

“Alternate Versions”:
The Duplicities of Life Writing in the Novels of Carol Shields

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to my friend Carol Shields.

Abstract

Life writing is always constituted of alternate versions of the self and the lived life of the self. The duplicities inherent in life writing are central to this study. These duplicities refer not only to the doubleness, but also to the constructedness, of life writing. My enabling assumption is that a life lived is never the same as the life written. Some of the questions at stake in the discourse of life writing include: How may the self be represented in literary form? How is biography a necessary ground of autobiography? What is the borderline between history and life story? Why and how is a lived life different from a written life? How much "truth" is there in life writing?

One obvious starting point is to trace the history of selfhood, or the identity of the self. Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) provides a thorough analysis of the sources of the self in its historical transformation from Plato's time to our era. However, only recently have media theorists such as Eric Havelock (1963), Benedict Anderson (1991), Mark Poster (1995) and Ronald J. Deibert (1997) offered an estimate of how self-identity changes as technology varies, and how the form of communication alters the bases of identity. Based on discoveries in neuroscience, Paul Eakin (1999) uses narrative theory to explain why life writing is always made up of multiple versions and how the notion of selfhood is profoundly shaped by culture. William Spengemann's historical and philosophical analysis of traditional autobiographies helps to explain different forms of autobiography in terms of personal motives and cultural reasons for writing.

This study shows that life writing is necessarily a process of translation in which facts must be transmuted into stories. In the process of translation, there are always alternate versions of the self, forms, media, voices, narratives, realities and finally alternate versions of fictions. By looking at seven of Carol Shields's fictions, this study aims to illustrate how Shields goes beyond models of historical, philosophical, and poetic self-presentation to find new ways and new forms for self-presentation in life writing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Carol Shields has been fascinated by life writing throughout her writing life. As she once told an interviewer as late as 1999, “Biography is my consuming passion” (cited in Roy 113). The field of biography to which Shields refers is not just third-person writing, but the whole genre of life writing, which includes both biography and autobiography. As John Paul Russo has argued, “Generically, autobiography [is] a branch of biography” (174). In his *The Forms of Autobiography*, William C. Spengemann also defines autobiography as “a self-written biography” (xiii). And Shields has devoted much of her writing life to this genre. She started, for example, with academic writing on literary biography at the University of Ottawa for her M.A thesis—*Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision* (1977)—and she ended her career by writing an actual biography, *Jane Austen* (2001). In between she has explored again and again the problems and duplicities of life writing in seven of her nine novels. These are *Small Ceremonies* (1976), *The Box Garden* (1977), *Happenstance* (1980), *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (1982), *Swann: A Mystery* (1987), *The Stone Diaries* (1993), and *Unless* (2003), each of which takes the form either of fictional biography or fictional autobiography.

Asked why she was interested in fictional life writing, Shields had this to say: “It is through fiction that I’ve learnt about the lives of women. And about how people think; biography and history have a narrative structure, but they don’t tell us much about the interior lives of people. This seems to me to be fiction’s magic, that it attempts to be an

account of all that cannot be documented, but is, nevertheless, true” (cited in Roy 138).

Therefore, Shields adopts the form of fictional auto/biography to illustrate some of the important issues in life writing such as: How is biography a necessary ground of autobiography? What is the borderline between history and life story? Why and how is a lived life different from a written life? How much “truth” is there in life writing? And how may the self be represented in literary form, with what differences?

Questions of self-representation are among Shields’s most important concerns. In her discussion of John Barth, she had already noticed that fiction writing has “its gaze on the question of self and the nature of self-identity” (“Narrative Hunger” 30). More widely, Shields’s fascination with life writing and her concerns about self-representation are also part of a more general cultural fascination with how the self may represent itself in literary works. As she observes, self-representation exists in “the narrative arc our culture has sanctioned, [in which] stories form a more communally conscious culture that is more likely to say ‘Who are we?’ rather than ‘Who am I?’”

A Brief History of the Self

Were we to trace, nonetheless, the history of selfhood, or the identity of “who am I,” we would find that Western notions of the self have a partial origin in Plato’s philosophy, in which the word *psyche* began to take on a new meaning, not as a life force, but as soul, or individual mind, with its modern connotations of “the Separation of the Knower from the Known” (Havelock 197). Before Plato, there was no concept of self as we understand it today, because there were no printed words and few written words to record a history of the self. The self was more loosely associated with everything one

remembered; the moment one chanted the poem, one became part of the things one remembered; and the memories were varied by different chanters at different times. So, as far as self-identity is concerned in oral culture, it was little more than a series of passing, changing words that were evanescent, transient and disappearing. The self began as whatever words that the culture speaks through the self. As a result, the self, in a sense, was always multiple, based on rhetorical roles that the conditions of oral poetry imposed on every speaker. That is because oral memory, in Havelock's sense, requires the self to be identified with everything one hears; there is no central, unified identity. As Havelock further suggests, "Oral verse was the instrument of a cultural indoctrination, the purpose of which was the preservation of group identity" (100). However, this group identity is not what Shields calls "Who are we"—the multiple identities of an individual simultaneously—but the self remembered by the group at different moments.

The identity of "Who are we," in Shields's own term, is "a multitude of selves" (cited in De Roo 50); it is the multiple identities of an individual self co-existing in his or her life as well as in his or her writing. The concept of this "multitude of selves" has, however, undergone a long history of communicational transformation. Coming back to the origins of the self, what Plato does in the area of writing, according to Havelock, is to encourage our rejection of oral culture in favour of a permanent expression. By rejecting oral culture, one has to develop a consciousness which separates one from the tradition, which becomes the thought of an individual: "This amounts to accepting the premise that there is a 'me,' a 'self,' a 'soul,' a consciousness which is self-governing and which discovers the reason for action in itself rather than imitation of the poetic experience" (Havelock 20). Only writing can separate the individual from the culture so that the

individuals are forced to stand apart, question, criticize, think, reflect, and to have their own points of view in regard to their own culture.

Although the Western self is born with Plato, it actually takes its modern character from printing in the early modern period, where print is “a major factor in the development of personal privacy that marks modern society” (Deibert 100). The whole notion of a unified, autonomous, rational, free individual self is essentially self-contained, in accordance with the Cartesian “I think therefore I am”. The reason René Descartes could come to such a conclusion was his radical scepticism which doubts everything, even the evidence of one’s senses, except for the capacity to think and to judge. Everything outside the self could be an illusion; sitting by a fireplace, writing, making notes and thinking is the only thing that assures Descartes of the existence of his individual self. *Cogito, ergo sum*. The fact that he can think proves his existence. Such a solipsistic and lonely position is ultimately based on print, or at least based on the notion of a private reader occupied with his/her own thoughts, holding a self-contained book, which becomes an analogue for a self-contained identity. And the book becomes a figure for the stand-alone, autonomous self and free individual.

But where does the self come from? And how has this selfhood developed and changed since Plato’s time? In answer to the first question, from a historical and philosophical point of view, Charles Taylor, in his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), provides a thorough analysis of the sources of the self in its historical transformation from Plato’s time to our own era. To him, “Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes” (3). So the self originates in Plato’s concept of goodness, from Homeric heroic

selfhood, but develops in terms of Augustine's inwardness, of Rousseau's faith in nature, and of Locke's disciplined making and remaking of self, which finds its most literal expression in Benjamin Franklin's mottoes of moral perfection. The self, then, either comes from the wholeness, harmony and order of society; or it comes from nature, as Rousseau and his followers firmly believed and practiced in the later Romantic Movement.

Taylor also points out what could prevent us from developing a genuine selfhood: an evil which, for Plato, is the lack of attention to goodness, since "the light of God is not just 'out there,' illuminating the order of being. It is also an 'inner light'" (129). Thus, we need to train our eyes to see the good. For Augustine, by contrast, evil is the wrong love: "For the good that I would do I do not: but the evil which I would, that I do" (cited in Taylor 138). The answer to duality is a philosophy of will: for the will-to-good to triumph over the will-to-evil. For Descartes, evil is not the will but the wrong method, because the "universe was to be understood mechanically," so "the concept of reason remains procedural" (Taylor 144, 165). For Locke, evil is a lack of discipline, because the "greater good in view doesn't always move us. If it does, argues Locke, we would clearly spend the greater part of our efforts ensuring our eternal salvation" (169). For Kant, evil is the lack of consciousness, because "we are so deeply embedded in it, we cannot but reach for reflective language" (176).

