

The Sense of Unending:
Joyce Carol Oates's *Bellefleur*
as an Experiment in Feminine
Storytelling

PERRY NODELMAN

EXPLAINING how innovation in American fiction has traditionally been understood as a manifestation of the need to escape social norms, Nina Baym says,

There is no place for a woman author in this scheme. Her roles in the drama of creation are those allotted to her in a male melodrama: either she is to be silent, like nature, or she is the creator of conventional works, the spokesperson of society. What she might do as an innovator in her own right is not to be perceived. (77)

The anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner suggests that assumptions of this sort are universal: in all cultures, "woman is being identified with—or if you will, seems to be a symbol of—something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself" (72). That something is "nature"; it is opposed to culture itself, "the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence . . ." (72). Paradoxically, then, those believed to be of a lower order show their cultural inferiority by passively accepting cultural conventions, and those of a higher order show their superiority by willfully disrupting cultural conventions and engendering new ones; since women are assumed to be members of a lower order, femininity and innovation are perceived to be opposites.

Not surprisingly, critics usually identify fiction as innovative exactly because it manipulates "systems of meaningful forms." Jerome Klinkowitz says that the authors he studies in *Literary Disruptions* are "given to formal experimentation, a thematic interest in the imaginative transformation of reality, and a sometimes painful but often hilarious self-conscious artistry" (x); Robert Scholes similarly says that the authors he calls "fabulators" take "an extraordinary delight in design. . . . The structure

also, by its very shapeliness, asserts the authority of the shaper" (2). In Ortner's terms, this is culture without nature, consciousness divorced from the substance it purports to order; it is pure masculinity that has decided, by implication, to make the feminine disappear.

For a woman writer, consequently, all possible choices seem equally wrong. As Baym suggests, to be silent "like nature" is to accept one's repression, and to write conventionally is to be repressed by convention. But to innovate along the usual lines is to write in explicit defiance of what has traditionally been considered to be female.

My contention is that Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Bellefleur* represents a fourth choice: a kind of writing that is neither conventional nor conventionally innovative, a novel whose innovations represent an identifiably feminine form of experimentation. I use the word "feminine" rather than "female," here and throughout this discussion, for the same reason that I use "masculine" rather than "male": to suggest that these qualities relate more significantly to cultural (and therefore changeable) assumptions about gender than they do to inherent biological factors. Indeed, Oates's "feminine" innovation suggests a means of transcending the limitations of both conventional and conventionally innovative forms of fiction that should have liberating potential for both women and men.

Oates herself has criticized the kinds of innovation I have characterized as masculine exactly because they leave out so much of perceived reality—much of it traditionally associated with femininity. She has criticized followers of Nabokov and Borges in an article in the *New York Times Book Review* for being solipsistic (June 4, 1972), and she has said that Beckett's strategy is

to refine man out of his existence in a recognizable world. . . . If one's very existence is the phenomenal stream-of-language, if he cannot pass through the hypnotic trance of his own self-worship or the worship of invented language, he is doomed to exist within the confines of his own skull, to babble endlessly about the very process of babbling. . . . (*New Heaven* 89, 95)

Such babbling results from distance from the "world" and from a refusal to use conventional meaning-making patterns of storytelling. If the tendency to take that distance and make that refusal relates to traditional ideas of masculinity, then specifically feminine innovation could ignore or deny neither. It would be innovative even while offering both a sense that a world does exist outside the self and recognizable narratives about that world.

To assert their authority as shapers over the material they are shaping, masculine innovators "disrupt" story; we often recognize innovative

writing by its fragmentations of narrative structure. But interestingly, literary experimentation involving women, either as characters in novels or as literary commentators, tends to be characterized as anything but fragmented. Feminist critics often cite the monologue that James Joyce gives Molly Bloom at the end of *Ulysses* as an example of writing unrepressed by the usual masculine assumptions about structure, and Joyce Carol Oates sees Molly's soliloquy as an attack on masculine authority: "What better way to level the pretensions of men than by having the most ordinary of Dublin voices carry us out of the novel?" (*Contraries* 185). Julia Kristeva characterizes feminism itself as a flowing stream: "by demanding recognition of an irreducible identity, without equal in the opposite sex and, as such, exploded, plural, fluid, in a certain way nonidentical, this feminism situates itself outside the linear time of identities which communicate through projection and revindication" (19–20). Speaking of her own writing, Hélène Cixous says, "I, too, overflow. . . . Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst" (246).

