

Response to Bernd Engler's "Recollections of Home in Joyce Carol Oates's 'By the River'"*

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Many of the enduring stories in western culture are etiological stories, stories about the beginnings of things. The Genesis story is such a story, purporting to explain, among other mysteries, the origins of death, sex, family, and the longing for an earlier, better time and place now lost. The irony about such stories is that they tend to be told only about matters that entirely escape historical or rational explanation. "Where did death come from?" assumes there was a time or place in which death did not exist, but that "fact" cannot be demonstrated, only posited. Thus etiological stories will always carry evidence of the illogical premises with which they begin.¹

In the Genesis story, for example, "death" (inherently meaningless to Adam and Eve since no instance existed) is both the threat employed to prohibit Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of knowledge and the knowledge they will acquire by violating that prohibition. The birth of death also makes sex "necessary." According to the extended story, the notions of husband and wife, son and daughter, brother and sister are based on death and sexual difference and sequential (most notably, generational) time. This origin-of-family tale is also claustrophobic, however, because its very simplicity makes incest necessary, although mention of this necessity is repressed until Noah's drunken coupling with his own daughters after the Flood. The sacred family unit, then, takes some of its origin in the violation of the very incest taboo that is universally regarded as defining it and protecting it.

*Reference: Bernd Engler, "Nightmare Visions of Eden: Recollections of Home in Joyce Carol Oates's 'By the River'" *Connotations* 7.3 (1997/98): 306-19.

All story-telling is necessarily repetitive, because no stories, especially the etiological ones (the most important ones), can satisfy the needs that generate them. The same story must be told again and again. Variation after variation on the same story must be told. Even stories that violate the shapes of such stories must take their meanings from the conventions they violate. What cannot be told is the last story, the sufficient one.

Etiological stories find an analog in the development of individual humans. If the desire or the need to believe that death—especially death as annihilation—did not always exist elicits etiological stories about death's birth, the most compelling "evidence" in favor of such stories is the infantile ignorance of mortality that is the lot of all of us. If it is impossible for an adult to recollect vividly what it was like when one did *not* know about sex and death, it is also impossible to forget completely that once one could not have known anything of either. Both the ignorance and the knowledge are nearly always experienced in family life.

Bernd Engler's interesting account of Joyce Carol Oates's work seems at least plausible, although it verges on cliché, suggesting as it does that Americans pursue a Second Eden but translate that notion into merely economic and self-absorbed terms. Engler's essay also seems to share (or compulsively repeat) the etiological urge which it finds in American culture and in Oates's stories and novels. After offering not to claim that "an autobiographical impulse" is "the essential factor in the *genesis* [my emphasis] of Oates's oeuvre" or "that her art *originates* [my emphasis] in an act of communication with a *hidden self*" (Engler 307), Engler claims that "Oates's works" are "*first and foremost . . . objectified efforts to analyse the past and present in the light of the highly problematic impact which America's fundamental belief in the possibility of establishing a second paradise in the New World has had upon the individual* [etiological language underlined for emphasis]" (Engler 307). Engler also claims that the Americans in Oates's fictions are largely aware that "their rural Eden and its promise of individual self-realization have not only been destroyed by the encroachments of modern civilization, but primarily by their own spiritual and moral disorientation" (Engler 308). Engler's largest unexamined claim is that "one may even assume that the characters forfeit

their return to an earthly Eden by the very obsession with which they try to salvage it" (308).

Engler comments, accurately, on the "gaps and irritating contradictions" (Engler 310) in the "information" about home, family, and self provided through Helen, the central figure in the story and, until the story's concluding sentences, the fictional consciousness through which the third-person narrator works. The "fictional facts" in this story are, in some instances, extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to identify with certainty. What follows, however, are several examples of what appears to be Engler's confusion about some of these "fictional facts," a confusion perhaps produced by their importance to his argument.