For modernists, according to Taylor, the self has lost its faith in the order of society because of Darwinism and technology; there is no goodness left to turn to. Thus, Henry Adams, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, realized that the self must be split to accommodate human evolution in a new technological environment:

Darwin's theory of evolution requires an ecological self to adapt to its new environment; and new technologies, such as electricity and dynamos, require a new self, an evolutionary self, and a multivariable self: "Adams," as the autobiographer writes, "was struggling to shape himself to his time" (Adams 269). However, from a humanistic and social perspective, John Paul Russo laments the consequent loss of unity in the self; he fails to see any positive impact of new technology upon Henry Adams's epistemology. Instead, Russo thinks that, "Adams's faith in history forced him to accept a 'discontinuous' education and thus 'discontinuous' self-information: the only way the events of his life could fit into the pattern was by comprehending their degree of unfitness" (179). For Russo, the real unfitness is the disappearance of the harmonious self, because the "self is swept up by history, unable to tame it, yet able to exploit and to teach it" (180). So, self-taught by history, Henry Adams "in effect chose to try to unite [the Augustinian and Franklinian models]" (178).

It would likely be more true to say that Adams was educated in both Rousseauistic romanticism and Franklin's heroic era of the self-made, self-regulating man; however, instead of losing a traditional, universal self, Adams teaches himself, rather, how to gain a new selfhood from "multiplicity," as suggested in the title of his autobiography: *The Education of Henry Adams: A Study of Twentieth Century Multiplicity*. And yet there is still a nostalgic yearning for unity in the form of Adams's autobiography, even though he breaks down a traditional, first-person narrative form by using a third-person narrative. "His identity," as he writes, "if one could call a bundle of disconnected memories an identity, seemed to remain; but his life was once more broken into separate pieces; he was a spider and had to spin a new web in some new place with a

new attachment” (20). But his “spider” attachment—writing in the third person—is a formal recognition of the impossibility to weave a new totality. As Adams realizes, “The only honest alternative to affirming unity was to deny it; and the denial would require a new education” (430). In effect, Adams exchanges Augustine’s philosophy of will (the subordination of a will-to-evil by a will-to-good) for a mechanistic philosophy more in keeping with the modern world—“Faraday’s trick of seeing lines of [electrical] force all about him, where he [Adams] had always seen lines of will” (426). He even starts to take into consideration the impact of the new (Freudian) psychology: “Did the new psychology hold that the ... soul or mind—was or was not a unit? ... He gathered from the books that the psychologists had, in a few cases, distinguished several personalities in the same mind.... Alternating personalities turned up constantly, even among one’s friends” (433). The most telling phrase that Adams uses to sum up his autobiography is that the “child born in 1900 would, then, be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple” (457).

If the conclusion of Darwinian self-adaptation in Adams’s autobiography is that “all the new forces, condensed to cooperation, were demanding a new type of man” (499), then Roland Barthes’s mid-century awareness of self-deconstruction is manifested in the text of his autobiography itself. As Barthes reminds his readers, “I am writing a text, and I call it R.B.” (56). Although it is written in an era before the Internet, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) is a “hypertext” of post-modern autobiography, which anticipates some of the features of digital writing, e.g. “a way of storing language” (Poster 69). As Barthes sees it, his “*language in so far as it is seen*,” is “that of infinitely spread-out languages, of parentheses never to be closed: a utopian vision in that it

supposes a mobile, plural reader, who nimbly inserts and removes the quotation marks” (Barthes 161). As he puts it, “Can one—or at least could one ever—begin to write without taking oneself for another” (99)? To the structuralist, the self is always a grammar in process, not a sign of some fixed language or artefact. And so Philippe Lejeune’s the *Autobiographical Pact* is undermined from the outset because there is no “referent” for Barthes who is contractually bound to keep this pact; sometimes, it is a Catholic believer; another time, a left-hander; other times, a gay man. By constantly changing the referent of his subject, Barthes refuses a consistent narrative of the self in his autobiographical text. The only order we should expect to find in his text is a series of fragments indexed alphabetically, “a novel without proper names” (Barthes 119). As another theorist of autobiography, Sidonie Smith, suggests, “This multiplication of speaking positions increases ‘the possibility of resistance through a recognition of the *simultaneous* non-unity and non-consistency of subject positions’” (21).

The Self in a New Mode of Information

Why does the concept of the self start with a unified, fixed and stable singularity, only to become a fragmented and decentred multiple, leading to the “disappearance of the self,” as Russo worries? Why does it vary in different historical epochs, in differing media cultures such as the oral, the print, and the digital? Neither Taylor nor Russo can provide an answer from either a philosophical, or even a social, point of view. Only recently have media theorists such as Eric Havelock (1963), Benedict Anderson (1991), Mark Poster (1995) and Ronald J. Deibert (1997) offered an estimate of how self-identity changes as technology varies, and how the form of communication alters the bases of

identity.

Mark Poster's study of the effect of the mode of communication upon the identity of an individual shows that, "In the case of both the reader and the author, print culture constitutes the individual as a subject, as transcendent to objects, as stable and fixed in identity" (58). Therefore, the self represented in written, or print-influenced, autobiographies is either of an Augustinian kind, a type unified with God, or of a Rousseauistic kind, a Romantic self wholly absorbed in Nature, or else of a Franklinist, self-regulating kind. No matter what form each of these auto/biographies takes, the self remains "stable and fixed in identity" (Poster 58). None of them looks beyond the autonomous self because, "in print culture, private reading mixed with and encouraged new forms of literary intimacy and exploration of the self." The very notion of an individual identity is tied to the notion of a unified, centralized, singular self because of the bound, self-contained book. At the same time, because of the mass production of printed materials such as newspapers, magazines and books, novels about an individual life also popularized an image of the self as private property.

As David Williams has argued, Deibert offers "space to explore only the changes affecting '*individual identities, spatial biases, and imagined communities*'" (47), because "printing favored the distinctly modern idea of the sovereign voice, the single author(itative) individual" (98). A whole culture of Western individuality, of privacy, of private property, and of private space thus springs from a deep engagement in the culture of the book. In his *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson ties the experience of collective reading by autonomous individuals to the way in which print culture "fostered the emergence of a new, distinctly modern, imagined community: the nation" (104).

Whether it is the identity of the self or the identity of the nation, the modern view of the self has remained closely tied to printing. The sovereign nation is likewise an incorporation of the sovereign will of like-minded individuals.

If printing fosters the notion of modern identity as central, unified and fixed, a hypermedia environment of digitalization and networked computing produces a very different post-modern epistemology of the self as plural, fragmented and decentred—a self that is almost like “an assemblage of its environment, a multiple self that changes in response to different social situations” (Deibert 181). Thus, Deibert concludes, “At the heart of post-modern social epistemology is a forceful reaction against the modernist view of the ‘self’ and individual subjectivity” (181). With the popularity of computer networks, “the practice of reading in a print culture” is henceforth challenged by the public sharing of information on line (184). As a result, “the private sphere is being invaded in the transparent hypermedia environment.”

Individual identity is not only constructed and configured in new forms in cyberculture, but is also easily deconstructed or reconstructed as well. “Identity deceptions” become hostile, or playful, or even necessary “when one’s ‘electronic identity’ is spread across and shared between global databases” (185). So, “electronic culture promotes the individual as an unstable identity, as a continuous process of multiple identity formation, and raises the question of a social form beyond the modern, the possibility of a postmodern society” (Poster 59). This post-modern identity is featured as disrupted, fragmented, decentred and multiplied in life writing. Such “electronically mediated communication opens the prospect of understanding the subject as constituted in historically concrete configurations of discourse and practice. It clears the way to

seeing the self as multiple, changeable, fragmented, in short as making a project of its own constitution” (Poster 77).

In this new media environment, Roland Barthes is merely adapting to a change in the mode of communication by reminding us that, “He more or less remembers the order in which he wrote these fragments; but where did that order come from? In the course of what classification, of what succession? He no longer remembers. The alphabetical order erases everything, banishes every origin” (148). By reducing the writing of his written autobiography to a series of hyperlinks, indexed alphabetically, Barthes gestures toward the emergent mode of information that would become hypertext. Meanwhile, marginal issues such as homosexuality, left-handedness, and Catholicism also become autobiographical asides. “When these subjects enter the scene of autobiographical writing, they engage dialogically with the cacophonous voices of cultural discourses” (Smith 21).