But such flowing feminine writing is not necessarily storytelling. Molly Bloom dwells on herself no less assertively or indulgently than the writers of masculine innovative fiction, and she tells even less of a connected and unified story; and Verena Andermatt suggests that the "amniotic flow" (40) of Cixous's texts is equally divorced from the conventional structure of narrative: "The tempo of their writing—indeed their lack of style—is in cadence with lacunary moments of grammatical inconsistencies, sentence-fragments, image signs, portmanteau words, litanic inscriptions and jets of letters of infinite regress" (46–47). This is pure flow divorced from narrative; it describes events without structure, just as conventional masculine innovation offers structure divorced from events. It is innovative; but in its absence of structural order it is not exactly fiction in any way we might recognize.

Yet that merely restates the paradox: for if it had the conventional structure of fiction, it could be neither innovative nor feminine—or here, female, for our usual assumptions about narrative are surprisingly bound up in our understanding of biological sexual differences; it is a critical truism that the conventional undisrupted patterns of narrative mirror maleness. When Scholes suggests that the "archetype of all fiction is the sexual act . . . the fundamental orgasmic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation" (26), he unconsciously echoes Beatrice Faust's description of male sexuality as "performance-oriented," emphasizing "gymnastic expertise" and with "orgasm as the desired goal" (194).

Faust also says that "female sexuality can include both intense arousal, which seeks release in orgasm, and a pleasant drift on the plateau level of

arousal, which may continue indefinitely. Many women can lead satisfying and harmonious sex lives without orgasm . . ." (59). Conventional fiction mirrors the conventional male orgasmic pattern, and conventionally innovative fiction merely confirms the significance of that pattern by defiantly disrupting it in something like an act of self-centered masturbatory exhibitionism; but fiction might be both innovative and feminine if it mirrored the conventional female orgasmic pattern.¹ Such fiction would reject both the conventional orgasmic pattern and the masculine innovative enterprise. Rather than disrupt the representational and sequential aspects of story by putting technique in the foreground and emphasizing the artist's "gymnastic expertise" over plot, feminine innovation would have to evoke both a recognizable and consistent reality and maintain a pleasurable flow of continuous events; but to avoid the pressure of the masculine pattern, it could not allow that flow to be dominated by the climactic end it might be seen to be moving toward.

In *Bellefleur* Oates does evoke a more-or-less recognizable world, and she does tell a story. But she evokes that world and tells that story in a way that relates to the descriptions of feminine writing I referred to earlier. In doing so, I believe, she achieves a kind of writing different from either the old conventions or conventionally innovative masculine responses to those conventions.²

Bellefleur is also different from much of Oates's earlier work—although not different in its thematic thrust; in fact, it is its new expression of old themes that most clearly relates it to the idea of a feminine narrative. *Bellefleur* describes how a family tries to impose its will upon the landscape of its vast estate; as commentators have pointed out, Oates has always written about people who have tried to impose themselves upon the world.³ Suggestively similar to the innovative novelists Klinkowitz describes, Oates's characters often try to replace the world with a fiction of their own invention; a particularly obvious example is Nora, the fussy gardener in the story "Magna Mater," who "hated untidiness, borders gone wild . . . she shared with Yeats and Stevens and others of her saints a need for assertion, for staking the claims of a particularity of being in a gross universe" (189). The thrust of Oates's work is to show the danger of such self-assertion; her stories and novels characteristically describe first, how controlling people distort and manipulate themselves into a death-like rigidity or numbness, and then, how the facts of the world outside inevitably disrupt their fantasies—as in "Magna Mater," in which some drunken friends invade Nora's orderly garden and Nora asks herself, "Was the world insane, that such a horror had swept into her garden, into her life?" (209).

