136.

¹⁸Linda Kuehl, "An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," *Commonweal*, 91 (December 5, 1969), 310.

¹⁹Oates, *Contraries*, p. 171.

²⁰Oates, *Contraries*, p. 176.

²¹Bellamy, p. 27.

²²Joyce Carol Oates, *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1974), p. 16.