

An essay review of "them," by Joyce Carol Oates  
(Vanguard, 508 pp. \$6.95)

## The Necessity in Art of a Reflective Intelligence

by BENJAMIN DEMOTT

Miss Oates's prefatory "Author's Note" to *them* points at some difficulties of her situation that have general cultural significance. The Note addresses the question how a professor of literature could come by the knowledge that lies at the heart of this tale. (Joyce Carol Oates teaches at the University of Windsor in Ontario; *them* deals chiefly with the experience of truck drivers, counter girls, parking-lot attendants, prostitutes, hapless aged in homes and welfare clinics, slum-dwellers, murderers, looters, rapists, and thieves.) The author has raised similar questions before, in relation to her earlier books, usually answering by speaking about slogging up source material in libraries. (The racing-car background in her first novel, *With Shuddering Fall*, for example, is said to have been pulled from trade journals.) But *them* is a different story. In writing it, says Miss Oates, she had the help of a former student—a young girl with a "disadvantaged" past who provided a generously detailed autobiographical confession, and at length became the central character of the book:

... the "Maureen Wendall" of this narrative [was] a student of mine in a night course, and a few years later she wrote to me and we became acquainted. Her various problems and complexities overwhelmed me, and I became aware of her life story. . . . My initial feeling about her life was, "This must be fiction, this can't all be real!" My more permanent feeling was, "This is the only kind of fiction that is real." And so the novel *them*, which is truly

about a specific "them" and not just a literary technique of pointing to us all, is based mainly upon Maureen's numerous recollections. Her remarks, where possible, have been incorporated into the narrative verbatim, and it is to her terrible obsession with her personal history that I owe the voluminous details of this novel.

Miss Oates acknowledges that the personal history wasn't in every instance allowed to stand, on the ms. page, in the form in which it first became available to her. "... the various sordid and shocking events of slum life, detailed in other naturalistic works, have been understated here, mainly because of my fear that too much reality would become unbearable." She adds, somewhat obscurely, that "certain episodes [were] revised after careful research indicated that their context was confused." But she repeatedly stresses that, in substance as in detail, *them* is no imaginary voyage. The basis of the whole was solid fact—so furious an outpouring of fact, indeed, that, as the author tells it, her own life and sense of self almost vanished in the welter:

For Maureen, this "confession" had the effect of a kind of psychological therapy, of probably temporary benefit; for me, as a witness, so much material had the effect of temporarily blocking out my own reality, my personal life, and substituting for it the various nightmare adventures of the Wendalls. Their lives pressed upon mine eerily, so that I began to dream about them instead of about myself, dreaming and redreaming their lives. Because their world was so remote from me it entered me with tremendous power, and in a sense the novel wrote itself.

Read in their entirety, the remarks just quoted seem a shade disingenuous.



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BENJAMIN DEMOTT's most recent book is *Supergrow: Essays and Reports on Imagination in America*. He is also the author of the novel *A Married Man*.

Occasional shakiness of tone, for instance, hints that Miss Oates might have hoped, by writing the Note, to disarm speculation that "Maureen Wendall" was in any sense herself, and that her conversancy with conditions of mean life was bought at a personal cost. (The jacket copy for *them* speaks only of Miss Oates's university degrees and literary honors; promotion for her earlier books, though, made much of her humble beginnings—early life on a farm outside a factory town, education in a one-room schoolhouse, escape via state scholarship to an undistinguished nearby university, etc.)

And the insistence on the "verbatim" character of the transcript also stirs mild skepticism. Whoever "Maureen Wendall" was, it's clear that Miss Oates's skill in shaping and pacing a narrative exceeds that of any conceivable non-literary mind. A family chronicle covering three decades (1937-1967), *them* shuttles between the life stories of a working-class mother, Loretta Botsford, and two of her children, Jules and Maureen. (The major settings are a small industrial canal city—it resembles Lockport, New York, where Miss Oates grew up—and Detroit before and during the '67 riots.) All three stories are clotted with violence. The book begins and ends with killings; parental beatings send children to the hospital for months; there are police clubbings, car and airplane crashes, barn burnings, bombings, stabblings . . . All three characters live for long moments on the chased side of the law, as thieves or prostitutes or rioting revolutionaries. And, to repeat, the crises of these lives—a series of desperate flights from one or another murderous pursuer—are recounted with speed, breathlessness and a communicated sense of anxiety that non-professional confessions (lax, rambling affairs that rarely attach themselves vividly to any particular instant of feeling) never attain. In short, facts of art as well as of life diminish the credibility of the author's account of her sources.