Bellefleur focuses on this central concern in many ways, but particu-

larly through images of maps, walls, and names, all of which represent human attempts to define and control the world. Walls are an artificial means by which human consciousness imposes patterns of order and authority on the natural landscape; both maps and names label and define, and, like walls, represent the authority of those who provide them. Bellefleur is an estate—both a building with walls and a label on a map that claims a large chunk of the surface of the world; it represents what the first American Bellefleur, Jean-Pierre, sees as his own “lust for acquisition. . . . One stuffs oneself, it is a frenzy, the lust to lay hands on everything, to beat out others, for the others are enemies” (657). Those who inhabit the manor, many members of various branches of the Bellefleur family across the generations, are inflicted by variations of their ancestor’s lust, so that the name Bellefleur comes to represent the same will to power of which the estate itself is a physical manifestation; in a chapter called “The Walled Garden,” Leah Bellefleur sits symbolically within the walls of the garden inside the boundaries of the Bellefleur estate, and consults old maps as she plots to restore “The Bellefleur name: the Bellefleur empire” (188).

Later, however, the Noir Vulture swoops into this same garden and steals from it a baby Leah has commandeered as her own; Vernon Bellefleur thinks about how “the creature actually appeared in the walled garden (of all places!—of all secluded, private, *secret places*)” (379). As always in Oates, privacy is a delusion, seclusion an invitation to violation; when there are walls, things break through them.

Bellefleur is made up of variations of this story; or to be more accurate, the stories about many different Bellefleurs that make up the novel are all variations of each other. Bellefleurs either attempt to impose their will on the world and fail, or refuse their patrimony by refusing to impose their will on the world. In different generations, Jean-Pierre, his grandson Raphael, and his great-great-granddaughter Leah express the family lust for acquisition. On the other hand, there are those who resist being Bellefleurs; the poet Vernon, who believes in a world in eternal flux beyond the narrow restrictions of individual perception, tells his father, “I am not a Bellefleur” (203), and in an earlier generation, Jedediah deserts his family and civilization, seeks God and selflessness in the ever-changing wilderness, and denies not just the name Bellefleur but the validity of all names: “What a mockery, that endless stream of food and excrement, given a human name!” (546). As these passages show, Vernon and Jedediah express their defiance of the Bellefleur name by accepting and embracing a world in flux beyond the rigidifying restrictions of walls and maps and names—a world that defies attempts to define it and own it.

The endless flow of reality continually defies Bellefleur attempts to con-

tain or control it. Emmanuel Bellefleur's project of mapping the land is never ending; "the land was always changing, streams were rerouting themselves, even the mountains were different from year to year . . ." (415). There are many actual floods of the Bellefleur estate, usually accompanied by the disappearance of Bellefleurs and the appearance of disturbing external forces. Outsiders, alien people, and even alien creatures like the Noir Vulture, break into the Bellefleur estate and disrupt its order—even its rationality, for these invasions are always the rare occasions when *Bellefleur* moves beyond realism and into fantasy. Bellefleurs find themselves sexually or otherwise involved with "natural," uncivilized people who turn into dogs, like the Doan boy, or who turn out to be bears, like Duane Doty Fox, or who may be vampires, like the Baron Ragnar Norst; the cat Mahaleel, whose arrival in a storm begins the novel, may or may not be the actual father of Leah's daughter Germaine (whose own physical expression of an un-Bellefleurish disorder is denied when her grandmother removes those parts of her body that made her a Siamese twin, and male as well as female).