The representation and the meaning of Western selfhood in a postmodern culture of hypertext are less obviously, but no less significantly, present in Shields’s novels. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Shields is doing what digital culture and electronic writing demands in fragmenting and decentering the autonomous self in *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries*. Although Mark Poster suggests that, “with information about individuals now digitalized in databases, one’s life becomes an open book for those who have access to the right computers” (64), and though John Paul Russo asks rather plaintively, “How does a monster write a memoir? What history could it possibly have?” (209), Shields is determined to find answers to the problem of adapting to this new world of information. Even in her first novel, *Small Ceremonies*, she grapples with the moral problem of sharing the information of one’s life. Later on, she develops a more

revolutionary model of “a communal history,” or a “collective writing of one’s life” in *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries*.

However, the “problem of communication theory,” as Mark Poster notes, “begins with recognition of necessary self-reflexivity, of the dependence of knowledge on its context. It requires from the outset a frank acknowledgement of contingency: the truth of communication theory is registered in relation to historical change and is in no sense ‘absolute’” (74). In the novels that I have chosen for discussion of Shields’s transformation of life writing, there are alternate versions of history, of form, and of selfhood that offer some clues to the future of life writing in a digital culture.

Neuroscience and the Transformation of the Self

Most recently, Paul John Eakin (1999) turns to neuroscience to explain why life writing is always made up of multiple versions and how the notion of selfhood is profoundly shaped by culture. First, by insisting on the primacy of the body, Eakin critiques the “bodiless ‘thinking substance’ of the Cartesian subject” (8). To him, the “Cartesian subject—dead or alive—is not a suitable model for the self” because, “underpinning the sense of self, underpinning memory...is the body image—the body...is the brain’s absolute frame of reference” (8, 19). Following Antonio R. Damasio’s biological theory of human cognition in his *Descartes’s Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), Eakin develops a narrative theory for what he calls the “ecological” self. Damasio’s lab work has proved that “the body, as represented in the brain, may constitute the indispensable frame of reference for the neural processes that we experience as the mind” (Damasio xvi). Thus, he concludes, “our most refined

thoughts and best actions, our greatest joys and deepest sorrows, use the body as a yardstick." Damasio demonstrates how the chemical circuits (the blood stream), the neurological circuits that run from our body and back into our brain, constitute a continuous feedback system. But, in fact, the brain is "the body's captive audience" (xv). However, there is a way in which Damasio supports a narrative theory of identity because his lab work shows that we are living our autobiographies all the time, i.e. we live our sense of selfhood: "At each moment the state of self is constructed from the ground up," because "our self, or better even, our metasef, only 'learns' about that 'now' an instant later" (240). The neural system in our body works constantly to update, to connect us with previous images, to recreate earlier information; and these neural devices do not even require languages; they are sending pictures all the time: the body sends pictures to the brain, and in return, the brain sends pictures to other parts of the brain. There is no single "Cartesian theatre" in the brain (94). Thus, long before the use of language, the brain receives a series of "silent movies" without words. Damasio can then conclude, "Language may not be the source of the self but it certainly is the source of 'I' " (242). In truth, we do not even have an "I" until we can say "I".

Taking Damasio's narrative of "crosstalk" between the brain and the body, Eakin develops a narrative theory of the self as it is produced through language in storytelling. However, the self has to make itself "socially accountable" to be understood, thereby ensuring a social and cultural dimension to selfhood. Based on the work of cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser, Eakin identifies five "registers of self": an "*ecological self*," an "*interpersonal self*," an "*extended self*," a "*private self*" and a "*conceptual self*," all of which are identifiable in autobiography. As he points out, "When it comes to

autobiography, *narrative* and *identity* are so intimately linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other. Thus, narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience" (*How Our Lives* 100). By restoring a narrative dimension to cognitive science, Eakin justifies his narrative theory—"Storied Selves: Identity through Self-Narration" (99).

Culture, in this narrative theory of selfhood, determines the forms of selfhood. We tell stories which are socially acceptable in terms of a dominant cultural script. Auto/biographical narrative is thus founded in social relations; as Eakin puts it, "identity is conceived as relational"(56). Autobiography, therefore, "offers not only the autobiography of the self but the biography and autobiography of the other." Thus, auto/biographical ethics often become a concern of life writers. The life writer must be ethically responsible for both his own story and those of others. In his discussion of John Shotter, for example, Eakin suggests, "we talk in this way...because we are disciplined to do so by 'social accountability'": "what we talk of as our experience of our reality is constituted for us largely by the *already established* ways in which we *must* talk in our attempts to *account* for ourselves—and for it—to the others around us.... And only certain ways of talking are deemed legitimate" (62). Thus, Eakin points to ways in which our various selves are shaped, if not determined, by culture. Shotter's own theory of "social accountability" suggests that we fashion our selves according to the available cultural models (62-3).

Another contribution Eakin makes to autobiographical theory is to legitimize imagined versions of selfhood. As neuroscience reveals, "Every perception is an act of creation" (16). Moreover, "all memories are perceptions newly occurring in the present

rather than images fixed and stored in the past and somehow mysteriously recalled to present consciousness" (18-19). Since all memories are fresh creations, it is impossible for the life writer to maintain a fixed image of selfhood. So an imagined selfhood in life writing is even more natural than the self may be in "reality", and more common than is generally thought. In this sense, the "truth" of life writing is challenged not only by "electronic" writing but also by neurological evidence.

Since alternative versions of self and life are proved scientifically, life writing may be closer to fiction than it is to fact, just as its production through memory suggests the inevitability of multiple versions. Moreover, cognitive psychology has uncovered multiple selves, two of which are already present in infancy: "the ecological self" and "the interpersonal self" (Eakin 22). Later "the extended self," "the private self," and "the conceptual self" will develop by the age of five (22-3). All of these "registers of self," as Eakin calls them, are brought together, or not, by an act of narrative integration. The rule is cruelly simple: "No narrative, no self". In other words, the "extended self" depends almost entirely upon story to extend across time and space. Eakin's narrative theory of autobiography has been used as a tool by David Williams to read Shields's *The Stone Diaries* ("Making" 10-28), where the fictional autobiographer, Daisy Goodwill, integrates her multiple selves into a narrative of process by which the self makes itself "socially accountable." But this process, as will appear in Shields's *oeuvre* as a whole, can take a variety of forms, according to the motive and cultural context of each autobiographer.

Forms of Autobiography

William Spengemann's historical and philosophical analysis of traditional autobiographies helps, to some degree, to understand the forms of autobiography in terms of motives for writing. According to him, "the only procedures available to autobiography" are "historical self-explanation, philosophical self-scrutiny, poetic self-expression, and poetic self-invention" (xvii, xvi). However, as technology advances and the mode of communication changes, more motives for self-representation could be added to Spengemann's list in his *The Forms of Autobiography* (1981). Some of these are cultural developments of the twentieth century. They could be described as technological self-adaptation in *Henry Adams's Education* (1907), modernist self-reflexivity in Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (1932), post-modern self-deconstruction in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975); and cultural self-translation in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1977). Of course, the ever-changing motives for self-representation are closely related to social and political, as well as to technological, conditions.

Charles Taylor dates the birth of the Western self from Plato, whose "view, just because it privileges a condition of self-collected awareness and designates this as the state of maximum unity with oneself, requires some conception of the mind as a unitary space" (119). But, as Taylor admits, "Plato does not use the inside-outside dichotomy to make his point. We have to wait until Augustine before a theory of this kind" (121). This narrative of interiority, which begins with Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (AD 398-400), is motivated by the saint's desire to reveal his inner life to the world, as it is seen and known by God. Augustine is the first writer who devotes a "literary form"—a whole

book—to his life story by confessing his sins to God, which validates Russo’s observation that “the form of the book and the concept of selfhood coincide” (178). Although Augustine develops a dichotomy in the self which is expressed in two wills, two loves and even, grammatically, in two pronouns, “I” and “you”, Augustine’s manuscript confession is still based on the oral form—like his framing prayer to God in each chapter—to reveal his conversion into a single, unified self. In this sense, his “whole outlook was influenced by Plato’s doctrine” (Taylor 127). Nonetheless, Augustine’s dichotomy of two selves was the historical beginning of a split self which was united only in the sacrifice of his old self to God in order for the new self to be born.