Yet her comments, as indicated, do possess interest. These fumbings with the "problem of esthetic distance," this uncertainty about how that problem can be met—both are signs which, when considered together with the public reception of Miss Oates's work, constitute a portent. Miss Oates's way of meeting the problem of "distance," her way of asserting her separateness as an artist, is to announce that she's writing a true story—about another girl, not herself. And implicit in that explanation is obliviousness to a series of truths about writing which, once familiar and well respected, have lately lost visibility and authority. Chief



Joyce Carol Oates—"knowingness."

among them is the truth that it's unimportant whether "the experience" is or isn't the writer's own. What tells is whether the writer has achieved comprehensive power in, through and over the experience, whether he has terms for considering the experience, understanding it, registering its meaning and value, comparing it with other possible kinds of experience.

"Achieving a distance" means, in other words, holding in mind other possible responses besides those of a particular character, even in the act of representing the particular character's responses exactly; it means, more generally, maintaining a constant alertness to life-possibility, the possibility of stronger, worthier, more life-enhancing patterns or forces than those which may momentarily, by necessity, be represented. The prime requirement for achievement of distance in this sense is the possession, as a result of toil, meditation and risk, of a wider knowledge and deeper sympathy than are found in most men. And the purpose of laboring to attain it is to carry forward the endless work of enlarging human understanding.

To say that these commonplaces have lost authority for Miss Oates isn't to say that *them*—or any of her previous books—lacks narrative vigor. It

is to say that she continues to appear as an undeveloping talent, a writer making no apparent advance toward reflective intelligence. *them*, like Miss Oates's earlier books, registers no distinctions among qualities of experience. The crudities and flatnesses of its characters' responses never are set in any perspective broader or subtler than their own. More important, at those moments when one or another of her people moves tentatively toward a dilation of mind or feeling—becomes for a moment, say, an enthralled reader of a classic novel in a quiet library—Miss Oates ruthlessly suppresses the sense of possibility, cutting and fitting the occasion to a systematic, schematic, reductive version of things.

The single principle or assumption carried in the texture of her narrative is that in every instance, every circumstance, the poor are vicious, their inwardness is blank; and the mind of the narrator, the teller of the story, is seldom tempted to move a step beyond this hopelessly abstract and restrictive vision. The book's epigraph does, to be sure, question the moral necessity of such a continuum of brutality and blankness: "... because we are poor, shall we be vicious?" (John Webster, *The White Devil*.) But in the body of the work there's no suggestion that alternatives to viciousness—or, at the least, interruptions of it—could exist in the presented world. And, saying it again, the novelist is utterly unwilling to allow herself to "stand in" through nuance or gesture for the intelligence or humane response "necessarily" erased from her story because of the nature of her characters. Not once, not even in the tone-shattering, clumsy moment midway in the book when Miss Oates enters in her own person and speaks of "Miss Oates" and of "her" student Maureen, does she enable her reader to believe that a mind subtler than that of the characters has been silently viewing the action with an appropriately compassionate and critical decency.

Why does this matter? says a voice. Miss Oates is thirty-one, enormously energetic and ambitious: is it not over-solemn to be foreclosing on her, denying the likelihood of a development? On its face, yes. At closer glance, though, the problem does look serious, for although Miss Oates is young, facts both of the contemporary literary culture and of her own special situation as a writer appear to be working against her chances. Her six books, most of them published while she was in her twenties, have been enthusiastically received. Reviewers have assigned one of her novels a place on a level with Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Two of her books have been nominated for a

National Book Award, and it's probable that *them* will win the prize in 1970. Her fiction is sought after by the imposing literary reviews of the day, journals whose editors take firm, well-publicized positions on television against the corruption of literature by Miss Jacqueline Susann. Few of the living writers whose work could provide invaluable models for Miss Oates have sufficient fame to compel her eye. (For keys to the humane penetration of lives lacking in privilege, Miss Oates could study the stories of Tillie Olsen; for knowledge of how to sustain an evaluative perspective on public events of a magnitude comparable to that of the Detroit riots she could study Anthony Powell's *The Military Philosophers*; for a model of natural, reflective sensibility, she could study John Barth's *The Floating Opera*.) Those who praise Miss Oates, moreover, do so in a vein that encourages her to regard an inability to perceive or create meaning as a virtue—a "courageous" eschewal of judgment, a new foray into the meaning of meaninglessness. And this "critical line" is but part of a wider body of conviction throughout the culture at large—conviction hostile to the sequential and the reflective, impatient with effort at discriminating the quality of this or that response to life on the ground that such effort is uninvolved, secondary, less like an action than an imitation of an action, hence unproductive of excitement or profit or pleasure.