This opposition between the world in flux and a family's attempts to impose authority upon it obviously relates to the masculinity of conventional ideas about self-assertion; in thematic terms, and as an ironic retelling of that typical American story about men getting rich by triumphing over a wild landscape, *Bellefleur* represents a devastating attack on conventional ideas about what it means to be civilized. But *Bellefleur* relates even more specifically to the feminist ideology of writers like Cixous and Kristeva who believe that language as we have inherited it from our male-dominated ancestors is inherently an expression of masculine authority. Throughout the novel, Oates emphasizes the power of language to replace nature with the artifice of consciousness. When Leah's son Bromwell tries to educate Goldie, a child of the wilderness, he sees it as the imposition of language upon her: "she seemed to have come from so distant a land, so remote a territory, that her very humanity was suspect. . . . It might be a challenge, a scientific challenge, Bromwell thought, to teach the child how to be human . . . how to become human, through the English language" (227).

Throughout the book, furthermore, what opposes that sort of humanity is something much like the flow supposedly characteristic of feminine speech. When young Raphael thinks of how he has survived an attack by the Doan boy by deserting his humanity and becoming fish-like, he becomes conscious of a voice that flows: "the pond's voice, the pond's subtle rhythmic murmurous voice . . ." (185). Oates often relates that inhuman voice to the world beyond the fiction-making control of human minds, as when Vernon Bellefleur says, "the poet knows that he is water

poured into water," and speaks of "drowning in God—or whatever it is—I mean the poetry, the voice, the, the rhythm—And then he isn't whoever people say he is, he doesn't have a name . . ." (204). Leah's son Bromwell sums up this central opposition between flow on the one hand and names and language on the other: "wasn't life on this planet clearly a matter of a metabolic current, unstoppable, a fluid, indefinable energy flowing violently through all things from the sea worm to the stallion to Gideon Bellefleur? Why then, take Bellefleur as central in nature?" (287).

According to Ellen G. Friedman, "In Oates it is not history that lies at the heart of the human tragedy—for history is irrevocable; one simply cannot contest it—but an extreme and finally self-defeating assertion of will, self-defeating because it takes the individual even further into the recesses of his isolation, even further from an authentic relation to his world" (42–43); but in *Bellefleur*, history is the assertion of will; as an image of past events that channels present conceptions of reality, the Bellefleur estate represents the unidirectional and single-mindedly linear concept of time that Julia Kristeva suggests masculine consciousness has imposed upon the actual world. As such, it must be contested; Bromwell rightly concludes that "he could not escape Bellefleur without escaping history itself" (286).

But Oates does not wholeheartedly endorse those characters who try to slip past self-assertiveness and embrace the flow: she knows that one cannot negotiate the world without maps or names, even inevitably inaccurate ones, and that there is something inherently self-defeating about a consciousness like Jedediah's whose goal is its own extinction. She makes it clear that self-assertion and self-denial are equally dangerous—and equally impossible to avoid. Readings of Oates's earlier work have tended to suggest that she recommends one of two forms of conduct as alternatives to the dangers of self-assertion: either acceptance of the world as it is, or denial of the self;⁴ in *Bellefleur*, however, she manages to show that *all* choices are acts of fiction-making, even those that purport to resist fiction-making—that *any* choice is doomed to be too narrow, to misrepresent, because it inevitably rejects the other possibilities. Jedediah's attempt to submerge himself in the mountains is as silly—and as logical—an act as Leah's attempt to dominate the landscape; through narrative leaps through time and place that juxtapose and counterpoint such opposite choices, *Bellefleur* reveals that they are equally ridiculous—but also, because one *must* choose, equally and gloriously human.

It is the peculiar narrative structure of *Bellefleur* that forces consciousness of this balance—a balance that Oates's earlier work misrepresents. Oates has often revealed the limitations of self-enclosed fictions in novels and stories that were themselves self-enclosed fictions with beginnings,

middles, climaxes, and ends. The conventional structure of these works often seems to imply the possibility either of transcendence or of healthful adjustment to reality. As the consequences of self-enclosure lead characters toward expectably horrific climaxes in novels like *Wonderland*, readers can easily read them as admonitory parables that imply the relative desirability of adjustment or transcendence.