Formally, Augustine’s *Confessions* is a dialogue between him and God; grammatically it is not a first-person narrative but a dialogue in the second person with a speaking first-person. It is also a story of two warring selves and two wills. The breakthrough in *Confessions* is that writing makes it possible for Augustine to reflect on himself. As Karl Weintraub points out, Augustine represents “a self-reflective person [who] asks ‘who am I?’ and ‘how did I become what I am?’” (1). In a written form of twelve books, recalling Virgil’s Roman epic, Augustine can thus question his religious tradition, which was impossible in oral poetry, because the tradition would disappear the moment it was questioned. Each of Augustine’s twelve books begins and ends with the address of “I” speaking to “you”. For example, at the beginning of Book II, Augustine writes: “I must now carry my thoughts back to the abominable things I did in those days, the sins of the flesh which defiled my soul. I do this, my God, not because I love those sins, but so that I may love you. For the love of your love I shall retrace my wicked ways” (43). Here, Augustine not only uses two pronouns to tell his life story but also

realizes that there are two selves in his life: one is the flesh, the sinful self; the other is the soul, the spiritual self. It is only when Augustine begins to question and doubt the sinful self that he develops a sense of self apart from his religious tradition, the Manichean doctrine which acknowledges two gods, the good god and the evil god; which identifies evil with matter and goodness with spirit. This dualism of the self is, in some sense, not so far removed from a post-modern concept of plural selves. But the key issue, as Charles Taylor's study of Augustine shows, is that, "When we get to God, the image of place becomes multiple and many-sided. In an important sense, the truth is *not* in me. I see the truth in God" (135). To Taylor, this inwardness is the source of the self, since one has to go inward to find God. And Augustine does not find God out of himself; God completely fills him, but remains beyond him. The experience of God is nonetheless grounded upon the first-person viewpoint, upon first-person perception, and its sense of inwardness. If God is within, this authorizes a new kind of re-born vision. "I" can speak with more authority and greater truth because it is God who speaks in "me" through the first person. Although there remains a dichotomy in Augustine's two loves and two voices, "I" and "you", such dualism escapes multiplicity because this "I" gives itself up to "you", sacrificing its interest and its will to God.

Augustine is aware of his debt to Platonism: "By reading these books of the Platonists I had been prompted to look for truth as something incorporeal" (154). The Neo-Platonists helped to prepare his conversion from Manichaeism, i.e. from dualism, to a unified self and a unified religion—where there is only one God. So Augustine uses his humble narrative to confess to God his dependence on the divine unity for his singular identity. This vision of God, in effect, locates the saint beyond time, where he looks back

on himself from a transcendent perspective where, “above my own mind, which was liable to change, there was the never changing, true eternity of truth” (151).

In her study of autobiography, Linda Anderson insists that Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* marks “the origins of Western autobiography, both in the sense of making a historical beginning and of setting up a model for other, later texts” (18). This would seem, in fact, to be Augustine’s intention to make himself “socially accountable”: “I need not tell all this to you, my God, but in your presence I tell it to my own kind, to those other men, however few, who may perhaps pick up this book” (45). In fact, Augustine establishes a norm for Christian selfhood. Confession even becomes the model for the church when it adopts his confession as an institutional practice that survives to this day. But the Church in Western Europe would be sorely challenged in later movements, such as the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution of the late-eighteenth century.

By calling his autobiography *Confessions* (1772), the French social philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau signals his intention to enter into a dialogue with Augustine. However, he is not another Augustine at all. Augustine gives up his egoless individuality to God; Rousseau grounds his egoistic individuality in nature: “I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man is myself” (3). By making nature his truth, “[w]hether Nature has acted rightly or wrongly in destroying the mould in which she cast me, can only be decided after I have been read.” Like Augustine, Rousseau, in a way, also has a doctrine of two wills, or two loves. Instead of the love of the world or flesh and the love of God or spirit, Rousseau’s two wills are “natural” and “social”. In his moral economy, one must live according to “nature”, and one must hate society, rejecting its corrupting influence. The whole doctrine of two loves is still there,

but in quite the opposite way. Literally, Rousseau goes to nature by leaving city and society; and he values a life as close as possible to a primitive life because he sees society as evil.

The motive of Rousseau's confessions is to destroy established rules and social conventions rather than to conform to the divine will, to sacrifice one's own interest to God. Thus, he writes, "I worship freedom; I abhor restraint" (37). To Rousseau, society is the agent of restraint and nature is the agent of freedom. Like Augustine, Rousseau also confesses, "I have been reproached with wanting to pose as an original, and different from others" (57). However, his confessions do not lead him to self-reproach; instead, his conscience is free of offence: "In reality, I have never troubled about acting like other people or differently from them. I sincerely desired to do what was right" (57). Of course, what he wants to do is right for himself, whatever his nature tells him to do.

What Rousseau does is to reverse traditional definitions about what is good and what is evil. Where Augustine has identified God with restraint and law, and freedom with lust, shame, selfishness, and egoism, Rousseau entirely reverses that: "The contempt for the manners, principles, and prejudices of my age, with which my deep meditations had inspired me, rendered me insensible to the raillery of those who possessed them, and I pulverized their trifling witticism with my maxims, as I should have crushed an insect between my fingers" (430). Rousseau does not care what others say about him; his attitude toward social conventions becomes the foundations of a social revolution, because what he reacts against is the court at Versailles as well as sophisticated manners and the whole social artefact of monarchy and French social life. Instead, he returns to nature and lets his behaviour be dictated by the nature within.

Again and again Rousseau uses confession to consolidate his individualism against any social forms identified with “God”: “Although false shame and fear of public disapproval at first prevented me from living in accordance with my principles, and from openly insulting the maxims of my age, from that moment my mind was made up, and I delayed carrying out my intention no longer than was necessary for contradictions to irritate it and render it victorious” (366). There is no humility in his confessions, only his own determination to make his nature his sole authority: “If I again begin to yield to public opinion in any single thing, I shall soon become its slave in everything” (389). He announces his satisfaction with himself in everything he has done.

“The position which I had taken up aroused curiosity; people were anxious to make the acquaintance of the singular man, which sought no one’s society, and whose only anxiety was to live free and happy after his own fashion” (378). It is true that “living after his own fashion” as “the original man” would become a basic principle for later generations of Romantics such as Thoreau and Emerson to have their original relationship with the universe. Thus, Rousseau becomes very much the fountainhead of American Romanticism. His notion of selfhood has great significance as well for political ideology in America, insofar as his rejection of social manners and morals lays the ground for the rejection of social institutions and of monarchy.

Although Augustine and Rousseau both use *Confessions* as their titles of autobiography, they offer totally opposite views of the world, the self and society, because, in many ways, “you”, the eternal God is reduced to a figure for society, for the institution of the church, and for the public in the Romantic view of the self. Rousseau rejects “you” for “me.” As Linda Anderson suggests, “The point therefore is not what

Rousseau confesses but the act of confession, the drama of the self” (51). By contrast, Augustine establishes “the unified, transcendent ‘I’ of autobiographical tradition [for] the ‘I’ to see and to turn its gaze self-consciously both inwards and upwards” (Anderson 27). If “I” conflicts with “you”, “I” has to be sacrificed for “you”.

In form, as much as content, Rousseau thus offers a remarkable innovation in transforming Augustine’s confession into a self-justification, or an apologia. When we come to Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, the autobiographical form has changed from a prayer to a letter, addressed to a second person who, far from being the transcendent deity, is the historical legatee of Franklin’s “life.” Literally, Franklin’s letter is addressed to his son; but symbolically, Franklin, the founder of the nation, speaks to the American revolutionary nation as a father to his son. Franklin neither sacrifices his self to God as Augustine does, nor does he cherish his self through Nature, as Rousseau does; instead, he tries to regulate his self to create a better self, to create “a life on a new, revolutionary model” (Ketcham 4). If Augustine sets up a model for his Church to follow, Franklin sets up a model for his nation to follow. By taking his fellow countrymen as his true posterity, he makes himself the father of America; by establishing his life as a model, he offers his autobiography as a secular “Scripture” (Spengemann 54).

A secular autobiography can still have the same function as Augustine’s sacred one. The differences between these two are that, by laying bare his sins to God, Augustine exposes his failures in a model of humility and of confession. By contrast, the print man, Franklin, has no sins; anything wrong in his life is reduced to “errata”, a term related to the medium of printing that implies corrective self-improvement: “The breaking into this money of Vernon’s was one of the first great errata of my life” (42);

“My printing this pamphlet was another erratum” (49); “I attempt familiarities (another erratum)...” (51). No matter how great are these “errata,” the printer can perfect the “page” of his life: “Thus I corrected that great erratum as well as I could” (71).