And then beyond all this—a further obstacle to Miss Oates's development—there's the matter of her sense of herself as a teacher of literature in a university. Speaking of this subject without wallowing in self-elevating self-hatred is, for the present writer (himself a professor), no easy trick—but still it's wrong to evade it. The case is that people paid to ruminate about books in front of young people are powerfully tempted to believe they have entered the penetralia of art, have learned "the secrets," know the thing from inside. And this knowingness inevitably complicates a writer's proper understanding of himself as an apprentice. And knowingness does cast a shadow everywhere in Miss Oates's work. It shows itself sometimes in needlessly pretentious titles and epigraphs. Sometimes it takes the form of displays of self-reference—allusions in her own stories to the progress of her literary reputation, quotations from her earlier work, etc. (see Miss Oates's *Expensive People*). On still other occasions it surfaces as a pretense of bored superiority to mere reviewers—as when Miss Oates included in a novel parodies of the reviews she expected in various

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## Book Forum

### Letters from Readers

#### For the Record

IT LOOKS LIKE MY COLLECTION, *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* [SR, Nov. 1], has confused Edward Potoker in various ways, but in one respect at least I insist we get the record straight. The character, "Sukenick's wife, Lynn," does not attend the City University of New York as Mr. Potoker claims, nor does she "write term papers for the pedants" there. This is not in my book and I don't know where Mr. Potoker gets it from. There is nothing about any particular college, explicitly or implicitly, in the story "The Death of the Novel," or in my novel *Up*. My wife in real life happens in fact to be writing a doctoral dissertation at the City University of New York and does not regard the professors there as "pedants," nor do I. The word is neither my character's nor my wife's but Mr. Potoker's. I assume he knows his colleagues at the City University but he doesn't know my wife, and as for my books, there is nothing in them but what I put there.

RONALD SUKENICK,  
Ithaca, N.Y.

#### Rhetoric to Unlearn?

BERNHARDT J. HURWOOD, in his review of the books on the Korean War by J. Lawton Collins and I. F. Stone [SR, Nov. 1], only once mentions the conflict of interest, ideology or whatnot between "us and them." He says, "Despite the general's blind acceptance of the domino theory, and occasional lapses into purple anti-communist rhetoric (uncomfortably close to purple anti-American rhetoric) there are sound suggestions and much to be learned from *War in Peacetime*." Does this mean that opposition to communism is nothing but "rhetoric" which we must now unlearn?

SIDNEY KORETZ,  
Arlington, Va.

#### Logically, No Ulcers in Ulster

J. H. PLUMB'S ASSERTION [SR, Oct. 25] that, had the Irish not rebelled successfully against English rule, they would by now be transformed by affluence beyond their wildest dreams may strike many as preposterous, though it is a contention stubbornly maintained by many English writers in the teeth of all evidence to the contrary. One looks in vain nowadays for that refreshing realism that made Samuel Johnson say concerning the Act of Union: "Gentlemen, we would unite with you only to rob you . . ." And it was Shelley, if memory serves aright, who later declared that "The Union was a union, but it was the union of a shark with its prey."

Since the six counties of Ulster that are still under English rule show little evidence of the transformation so blithely conjured up by Mr. Plumb, one hopes he

will excuse a certain cynicism. According to his logic, "Ulster" should be a most fortunate spot, prosperous, enlightened and happy, while the South wallows in ignorance, despair and bigotry.

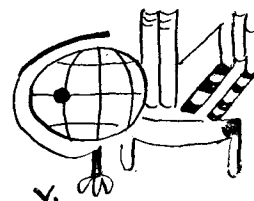
Mr. Plumb neglects to mention that Irish industry was virtually non-existent in 1921, due, I'm afraid, to English Acts of Parliament; that an unjust Partition did not help economically; that there was a world-wide depression during the Twenties; that early in the Thirties England began to wage war on the Irish economy because we stopped repaying loans given so that we could buy back the lands taken by force from our forefathers.

MARY C. BEAUSOLEIL,  
Las Vegas, Nev.

MR. PLUMB ARGUES THAT during these forty poverty-stricken years, the youth of Ireland left in droves to find work in other countries. Quite so. Had Ireland not seceded, there would have been fewer to leave—thousands would have died fighting in World War II, as they died in World War I.

Mr. Plumb defeats his own argument by admitting, at the end, that Ulster, which remained tied to England, is now the poorest province in the island.

SAMUEL LEVENSON,  
Washington, D.C.



#### Saints

MAISIE WARD ADVISES US in her review of *Saint Watching* [SR, Nov. 1] that St. Teresa would have "blenched" (at thoughts of Jewish blood); a word I have never before encountered—although it does have nice overtones of a pale, wretched wench retching.

DONALD I. KENNEDY,  
San Francisco, Calif.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Webster's II Unabridged defines "blench" v. Intransitive: "to shrink; to start back; to draw back, or turn aside, from lack of courage or resolution; to flinch; quail. . . . To grow pale . . ."

#### P.E.N. Founder

DAVID DEMPSEY in his "Letters and Leisure on the Riviera" [SR, Oct. 18] states that John Galsworthy founded P.E.N. Galsworthy was the P.E.N.'s first president; the novelist Mrs. C. A. Dawson-Scott founded P.E.N. in October 1921.

ALBERT A. SPERISEN,  
San Francisco, Calif.