Some of Oates's novels before *Bellefleur* imply her concern with exactly this sort of problem. In both *Do With Me What You Will* and *The Assassins*, she includes more than one "story"; as the self-enclosed fictions of different characters intersect with each other, we come to understand how limited their perceptions are. In *The Assassins*, Hugh realizes how false his perceptions are: "The difficulty with stories, even true ones, is that they begin nowhere and end nowhere. Ultimately they encompass the entire universe and all of history. Yet—one must begin somewhere, after all! Order must be imposed upon events! *History* must be presented as story!" (101). Because *The Assassins* presents history as stories that are all limited, and does not offer a sense of an encompassing, outside world that could include all the stories, it seems particularly bleak. Alternately, although *Do With Me What You Will* works to show how Elena and Jack each break through their self-enclosed fictions and find each other, it seems merely to replace the earlier fictions with one that they both share, and one that misrepresents the world just as much as their earlier fictions did.

It is exactly the sense of a world unperceived and undistorted by anyone, a world existing outside everyone's fictions of it, a world larger than any story and containing all the stories, that *Bellefleur* successfully provides. How it does that becomes apparent in an exploration of its unusual grammar. The first sentence of *Bellefleur* contains 214 words—an outpouring expressive of the "innumerable frenzied winds" and "inarticulate longing" it describes, and also of the "flow" we might expect of woman's writing that deliberately works to contradict the shaping powers of masculine storytelling. Later sentences are equally long, often whole paragraphs. The first sentence of a chapter appropriately titled "Bloody Run" contains 736 words, including the self-descriptive "plunging with an eerie guttural music" (195); it mentions nine Bellefleurs from Jean-Pierre, the first, to one of the latest, Yolande.

One result of these long sentences is that little is left abstract or generalized throughout the book. We are told that the Noir River in flood carries not just debris, but

baby buggies, chairs, laundry that had been hung out to dry, lampshades, parts of automobiles, loose boards, doors, window frames, the

corpses of chickens, cows, horses, snakes, muskrats, raccoons, and parts of these corpses; and parts of what were evidently human corpses (for the cemeteries once again flooded, and relief workers were to be astonished and sickened by the sight of badly decomposed corpses dangling from roofs, from trees, jammed against silos and corncribs and abandoned cars. . . .) (332-33)

And so on, for another 50 or so words. Other sentences tell what objects are on a table, what the furniture of a room looks like, what toys are in the nursery; and the listing of such objects inevitably evokes discussion of when they were bought, and by whom. This apparently compulsive need to fill in all the details even extends to lists of *Bellefleur* suicides (151-52) and "secret places" (272), and whole chapters that tell of the various cars and horses owned by the Bellefleurs, and of the variety of their "Fateful Mismatches."

Most significantly, these details are all related to each other. Despite their length, the sentences of *Bellefleur* make far too much sense to suggest anything as amorphous as the feminine language described and used by writers like Cixous. They are filled, not just with details, but with parallel constructions between dashes, with phrases and clauses in parenthesis; and this intricate grammar implies equally intricate connections among all the details—among everything that relates to the Bellefleurs, which is everything in the novel. What distinguishes *Bellefleur* as an innovative narrative, then, is not that it is a deliberately incoherent flow, but that its narrative voice so obsessively strives for coherence, for connections and explanations.

It is exactly that sort of coherence we assume to be the main quality that distinguishes a story from an incoherent description of unconnected events; paradoxically, however, it is the obsessive striving to make connections and explain details in *Bellefleur* that effectively distracts attention from its overall narrative shape, the forward movement from beginning through the middle and toward the end, of any given sentence, or of a chapter, or even of the book as a whole. Thus, the novel seems to disrupt narrative just as much as do the experimental novels by masculine writers. But far from making stories disappear, as do those other novels, *Bellefleur* does just the opposite; it tells more stories than five or six more conventional novels of its size. But it often introduces any one of those stories as an explanation for something happening in another story. At any given moment, we may be in the middle of two or three or more different stories or events in two or three different time periods, so that parts of one story interfere with the narrative sequencing of others.