Another difference from Augustine is that Franklin may have two selves, but only in the sense that his life can have more than one “edition”. At the very beginning of his autobiography, he writes, “I should have no objection to a repetition of the same life from its beginning, only asking the advantage authors have in a second edition to correct some faults of the first” (16). If we think about the notion of “edition” in which a typesetter follows a manuscript, Franklin merely needs to set up the type for his life, and then follow it. What he has to do in living his life is to produce a faithful copy in print of what was first written in living manuscript. Thus, autobiography is simply a pre-existing text for one’s life, a model that one writes “by hand” and then sets in type.

Forty-five years before he sets out to write his autobiography, Franklin sketches a plan for his life as he sails from England to America. This is what he writes in his journal:

We sail’d from Gravesend on 23rd of July, 1726. For the incidents of the voyage, I refer you to my Journal, where you will find them all minutely related. Perhaps the most important part of that journal is the *plan* to be found in it, which I formed at sea, for regulating my future conduct in life. It is the more remarkable, as being formed when I was so young, and yet being pretty faithfully adhered to quite thro’ to old age. (56)

In writing to himself, Franklin writes to the future, as he will later write to his son and to his nation. He thus establishes himself as the “author” of his life, writing a plan to follow in living, which is quite opposite to Rousseau, who changes his “plans every moment,”

who follows “nothing but the caprice of the moment” (Rousseau 666). Thus, the written plan becomes a means by which Franklin regulates himself. So, in this way, Franklin expands on the Cartesian model of a disengaged, objective self; he steps apart from the self to invent another self, which means that, where there is more than one self, the regulating self has both the power to conceal and to correct any other version.

In his *Future Without a Past*, John Paul Russo suggests that Franklin’s multiple “selves,” “poses” and “props” are made possible or accessible “because the printed page was obviously the medium through which he learned many of the gestures and postures of his multiple lives” (177-8). But I would argue that it is also the medium of type that makes it possible for him to regulate his self in terms of a set moral chart. And if he can be true to “type,” so should later generations be able to follow this model of self-improvement. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), we can see one of Franklin’s “sons” following the father of the nation to the “letter.” By “printing” his chart for moral perfection and future plans, Franklin has made himself the author of his own life as a pattern for others.

Using a letter from Mr Benjamin Vaughan, Franklin also demonstrates the success of this “pre-scribed” life: “As no end likewise happens without a means, so we shall find, sir, that even you yourself framed a plan by which you became considerable” (75). Not only does Franklin make a plan at the level of the self, he also draws a plan at the level of the city. His blueprint for civic planning includes such public facilities as paved streets, sewers and lights. Ultimately, he also draws a plan at the level of the nation by drafting a political constitution. Evidently, Franklin’s personal transformation of the self is paradigmatic for American history and culture.

Another feature of Franklin's autobiography is that he relies on biography "as a pattern for all youth" (76), with which to invent the self. Franklin writes: "Plutarch's *Lives* there was in which I read abundantly, and I still think that time spent to great advantage" (24). Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (ca. 110 CE) is one of the most important books that Franklin mentions; it occurs twice in his text not only because Plutarch sets a moral pattern for his life but also because biography introduces a model for autobiography, since biography "encourages more writings of the same kind with [his] own, and induces more men to spend lives to be written" (76). Thus, the reference to Plutarch's *Lives* as a pattern for life writing calls attention to the formal interdependence of biography and autobiography, too.

Biography is supposed to treat the history of someone else's life, with its unique circumstances, individual periods, and documents of history. However, the very title of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* suggests that biography, in its origin, is less history than it is a model for imitation. Plutarch is much less concerned with writing the histories of noble Greeks and Romans, than he is in defining a pattern for moral virtue. And the great virtue for Plutarch is that Dion and Brutus, for example, both hated tyrants. Though they lived in differing cultures some three hundred years apart, they were both willing to sacrifice themselves to fight tyranny. In Plutarch's "biographical" writings, Dion and Brutus are both celebrated as republican heroes since they are both students of Plato's *Republic*. Indeed, Plato's *Republic* becomes something of a Franklinesque model for Plutarch, to the extent that a written model becomes the pattern of a lived life. It is political biography, much in the sense that Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-81) is political

hagiography, at least to the extent that his subjects conform to a moral pattern of supporting monarchy.

In stark contrast to Plutarch's republican heroes who oppose arbitrary authority, Samuel Johnson's characters are poets who remain obedient and loyal to a King's or Queen's authority. Johnson begins not with Milton, whose life precedes his first subject, but with Abraham Cowley who became secretary to Lord Jermin, "an employment of the highest confidence and honour" (Johnson 4). His second character, John Denham, was "entrusted by the queen with a message to the king" (56); so "Denham is deservedly considered as one of the fathers of English poetry" (58). To Johnson, who himself is profoundly loyal to the English monarchy, the life of Milton, chief of poets, is blighted because he "hated monarchs in the state, and prelates in the church; for he hated all whom he was required to obey. It is suspected that his predominant desire was to destroy rather than establish, and that he felt not so much the love of liberty as repugnance to authority" (112). Thus, Milton's "work is not the greatest of heroick poems" (139), because his "republicanism was, I am afraid, founded in an envious hatred of greatness and a sullen desire of independence; in petulance impatient of control, and in pride disdainful of superiority" (112). Both Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* suggest that biography is less about history than it is about moral philosophy.

Modern biography takes a somewhat different turn in James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). Boswell seeks to record the uniqueness of Dr. Johnson's life, even though Johnson himself sets a pattern of respecting monarchy and authority, of upholding conservative ideals and conservative views of the world. Ironically, Johnson

still belongs to the old world of moral philosophy, though Boswell offers a modern version of the biographical subject to show “the progress of his mind” by “following so eminent a man from his cradle to his grave, every minute particular” (4). What Boswell does is to use a more historical method, taking notes of what his subject said each night after time spent with the “great man,” and studying and incorporating sentences from the letters that Johnson gave him before his death. So Johnson’s life is based upon documented facts, both in his conversations and in his private writings. Thus, Dr. Johnson is remembered as an individual unique in his speech, his humour, his wit and his language. Under Boswell’s pen, Dr. Johnson is a man of many parts.

Of course, Boswell is aware of the dangers of not writing an ideal portrait of his subject: “I am conscious that this is the most difficult and dangerous part of my biographical work, and I cannot but be very anxious concerning it. I trust that I have got through it, preserving at once my regard to truth, —to my friend, —and to the interest of virtue and religion. Nor can I apprehend that more harm can ensue from knowledge of the irregularity of Johnson” (623). Here, Boswell does not seek an ideal pattern of a man, but tries to tell the historical truth of the man. We might say that Boswell’s *Life of Dr Johnson* is almost true to the historical facts because he relies on first-hand data, or on documented facts, to write about the life of Dr. Johnson. The “virtue” of Boswell’s historical method is his truth to “fact,” to his eye-witness recording of the conversation, comportment, and outlook of his subject.

Life Writing as the Paradigm of Shields's Novels

The ethics of life writing are fairly straightforward for a biographer like James Boswell. But what ethical problems are faced by a biographer such as Shields's Judith Gill who lives a century after her subject Susanna Moodie? Or how about a biographical subject who has few or no data to interpret, such as a dead poet, Mary Swann? Or how about an autobiographer who may be an unreliable witness of her past, such as Daisy Goodwill? And what is the relationship between the biographer and autobiographer in any of these works? What borderlines do we encounter in Shields's novels between biography and history, between fiction and fact?

These questions are central concerns through the writing career of Carol Shields. So it is no accident that she chooses to write books which neither simply reproduce the history of the self as authorized by the book, nor merely follow the models of her predecessors. Instead, she questions both traditional and modern forms of life writing by combining and paralleling them in her writing. At the same time, she is sensitive to a cultural shift in concepts of the self. By looking at seven of Shields's novels from an evolutionary point of view, I pursue larger questions about the changing forms of auto/biography, about the development of self-representation and an evolving view of subjectivity throughout Shields's career. My purpose is to show how Shields goes beyond models of historical, philosophical, and poetic self-presentation to find new ways and new forms for self-representation in life writing.

The first chapter explores Shields's first novel, *Small Ceremonies*, as a meta-narrative of life writing that demonstrates how biography is necessarily a form of autobiography, a "translation" of one's life into another form, which carries inevitable

traces of fiction, but also raises moral questions about the propriety of life writing.