It seems vital to Engler's argument that he make the case that Helen "has no recollection of her life before her arrival in Eden County," because, according to Engler, the parents' "den" shocked her with her first awareness of time and change and mortality, even though Engler himself has noted "too many aspects of Helen's former life seem to be censured and repressed, too many attempts at gaining access to the past seem aborted at an early stage" (Engler 310-11). He is in fact able to quote from the story on this matter: "he [Helen] could not remember the city and the house [belonging to and also occupied by her maternal grandparents, who spoke only German] they had lived in there . . ." (117; 135).² But we are also told: "The grandparents—her mother's parents—had died in *that old dark house in the city*, and Helen did not remember them at all except as her father summoned them back, recalling with hatred his wife's father . . ." (Oates 135). That "old dark house"—whose memory is this, if not Helen's?—went to the bank after the death of the grandparents and not to Helen's parents, thus causing their move to the country. If Engler needed a fall from innocence for Helen, would not a dark house full of intergenerational tension, the death of its two owners, her grandparents, and her own family's "eviction" in favor of a bank have been sufficient to impress instability, loss, and mortality on a child of five? Or is it easier to believe in a twenty-two year old woman who has no memories of the first five years of her existence? If Helen's memories of that earlier time are "censured and repressed," perhaps the interpreter's task is as much to locate the place, time, and circumstances when those memories were

hidden as to repeat the conscious ones, which may be mere substitutes, displacements, or transformations of traumatic memories that might clarify both Helen's vagueness and her father's murderous fury.

Similarly, Engler appears to oversimplify Helen's contradictory, even "amorphous" memories of the farm in Eden County to which the family moved after the grandparents' death. Engler claims that Helen "*initially* [my emphasis] visualizes the farmhouse the family moves into as a shabby run-down place" and only later eliminates "all disturbing aspects of her vision" (Engler 311) of the place and invests it with mythic grace. In "fictional fact," however, part of Helen's memory is significantly different: "The family was big—six children then, before Arthur died at ten—and *half an hour after they had moved in* [my emphasis], the house was crowded and shabby" (134). The clear implication here is that the family's size and condition made the house seem "crowded and shabby." That the house was large is emphasized several times in the story, so the crowding was these eight people more than the house. Although the father will eventually speak of some of what was wrong with the house ("that son of a bitch house with the roof half rotted and the well all shot to hell" 142), these would be "secret things" only to a small child with parents who did not talk much with one another. Engler's version is that the father would soon feel his hopes betrayed because "the farm did not yield the profit he had expected" (Engler 312) and that the child would sense this collapse of the dream. The father insists, however, "But it wasn't the money I wanted! . . . It wasn't never the money I wanted . . ." (145).

Similarly, Engler himself, in a contradictory fashion not supported by the story's "fictional facts," both countrifies and glamorizes the farm and invents a communicative father who is only now oddly silent. Engler reports: "When her father finally picks her up and drives her home along backcountry dirt roads, Helen is somewhat irritated by his unusual taciturnity . . ." (Engler 310). The story makes no mention of contemporary dirt roads and, in fact, goes out of its way to remove them. Even the road in front of their quite distant house was "covered with blacktop" years ago (131). Engler also claims that shortly before the murder "her father drives along and passes pastures and fields that once belonged to her parents' farm . . ." (123 [141]). These pastures and fields are at least "seven

or eight miles from home" (140), the distance Helen thinks to herself later when her father stops the car near the place where she will be killed. If these particular pastures and fields had ever belonged to Helen's parents, they constituted a Texas-sized farm.

More significant, perhaps, is Engler's description of Helen's supposed irritation at her father's "unusual taciturnity" (Engler 310) after he has picked her up at the bus station. All of the descriptions given of him, whether seventeen years ago or at present, emphasize his silence, except in the bizarre moments leading up to the killing of his daughter when he becomes so voluble Helen accuses him of being drunk. In her memory of moving into the farmhouse, "she remembered being frightened at something and her father picking her up right in the middle of moving, and not asking her why she cried—her mother had always asked her that, as if there were a reason—but rocked [sic] her and comforted [sic] her with his rough hands" (134), not with words. When Helen remembers the house, she thinks:

If she had been afraid of the dark, upstairs in that big old farmhouse in the room she shared with her sister, all she had to do was to think of him [her father]. He had a way of sitting at the supper table that was so still, so silent, you knew nothing could budge him. Nothing could frighten him. (138)

His strength—and her security as a child—was in his silence and in "the solid flesh beneath [his work clothes], the skeleton that hung onto its muscles and would never get old, never die" (138). When her father begins to talk of moving to their place seventeen years ago, he clears his throat, "the gesture of a man unaccustomed to speech" (137). When he does begin to speak, however, he will not stop until speech itself stops and he slams a knife into his daughter's chest.