For instance, the first chapter, about the arrival of Mahaleel, ends tan-

talizingly with the statement that "everything began on that night. And once begun, it could not be stopped" (37). But the second chapter has no apparent narrative connection to the events of the first. It tells how Raphael, merely mentioned in an aside in the first chapter and, as it turns out, of no significance in the story of Mahaleel and Leah, is attacked by the Doan boy. It is only in retrospect, after reading much further into the novel and perceiving its patterns, that one comes to understand that the story of the Doan boy's invasion of Bellefleur property interestingly parallels Mahaleel's arrival. Furthermore, and most infuriatingly, this second chapter leaves Raphael just at the moment when he seems to have drowned, at a point immediately before the story reaches its climax; it is not until the end of the next chapter that we learn, in a subclause inside another subclause of a sentence mostly about Raphael's Grand Uncle Hiram, that Raphael is not dead: instead, he is merely "so unnaturally quiet, since his near-drowning in the pond (the circumstances of which he chose *not* to explain completely to the family)" (58). Oates chooses not to explain them either; we do not hear *how* Raphael escaped drowning for another hundred pages (185).

Again and again throughout the novel, the endings of stories are missing, deferred. To use Scholes's image of orgasm, this is something like foreplay without climax, with every climax being replaced by more foreplay, a different set of exciting events that is in turn interrupted before it reaches its climax; and even when they do occur, the climaxes lose their force when they are revealed pages after the exciting events that lead up to them. Frank Kermode speaks of how "the sense of an ending" is what gives shape and meaning to all the events that precede the ending; what Oates creates in *Bellefleur* is the opposite effect: a sense of unending.

This denial of traditional storytelling does not deny the existence of the world outside the storyteller's head, and does not even deny story itself; but it *is* a denial of linear history. As the "Bellefleur Family Tree" at the front of the novel implies, Oates does tell much of the history of seven generations of the family; but she does not tell it chronologically, so that the facts of Bellefleur history are not connected by the conventional cause-and-effect relationships of narrative history. We do not move from beginning to end. We do not get complete stories in any given chapter or section. Instead, we are immersed in a sea of competing stories. The effect is of a narrator obsessively steeped, not in him or herself, but in endless details of Bellefleur history, and unable to forget any of them. It is no accident that the first chapter contains the names of no fewer than 36 members of the Bellefleur family, many of them introduced to explain facts about the house and its inhabitants that are needed to make sense of the story of the arrival of Mahaleel; but many of these Bellefleurs are

introduced with identifying tags that create new mysteries, and demand that other stories be told: we hear of "Jean-Pierre, imprisoned in Powhassie" (25) and of a drum "which Raphael Bellefleur had had covered with his own skin" (29). These imply stories we have not heard yet, and that, as it turns out, we will eventually hear.

The effect of all this is like Germaine's description of Bellefleur storytelling: "For the Bellefleurs, reminiscing, quite shamelessly jumbled 'chronological' order—indeed, to Germaine's way of thinking, they had a lofty *contempt* for it" (428). We move from Leah in the present to Jedediah in the past to Hepatica at another point in the past and then back again by grammatical rather than chronological connections; whenever one story is paralleled by, or requires information contained in, another, Oates invents a complex grammatical structure, a clause or subclause that allows her to provide it. The intricate connections of the grammar and structure of the novel imply that history is indeed real, but less significantly a linear chronology than material for endless possibilities, infinite connection and complication—numerous different stories. *Bellefleur* is much like the Tirpitz Pavilion that Leah visits—"a five-acre jumble of marvels" (265).