Shields adopts the form of fictional autobiography to discuss some of these biographical issues. Judith Gill, the first-person narrator of her autobiography, confesses to a moral dilemma in being a biographer: because biography is about someone else, she has a moral obligation to be fair to the subject or, in some way, to honour the subject. However, there is a great danger in biography to seek to expose, to humiliate or destroy the subject.

Another danger that Judith Gill's career points to is the violation of another's privacy.

How much privacy should be revealed in biography is one of Shields's lasting concerns.

In "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard," for example, she confesses: "I suffer a sort of scavenger's guilt" (21). Shields shows how biography always risks betraying the subject; at the same time, she also seeks a solution to this moral problem.

What Shields concludes in *Small Ceremonies* is that life writing is necessarily a process of translation in which facts must be transmuted into stories because "our lives are steamed and shaped into stories" (51). Judith's autobiography is finally about her own transmutation from a watcher to a translator. Her moral dilemma of being a watcher of other lives is overcome by her new way of seeing her role as a watcher and a translator. She finally feels "cleansed" of her guilt for stealing John Spalding's plot because "writers don't steal ideas. They abstract them wherever they can" (131). So "the crime within a crime" has turned out to be a fiction within a fiction: Furlong Eberhart's *Graven Images* and Spalding's *Alien Interlude* are both cradled in the text of Judith's autobiography, *Small Ceremonies*. So Shields weighs the ethical problem of revelation in her first novel, finding a solution in this "confession" in the very nature of narrative itself as a translation from lived experience into language.

The second chapter, based on Shields's second novel, *The Box Garden*, gives an alternate version of Judith's account of the McNinn family history, illustrating how a lonely autobiographer must overcome "the most debilitating of diseases, subjectivity" (109), in order to write herself out of "the box garden". Charleen Forrest, Judith's sister, turns to poetry writing out of her own social and narrative malnutrition in childhood. But, instead of expressing herself through poetry, Charleen buries in her writing "the greater part of [her] pain and humiliation" (152); and finally, she locks herself up in a "box garden", retreating to a visible form of solipsism. At the same time, she likes to think of herself as "a bit of a mystic" (83), holding out the hope of an autonomous self. By tracing Charleen's differences from Judith, Shields provides another version of the McNinn family history with a new eye to preventing or curing a "hereditary disease" (126). Besides this lonely and isolated autobiographer, there are two other figures of an autonomous self in the novel, Charleen's mother, Mrs. McNinn and Charleen's ex-husband, Watson. All three are different representations of the same sort of selfhood, one which is isolated from the outside world. At this stage, a relational identity is the only answer Shields can offer to the problem of living and writing a life.

In Charleen's autobiography, there at least remains a healthy tension between self and community. As much as she writes about her lonely self, Charleen comes to understand herself only when she becomes a social being, which anticipates Charles Taylor's moral view of the self: "I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors; in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition.... A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution'" (36). Or, as Paul John Eakin describes it, the self is "a product of social discourse" or, at the very

least, “a self-created aspect of concrete social dialogue” (*How Our Lives* 65). Once Mrs. McNinn, from whom Charleen inherits this solipsism, steps out of her own small world to embrace the other in her life, she can become a loving mother as well as a caring person. Therefore, kindness, as Charleen finally discovers, is a sufficient door to social being, to interpersonal selfhood. And Waston, like McCandless, the romantic individualist who starves to death in Eakin’s *How Our Lives Become Stories*, becomes “a victim of fatally misguided beliefs” (45). So in this sense, Charleen’s autobiography belongs to a long tradition of social novels which make the self “a product of social discourse.”

After these “alternate versions” of a family story by two sisters, Shields traces “alternate versions” of the history of a marriage in two companion novels, *Happenstance* (1980) and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (1982). In a fairly unconventional way, however, Shields raises questions of how to tell “shared stories” by exploring the problem of historical “truth”. In these companion novels, Shields develops more sophisticated forms to tell the same story from two points of view: that of the historian-husband and folk-artist-wife. By offering Jack, the husband, the role of historian, and showing his problems in writing history, Shields points to problems in life writing. What is worthy of recording in auto/biography? Is the written life a true representation of a lived life? Or is it an artful selection, repressing “alternate” truths? Can life writing ever represent the “truth” of a life? By giving the role of a quilt-maker to Brenda, the wife, Shields introduces a new way to represent one’s life history, a visual medium which has links with Martin’s tapestry in her first novel, *Small Ceremonies*.

The purpose of this third chapter is to show how the “historian” and “artist” are necessarily counter-posed to blur the boundaries between history and fiction in these two

novels. As Linda Hutcheon has noted, "history's problem is verification, while fiction's [is] veracity" (112). Thus, the argument in this chapter deals with the ways in which history and fiction overlap, inasmuch as they are both constructed narratives. There is nonetheless an inherent competition between them for "truth value", and there is an unresolved tension in their use of a similar, narrative form.

In her first novel, Shields had claimed that "the task of the biographer is to enlarge on available data" (*Ceremonies* 35). However, when Shields comes to her fifth novel, *Swann*, in which a fictional dead poet, Mary Swann, who has been chopped to pieces by her brutal husband, leaves almost no data on which to work, Shields starts to raise larger questions about life writing as well as the relationship between biography and autobiography: How much does the biography represent the life of the subject, and how much is the life of the biographer projected onto the subject? How do various media differ in representing a life? And what happens to "life writing" when it is translated into another medium, such as film? How, in this larger sense, do differing media offer alternate versions of a recorded life?

The aim of my chapter on *Swann* is to use it as a meta-auto/biography to show how a life has been invented in four different versions: by means of a feminist discourse, a biographical discourse, a discourse of the museum, and an editorial discourse. After exposing how the biographical record is pruned, devalued, fabricated and remade, I look for an answer in Shields's suggestions of how the "life" of a dead poet can be made to live in our continuing performance of "communal history" by going back to oral culture, as well as to film as a modern version of orality.

After demonstrating that biography needs to become the communal history of an

individual life, Shields begins to explore how an autobiography, a solitary form, can become a form of communal writing in *The Stone Diaries* (1993). This fictional autobiography develops a combination of alternate versions of selfhood, of auto/biographical narrators, of life-writing forms and even alternate versions of imagination in Daisy Goodwill Flett's life. My argument presumes that the future of autobiographical writing is moving towards collective writing because of the accessibility of private lives, and personal information, in a digital world.

The ultimate breakthrough in this fictional autobiography is that Shields makes it possible for an autobiographer to pre-exist, as well as to survive her story, to be present before her birth and after her death. She also allows a lonely soul to be embraced by a host of other narrators, in order to transform her sad stories into a joyful action of collective telling. Although the whole process of collective narrating is Daisy's own imagination, it becomes a possible model for future "lives". Moreover, *The Stone Diaries* anticipates and reinforces many theories of life writing, such as one finds in Philippe Lejeune's grammar of autobiography, Roland Barthes' s theory of the "death" of the author, Paul John Eakin's narrative theory, Charles Taylor's philosophy of the sources of the self, as well as Ulric Neisser's psychological and biological theories of selfhood. The text is a showcase for media theories of electronic writing (Williams, "Making"), in which there is a flow of various applications of texts such as letters, memos, photos, family trees, shopping lists, posters, etc., all of which "enables the removal of the author from the text" (Poster 69). Consequently, the issue now becomes: whoever really writes his or her own life story?

In this sense, Shields points out another future direction for autobiographers: as

Daisy recruits multiple narrators of her own life stories, we see how it is possible to turn an autobiographical account into multiple versions of biographical accounts, mixing one's life history with a communal history. In sharing communal history and collective narrations, multiple selves come to exist in multiple versions of an individual life so that "all the individuals" will not "come out looking roughly similar" (208), a potential result which concerns John Paul Russo.

While, structurally, *The Stone Diaries* shows the possibility of multiple versions of the self in a telling through shifting subject positions, Shields's last novel, *Unless* (2002), more figuratively offers alternate versions of a life by showing the functions of adverbs or prepositions: "A life is full of isolated events, but these events, if they are to form a coherent narrative, require odd pieces of language to cement them together, little chips of grammar (mostly adverbs or prepositions) that are hard to define" (313). Yet how can such small and limited words as adverbs and prepositions function as such giant shifters of reality?

As the title of the novel signifies, the word points to multiple versions of reality: "*Unless* provides you with a trapdoor, a tunnel into the light, the reverse side of not enough. *Unless* keeps you from drowning in the presiding arrangements. Ironically, *unless*, the lever that finally shifts reality into a new perspective, cannot be expressed in French" (224-5). Even scientifically, Shields resorts to a theory of alternate versions of material reality, as appears in her allusion to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: "The uncertainty principle; did anyone ever believe otherwise" (318)? As an alternative to Newtonian physics with its mechanistic certainties, the "uncertainty principle" of quantum physics sees only uncertainties and unpredictability at the sub-atomic level.