Interpretation is, among other things, an attempt to achieve a good fit between the manifest and latent meanings of a story. Moments of excess and riveting scenes that seem to arise without adequate causes are the elements in a story that clearly demand interpretation. In this story, the father's killing of his daughter is the excessive scene that demands explanation, perhaps for its ritual quality ("Pa" washes his hand in the dirty river water before the killing and washes the bloody knife afterward) and

certainly for the sexually charged intimacy that must accompany a father's plunging a knife into the chest of his own daughter. This is the daughter whom he himself has described as the "only one [he] loved," and near the end, she is "no longer afraid but only curious with the mute marblelike curiosity of a child" (146). But this excessive scene also has antecedents in the father's descriptions, first, of his time in the house of his father-in-law, and secondly, of his time of silent fury on the farm in Eden County.

"Pa" married Helen's mother, produced six offspring, and apparently spent many years living in the house of his father-in-law, which he describes with loud revulsion:

And you [Helen] don't remember your mother's parents and their house, that goddam stinking house, and how I did all the work for him in his store . . . The dirty sawdust floor and the old women coming in for sausage, enough to make you want to puke, and pigs' feet and brains out of cows or guts or what the hell. . . . I could puke for all my life and not get clean of it. You were just born then. And we were dirt to your mother's people, just dirt. I was dirt. (142)

Even when the in-laws died, the house and store went to others in what the father still treats as an act of malice or fraud that left him working on his farm in silent fury for seventeen years: "First I did it for me, myself, to show that bastard father of hers that was dead—then those other bastards, those big farms around us—but then for you, for you" (143). The father's scalding memories are rich with the stink of flesh and a feeling of defilement from which he cannot imagine ever being cleansed. Ironically, perhaps, Helen also thinks of his "thickened, dirt-creased hand that could never be made clean" (135).

Almost immediately on his new farm he endured what he took to be a continuation of the arrogance of his father-in-law on the part of the local "money people." In the worst of his inner rage, the father prayed that God would drag "every bastard one of them . . . down to me so they could see me, my children as good as theirs, and me a harder worker than any of them . . ." (143). He vowed that one day Helen would be in one of those "big houses" and he said he would do that for her or die. He was praying to a "God" very much like himself, however, one who listened but said nothing at all. And from then on he "knew [he] was in it all on [his] own . . . [and] never bothered about God again" (145). And then he has to

confess that he didn't know exactly what it was that he had wanted. His own language suggests he wanted that American core mythic value not mentioned by Engler, equality (to be "as good as" others), but also, contradictorily, a share in the superiority of the "money people," a place in "their world even if it had to be on the bottom of it . . ." (143). He planned to blister their ears one day. He had even practiced the angry speech to himself so often he speaks of it now as if he had already said it to them. But, in fact, "[He] never talked about it to anyone" (143).

It is possible to complement Engler's theory by emphasizing what he avoids: the various hints that the bond between father and daughter is both mutual and excessive. The father clearly says that he had invested all his love and hopes in Helen, because he believes she was innocent (ignorant of his time of degradation in the city), having been born only toward the end of that time. Helen's imagination, memory, choices, and travels have now combined to bring her back to the father she left at age seventeen.

Helen's first thought, the opening sentences in the story, can be taken as the first of many threads that can be woven together to show the tragic dynamics of a family in the process of imploding, a secularized retelling of the Electra story: "Am I in love again, some new kind of love? Is that why I'm here?" John Hendriks, her young husband, and her nameless daughter are both here, but she has returned not to them but to her own father, and her father has made certain that neither her husband nor her mother know of her return.

Helen's father seems to reveal in his ranting to his daughter a previously concealed hatred of his wife, Helen's mother. Helen's one telling memory in this regard is of a family ride after church long ago when her father sneered at a couple of the local "money people" from "old, old families" (135), who dressed poorly and drove old trucks. In the child's view, her father's phrase, "money people," which had made her mother "sharp and impatient" (135), "had ruined the ride, as if by magic" (135). That is, no rational connection occurred to the child between the remark, the mother's anger, and the ruined ride. Given other bits of evidence scattered about in the story, however, it is not difficult to locate a lasting strain between husband and wife. Ma's parents were the reverse of the local money