When Leah asks Tirpitz, "what is the theme of your pavilion?—what is the connection between all these wonderful things?" he asks her to guess the answer. Leah cannot, but Oates implies one as a drunk Noel Bellefleur thinks of "The living and the dead. Braided together. Woven together. An immense tapestry taking in centuries. . . . A tapestry. Or was it one of Matilde's ingenious quilts that looked crazy to the eye but (if you allowed her to explain, to point out the connections) made a kind of dizzying sense . . . ?" (155). *Bellefleur* is like those quilts: it is bewilderingly complicated, but makes a kind of dizzying sense, once the narrative points out the connections.

By duplicating that crazy quilt in her narrative sequencing, Oates accomplishes two things; as in her earlier work she reveals how human perception is always an act of fiction-making, and always limited—always merely one of myriad different ways of making connections; and as she had not done before *Bellefleur*, she effectively captures a sense of a world outside all the fictions—a crazy quilt that contains or evokes worlds beyond all the conflicting explanations, beyond all the stories that people make up about it.

Obviously, then, the peculiar structure of *Bellefleur* mirrors its major themes. But as well as mirroring the central ideas of the novel, its narrative structure accomplishes something equally or even more important. In deferring the endings of stories, it offers readers an unusual form of pleasure—a sense of constant mystery, endless secrets. In other words, it offers

one of the main pleasures of narrative—the tension of meanings and conclusions deferred—uncontaminated by the other main pleasure—the satisfaction of a climax and an actual ending. In focusing on the continual pleasure of narrative flow as opposed to the authority of overall single-minded shaping, in deferring and downplaying climaxes and in returning again and again to the same stories and telling ever more about them, *Bellefleur* clearly echoes a sort of sexual pleasure different from the orgasmic fiction Scholes describes—and similar to Faust's description of typical female sexuality.

Yet it does not entirely desert the more conventional pleasure. The structure of the novel does mirror what Kristeva calls “female time”—both “cycles, gestations, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature” and “the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word ‘temporality’ hardly fits” (16). But it does so without ever actually sacrificing the linear chronology of conventional storytelling: eventually, the stories (or at least most of them) are complete, even though the way they have been told evokes other conceptions of time than the one conception that conventional narrative rests upon. In other words, *Bellefleur* does not so much deny and dismiss linear history as add other sorts of time to it.

Bellefleur most clearly expresses linear time in that it does finally head toward a traditional climax—in the last hundred or so pages, suspense-making hints are dropped, important but thus far held-back episodes of early *Bellefleur* history are finally filled in (for instance, we learn that Jean-Pierre fathered not just the Bellefleur family, but its archenemies, the Varrells), and in the second to last chapter, Gideon Bellefleur drives an airplane filled with explosives into the manor, bringing to an end the house, the lives of all its inhabitants, and the novel. The climax of the novel, the event that suddenly ends all the Bellefleur stories, is itself as explosive and as conclusive as any conventional male orgasm.

The wonderful joke of a climax surfaces one last important innovation of *Bellefleur*; Oates not only reinvents the structure of narrative, she also invents an intriguing narrator. The voice that tells *Bellefleur* is as clearly and as authoritatively in control, as much a self-conscious artificer as masculine innovators are; but it also, ambiguously, enjoys sending itself up, so that even the act of producing a narrative that defies traditions is understood to be a gratuitous attempt to impose authority. When a new Bellefleur is invented for the sole purpose of making a point about Gideon 600 pages into the novel, the narrator slyly says, “little is known of Meredith Bellefleur” (619), and never mentions him again; and she slyly comments that Bromwell Bellefleur's *Hypothesis Concerning Anti-Matter*, is

"eight hundred dense pages long. . . Prefaced with an enigmatic and loosely translated remark of Heraclitus, on the nature of time: or, rather, on the nature of our conception of time" (669)—it sounds much like Oates's novel, which has just such an epigraph. In fact, the narrator constantly has characters make comments about "Bellefleur" that jokingly apply to the novel as well as the house or the family. Yolande thinks, in the middle of a chapter in which thoughts of no fewer than 20 of her relatives pass through her head, "There were so many Bellefleurs. . . There were already enough Bellefleurs for her to contend with" (239, 242), and the narrator later tells us, "There were so many Bellefleurs, people said, but perhaps most of them had never existed. They were just stories, tales, anecdotes set in the mountains, which no one quite believed and yet could not quite disregard" (676). Jean-Pierre II asks of the "horrific" manor, "What sort of mind, driven by an unspeakable lust, had imagined it into being?" (450); and Lord Dunraven says, "there are, you know, surely you know, a dizzying profusion of plots in this house—plots, calculations, aspirations, dreams—some of them, to my way of thinking, quite mad. . ." (473).