Following this scientific principle of alternate versions of matter, Shields concludes her last work with a series of “alternate versions” of many other things in her writing.

In a more overtly political way than in any of her other works, Shields also shows how Canada itself is an “alternate version” of the nation, in much the same way as her protagonist is equally at home writing novels in English and translating French poetry: “À *moins que* doesn’t have quite the heft” of *unless*, whereas “sauf is crude” (225), Reta Winters says about her own title word. But Reta also translates Danielle Westerman’s *L’Île* (101) from French into English, changing “the title to *Isolation*. The direct translation, *Island*, didn’t quite capture the sense Danielle had at that time in her life of being the only feminist in the world” (102). The relationship between writing and translating also creates a space for Reta to write a second self into *Isolation*. Reta actually cherishes her “immersion in two languages,” because “doubleness clarified the world” (146) for her. Is Shields then able to work out the political implications of such doubleness in these “alternate versions” of self and nation?

At the very least, *Unless* provides a sort of coda to a career Shields has spent in exploring the significance of alternate versions. In this way, she expands the notion of alternative versions from reality and imagination in *The Stone Diaries* to the double linguistic system of English and French and the double versions of material reality in *Unless*. But are such alternate versions of reality anything more than an escape from real life? Is it possible, as Reta thinks, to remake “an untenable world through the nib of a pen” (208)?

My last chapter explores this question in terms of Shields’s own biography of Jane Austen. Interestingly, *Jane Austen* is a literary biography that is not based on new,

or original, research on Austen's life but, rather, on an oblique interpretation of Shields's own affinity with the British writer. In the final pages remarking on her sources for the biography, Shields acknowledges that in 1997 alone, three new biographies of Jane Austen were published. Shields herself is not a professional biographer; nor is she a literary critic. Why on earth would she then attempt a biography of Jane Austen? What purpose could it serve? Would she write to defend Jane Austen, or even to defend herself as a novelist exhibiting many similarities to the eighteenth-century novelist? Why does Shields resent so deeply conventional criticism of Jane Austen? How does she propose to defend Jane Austen? Against what does she need to be defended?

The answer is deceptively simple. If *Small Ceremonies* "presents the biography as a kind of borderline genre, not quite history, not quite fiction," then Shields's life of Jane Austen gives us a biographer writing her own life into the biography of another. In a curious way, Shields has turned a biography into an autobiography, creating another form of "alternate possibility" in life writing (13). Is it ethical, however, for Shields to be imposing her life onto that of Jane Austen? Or is she publicly disclosing a more general working method of life writing? Is she writing history, or is she using imagination to create multiple identities for Jane Austen? By identifying Austen as her literary foremother, she could well, like Plutarch, be writing a modern version of *Parallel Lives*. But where the former chose to write about Brutus and Dion as republican opponents of tyranny, the latter has chosen to write about two women, from differing countries and differing centuries, who likewise believe in decency, kindness and communal values, and who share a similar outlook on writing as a means of transforming lives. Is Carol Shields finally a classical writer, more than she is a post-modern writer? Or is she guilty of

privileging a bourgeois ideology of writing, much as Dr. Johnson has privileged a monarchist ideology of writing in his *Lives of the English Poets*?

In my pursuit of these questions, I hope to offer several different types of answers about changing styles and forms throughout Shields's novelistic career, exploring changing models of selfhood, changing notions about the relationship between history and fiction, and, ultimately, a larger sense of what narrative has to offer as a means "to melt into an alternative reality" (*Unless* 256). Meanwhile, this dissertation also offers an account of how all these questions are relevant to Shields herself, and develops a historical context to show why Shields is so fascinated by issues of life writing, and how she provides new solutions to each new question concerning life writing.

Chapter 2: From a Watcher to a Translator: A Biographer's Self-Realization in

Small Ceremonies

Small Ceremonies is a fictional autobiography of a biographer, Judith Gill, who has already published two “moderately well received” biographies and now is working on her third one, the biography of Susanna Moodie (Shields, *Small Ceremonies* 5). She believes that she has “a subject with somewhat wider appeal than the other two” because “her name brings forth the sweet jangle of familiarity” (6). However, while she is “searching, prying into the small seams” of Susanna Moodie’s life, she realizes that she has been invading “an area of existence where [she has] no real rights” (34). From the outset, she has been aware of one of the fundamental problems of writing biography—the violation of individual privacy. But now, reflecting on herself, she has to confront the problem of being a watcher in her own life. Although her autobiography only covers a nine-month period of her life in which she is writing about Susanna Moodie, it reflects a long process of Judith’s growing awareness of what she calls her “unhealthy lust for the lives of other people” (38), “my only, only disease in an otherwise lucky life” (179). Most interestingly, Judith Gill starts by revealing the problems of writing biography but ends up with a self-reflexive text in which she comes to understand why the writing of biography could satisfy “my girlhood hunger for an expanded existence” (46).

Judith Gill asks, “Why am I always the one who watches?” as she struggles to find the answer (22). She claims that her family “require someone, me, to watch them; otherwise they would float apart and disintegrate.” She watches her son, Richard, while

he is reading letters from Anita Spalding, the daughter of the family who rents their house to Judith's family when they are in England for a sabbatical year. In Richard's mind, Judith has "great vacant hours with nothing to do but satisfy [her] curiosity about his affairs" (9). She watches her daughter, Meredith, who is absorbed in reading Furlong Eberhardt's new novel about the prairies. Judith finds it "painful to watch her," because "her forehead puzzle[s]" as she "sweeps over the pages" (18). She wants to know why she has invested "so much of herself" in Furlong's book. She watches her husband, Martin, when he "goes over papers at his desk or reads a book" (20). She wants to find out if he is "really happy teaching Milton year after year" (32). Judith has her own philosophy of observation: "Husband, children, they are not so much witnessed as perceived, flat leaves which grow absently from a stalk in my head, each fitting into the next, all their curving edges perfect. So far, so far.... I watch them. They are as happy as can be expected" (22). Obviously, she sees the need for her to bring her family together by observation. But what justification does she offer for her role as a watcher and why should this role bring her family close to each other?

Judith watches wherever she is: she watches another patient while she is a patient in hospital waiting for a minor operation: "I watched him fascinated, a slow-motion film, as he laboured to open his mouth" (23). At the same time, she wonders whether the man's marriage is happy or not. She also observes a party of deaf people when she is eating in a restaurant: "I am watching the delicate opening and closing of those sixteen hands" (178). She is eager to know "the larger stories of their separate lives" (179). Watching has become her instinctive action. As she admits, "I became a full-time voyeur. On trains I watched people, lusting to know their destinations, their middle names, their marital

status and always and especially whether or not they were happy. I stared to see the titles of the books they were reading or the brand of cigarettes they smoked. I strained to hear snatches of conversation” (54). Actually Judith watches people no matter who they are, no matter whether they have any relation to her or not. While she sees her watching as a lust, she does not think that it is a lust for other people’s secrets.

In observing her children, Judith comes to understand that she has a lust for stories. She remembers that whenever she tells them stories, “their eyes were fixed on [her]; they never miss a word” (45). Now she realizes, “The genes are true; my children are like me in their lust after other people’s stories. Unlike Martin, whose family tree came well stocked with family tales, I am from a bleak non-storytelling family” (45). Apparently, it is “out of simple malnutrition” that Judith acquires her lust for other people’s stories so that she can satisfy her “girlhood hunger for an expanded existence” (46). This reflection helps her to understand why both she and her sister turn to literature: “My sister Charleen, who is a poet, believes that we two sisters turned to literature out of simple malnutrition. Our own lives just weren’t enough, she explains. We were underfed, undernourished; we were desperate. So we dug in, and here we are, all these years later, still digging” (47). Even now Judith is still haunted by the “terrible suffocating sameness” and “awful and relentless monotony” (58) of that childhood. So she has become a biographer, making life stories to expand her own existence.