people: her parents had only seemed to have money but in fact owned nothing and left nothing to Helen's parents. As Helen's father says to her later, "Your mother and me never had much to say, you know that. She was like her father" (143), the very man whom he professes to hate furiously even now. In addition, Helen's "mother's dissatisfaction with her had always ranged Helen and her father together" (133). Somewhat cryptically, Helen recalls that "there had always been trouble, sometimes the kind you laughed about later and sometimes not; that was one of the reasons she had married John . . ." (130). Finally, Helen married John, the son of "money people," but she tried to reassure her father by saying, "If John didn't have the store coming to him, and that land and all, I'd have married him anyway" (144), a remark that might have been reassuring to John before she left him, but which could not help but be a painful mirror-image (that is, reversed) reminder to her father of his own experience with his father-in-law, who got him to do all the work in the store and treated him like "dirt," with the implied but fraudulent promise that Helen's parents would inherit that house and store.

Helen also takes comfort in the sameness of her own face, "the face she had always seen" with its "smooth gentle skin . . . and the cool, innocent green of her eyes" (128), a child's face that does not reveal the woman's guilty choices. Those are the features she shares with her father who also has "pale surprised green eyes" and "skin that [is] almost as fair as Helen's" (138), at least in the winter.

But nothing expresses Helen's sense of her closeness to her father so compellingly—or disconcertingly—as her memory of bringing water to him as he worked in his fields. Her memory is perhaps stirred by the heat of this April day:

She remembered going out to the farthest field with water for him, before he had given up that part of the farm. And he would take the jug of water and lift it to his lips and it would seem to Helen, the sweet child Helen standing in the dusty corn, that the water flowed into her magnificent father and enlivened him as if it were secret blood of her own she had given him. And his chest would swell, his reddened arms eager with muscle emerging out of his rolled-up sleeves . . . (141)

The erotic wildness of this memory is perhaps tamed but only because she was "the sweet child Helen" at the time and now wonders what connection, if any, there can be between that vision and the aging man sitting beside her in the car.

Helen next remembers her father's amazed white expression when his eldest son Eddie, "moved away now and lost to them" (141), had shoved him against the supper table. The violent break with the father's authority freed the eldest son, perhaps, but the youngest daughter's break was in marriage to a young man, with whom she has had a (nameless) child that she then left for an emotionally needy drinking man not much younger than her father. And now she has left even that man to return to her father. The attempt to return to her own childhood innocence is as hopeless as trying to find again her magnificent young father, as she herself half realizes. But she is here.

When her father demands, "Why did you leave with that man?" (145), Helen cannot answer him except by saying, "He made me think of . . . you, Pa . . . And if he loved me that much I had to go with him" (146). Her father's next challenge, "Then why did you come back?" allows for either no answer at all, which is Helen's response, or the same answer she had given about both her husband John and her nameless middle-aged lover: "And if [you] loved me that much I had to go with [you]" (146). (Remember her father's frightening words: "It was all for you . . . I said I would do it for you or die" [145].) This time, of course, her own father is not someone she can leave husband, child, and lover for; that would be unspeakable.

When her father strikes her with the knife, his hand ("his whitened fist") finally looks clean as her blood "explod[es] out upon it" (146). He then washes the knife in the dirty water of Eden River and squats and finally sits beside her body and the river for hours in a kind of post-coital trance.

The point of view, the angle of narration, shifts into the father as soon as the daughter is dead, but all that is in his head and heart for hours is an empty waiting. The father finally tries "to turn his mind with an effort to the next thing he must do" (147), but it is difficult to imagine him succeeding.

No matter how rooted in American culture Oates's stories are, they always seem to have moments like this one when they aspire to the stature of parable, fable, or myth.

The gates of Eden are closed. There is no returning to such a place or time, not even to one's own infancy. Angels with swords still guard every entrance.

In this Joyce Carol Oates story, of course, any religious straining toward transcendence is thoroughly secularized by the metaphor of a deadly disease (Helen's notion of her own adultery) displacing the traditional notion of a mortal sin, a homely country water jug displacing the communion chalice of sacred blood, a "generous" daughter displacing Eve in this return to the grave, not the garden, and the father himself with his "familiar" knife standing in for the angels.

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NOTES

¹For an interesting treatment of these matters, see J. Hillis Miller's "Narrative" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990, 1995) 66-79.

²This and all subsequent references in parentheses are to "By the River" in Joyce Carol Oates, *Marriages and Infidelities* (New York: Vanguard, 1972) 127-47.