Above all, Oates undermines her authority as narrator simply by refusing to use it. Not only does she defer explanations and solutions to mysteries, but the novel comes to its abrupt end with many mysteries left unexplained altogether. Whatever happened to Yolande after she left Bellefleur? To the boy Raphael? What exactly went on at Raoul's house? Was the old man who came to stay President Lincoln, or not? Was the old man who appeared in a flood Jeremiah, who had disappeared in an earlier flood? Gideon explodes Bellefleur before the narrator gets around to solving these and many other mysteries.

In undermining its own authority, the narrative voice allows *Bellefleur* both to have a shape and to comment on the dangers of shaping, both to use a dangerously repressive language and to change it enough to defuse its danger and its repressiveness. By reinventing the shape of narrative and the voice of the narrator, by breaking up traditional concepts and expressions of linear time in a way that implies other, more traditionally feminine ways of perceiving time but that nevertheless still expresses and allows linear time, Oates does not so much reject convention as transmute and enrich and revitalize it.

NOTES

1. Rachel Blau Duplessis connects writing and female sexuality when she suggests that Monique Wittig's writing "may also be a form of sexuality, that

multifocal female body and its orgasmic capacity, where orgasms vary startlingly and are multiple" (278).

2. In *Joyce Carol Oates: Artist in Residence*, Eileen Bender suggests that in *Bellefleur*, "Oates sets up an intriguing contrast between the chronological patriarchal saga and the cyclical rhythms of a woman's text" (112). In a sense, Bender is right; the elements of *Bellefleur* that would identify it as a woman's text do transform the novel into something like a parody of the patriarchal saga, one that parodies by virtue of the way it contrasts with our expectations of that genre. But this means, not that *Bellefleur* itself contrasts masculine chronology with feminine rhythms, but rather that its feminine rhythms transform masculine chronology into something else, something both distinct and distinctly feminine. Bender contradictorily suggests that *Bellefleur* is both "an assemblage" of fragments and as "fluid as cinema" (118)—in terms of the definitions I offer here, that it represents at one and the same time both a fragmentary masculine form of innovation and a flowing female one. As I hope to make clear, I believe she is wrong about the former, right about the latter.
3. Joanne V. Creighton says that Oates "focuses obsessively upon the nature of the 'self' and its relationship to the 'other'" (25), G. F. Waller that "Oates's characters, especially her women, are rigidly encased in their mental ideas of the self . . ." (44), and Ellen G. Friedman that "Oates is preoccupied with the idea that the self is not a substitute for the world . . ." (4).
4. Friedman opts for acceptance: "In Oates's fiction there is no alternative to facticity, to the multifold world. . . . Her fiction documents the necessity for compromise" (20). Mary Kathryn Grant offers a more positive sort of acceptance: "There is . . . a certain resignation or acceptance of life-as-it-is in some of her early works. . . . Taken together, however, her body of novels yields a gradually developing growth toward affirmation—still to be arrived at" (7, 8). Grant believes that Oates is heading toward a "transcendent vision" (9); similarly, Creighton says, "Central to Oates's thought and to her work is a visionary conception of human experience, a belief that the ego-consciousness of our culture can be transcended personally and collectively . . ." (144); and again similarly, Waller says, "from Oates's work we sense just how crucial it is to move beyond the limitations of our isolated self-concentration. We must ultimately open ourselves to the obliteration of the ego and our fixation with its uniqueness" (23).

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