Judith also defends her watching and observing other people’s lives as a compensation for her loss of narrative identity in her childhood: “All through my endless barren childhood I had my special and privileged observation platform” (124). Because her parents failed to tell stories, she could “have lost the ability,” as one theorist of

autobiography puts it, “to construct narrative,” and so, like others suffering from “dysnarrativia,” have lost her own narrative identity (Eakin 124). However, the fact that her parents fail her does not leave her without self identity. She still seeks to make stories from what she has observed from real life. This is where she develops her special privilege of an observation platform. Making stories, however, is not only the task of the autobiographer who must define herself in narrative. It is also, as Susan E. Billingham suggests, “the task of the biographer” (277) who, in Judith’s own terms, must “enlarge on available data” (35). In making stories to compensate for the lack of her own narrative identity, Judith seeks an “extended existence” through writing about the lives of others. That is how Judith understands her own need for stories. As one critic of this novel puts it, “watchers make better biographers” (Page 174). This does not guarantee, however, a position of objectivity in the act of watching. As Judith admits, her “hunger for an expanded existence” (47) risks her writing her own life into the “available data” of another person’s life.

However, as a biographer, Judith tries to keep herself detached from her subject so that she will have an objective view. For instance, when she hears on the radio news of a “glass blitz” for recycling bottles organized by local women, she feels sad for being isolated from them: “The distance I sometimes sensed between myself and other women saddened me” (5). Although, as a writer, she can imagine these women “rolling into action, setting to work phoning the newspaper, the radio stations,” she can never understand “the impulse that actually gets these women, Gwen, Sue, Pat and so on, moving.” Instead of participating in this “glass blitz,” she makes “a mental note to sort out the bottles in the basement. Guilt, guilt.” While Judith feels guilty about her isolation,

she needs this distance as a biographer in order to reduce her own subjectivity. Malcolm Page is right in describing Judith as “the perennial observer, slightly aside from life, which she regrets but cannot change” (173). But does she really write about her biographical subject objectively?

When Judith works on her biography of Susanna Moodie, she tries to look for “the cracks in the surface” of her subject’s life by “reading the junky old novelettes and serialized articles” (7). She digs up all the details about Susanna’s life: from “marriage, pregnancy, birth, emigration” to “poverty, struggle, writing,” and “writing to pay off debts” (34). To Judith, “[t]he total image would never exist were it not for the careful daily accumulation of details” (35). But what kind of details is Judith interested in to make this “total image” of Susanna Moodie?

The bridal bed she mentions in her story ‘The Miss Greens,’ a hint of sexuality, hurray. Her democratic posture slipping in a book review in the *Victoria Magazine*, get it down, get it down. Her fear of ugliness. And today I find something altogether unsavoury—the way in which she dwells on the mutilated body of a young pioneer mother who is killed by a panther. She skirts the dreadful sight, but she is really circling in, moving around and around it, horrified, but hoping for one more view. (33)

Actually, what she is doing is catching Susanna Moodie in an unguarded moment in which Judith reveals a fascination with death, and with sensation, with violence. It is clear that Judith is not interested in an idealized image of Susanna Moodie. Instead, she becomes a detective, trying to spy out something shameful or secret that Moodie has tried to keep hidden.

Judith is self-conscious enough, however, to recognize something shameful in her own desire to pry: “What I am doing is common, snoopy, vulgar; reading the junky old novelettes and serialized articles of Susanna Moodie; catlike I wait for her to lose her grip. And though she is careful, artfully careful, I am finding gold” (33). She is painfully aware, all the same, that she has invaded “an area of existence” where she has no real rights. She is aware of the danger of betraying Susanna Moodie by digging up her secrets. As a matter of fact, she knows that her biographical subject would not like to be represented in this terribly public way. As Judith realizes, Susanna Moodie is “genteel enough not to dangle her shredded placenta before her public” (6). And so Judith is left to struggle with her own contradictory attraction to her subject: “if her reticence is attractive, it also makes her a difficult subject to possess” (7). While Judith admires “a woman who hesitates to bore her reader with the idle slopover of her soul” (6), she longs to spill the beans, to get the dirt, on a woman who has managed to possess her ultimate secrets in dignified privacy.

Through writing about Susanna Moodie’s life, Judith comes to understand the effects of her watching upon other subjects she observes: “No wonder Richard seals his letter with Scotch tape. No wonder Meredith locks her diary, burns her mail, carries the telephone into her room when she talks. No wonder Martin is driven to subterfuge, not telling me that his latest paper has been turned down by the Renaissance Society” (34). Instead of keeping people close to her, her watching leaves her detached from her family. In Richard’s room, she “found desk drawers filled with Anita Spalding’s letters, each one taped shut from prying eyes” (16). Even though Judith “delight[s] in sorting out personalities, [she] can’t even draw a circle around [her] own daughter’s” (18). Incredibly,

even Martin has kept a huge secret from her; he has eight bundles of wool in different colors in his drawer. Evidently, no one who knows Judith is willing to trust her to honour their privacy. As Judith is forced to concede, “I am a watcher, an outsider, whether I like it or not” (179), “and I’m stuck with the dangers that go along with it.”

When they live in John Spalding’s house in Birmingham, England, Judith finds herself “wandering from room to room, pondering on John and Isabel for wanting something better to do” (36). She reads John Spalding’s manuscripts of his novels, trying to imagine his life. Even then, she has the sense of invading another’s privacy. As she feels obliged to confess, “Curious is kind; I am an invader, I am an enemy” (34). On one hand, she keeps on warning herself: “I should have stopped with the novels, for opening and reading such a personal document made me cringe at his candour.” On the other hand, she keeps on exploring and reading. The more she reads, the more she hopes to discover. When she finds “a sort of writer’s diary” (38), her “lust for the lives of others” drives her to explore the hidden spaces between the private, secret self and the public person. She explores John’s private life to the point of regretting her “unhealthy” desire: “I read the notebook to the end although the terrible open quality of its confessions brought me close to weeping” (39). Obviously, she has the sense that she is not blameless. Therefore she keeps this secret, and “never [tells] anyone about them, not even Martin” (39).

Through writing the life of Susanna Moodie, Judith comes to repent of “the total disclosure” that “a biographer prays for” (36); she admits her invasion of John Spalding’s privacy even as she laughs at him for writing eight failed novels: “Silly, silly, silly little man” (39). What is worse, she is “fascinated watching him play the role of tormented hero.” Out of “all the miscellaneous and unsorted debris” that she obtains from “[prying]

into another person's private manuscripts" (38, 37), she invents a thumbnail biography of John Spalding: "university lecturer, neurotic specialist in Thomas Hardy, a man who suffered insomnia and constipation, who fantasized on a love life beyond Isabel, who was behind on his telephone bill" (36). The biographer and would-be novelist now judges herself most harshly; what right does she have to "pry into another person's private manuscripts" (37)? And how can she then continue with her biographical project of "total disclosure" (36)?

Actually, there is a fundamental contradiction in Judith about her own right to privacy and her curiosity about the secrets of other people. On one hand, she admires Susanna Moodie's "holding back" the secret of the letter she wrote to the governor of Upper Canada, trying to find a job for her husband: "The letter is astonishing enough; but even more extraordinary is the fact that John Moodie never knew about it" (102). Judith thinks "that is the brave thing" (7). She takes Susanna Moodie as her model: she never makes public what she has done in John Spalding's house, not even to her husband. As she tells the reader, "I never did tell Martin that I had read John Spalding's manuscripts. He would not have liked it; he would have looked at me with less than love; it might even have damaged the balance between us" (103). Nor does she reveal another secret that she knows, "the guilty secret of [Furlong's] real name: it is Rudyard" (29). She even questions herself: "Why is it I have kept this particular secret to myself" (137)? Eventually, she realizes that the secret of his name is only a "trifling fact." So she never mentions it to Martin or even to Roger, who writes his Ph.D. thesis on Furlong.

On the other hand, Judith seeks to violate the privacy of others. She digs up Susanna Moodie's private life; she writes about her letter to the governor. Having

invaded John Spalding's privacy, she then steals his plot and uses it in her creative writing for Furlong's class. She also conducts research on Furlong's great secret even though she promises, "Furlong, I won't betray you now." However, she has his biographical facts: Furlong Eberhardt keeps writing novels about the prairies in Canada. His novels always open with waving wheat fields, which is a scene often seen on the Canadian prairies. He presents himself as a leading Canadian prairie novelist, "who embodies the national ethos" (49). The fact, however, is that he is American; and he has changed his name from Rudyard to Furlong to conceal his origins: "Furlong had done a remarkable job of obscuring his past. He seems hardly to have existed before 1952 when his first book was published" (140). She enjoys discovering Furlong's mysteries: "so amused was I by the spectacle of Furlong Eberhardt who, with scarcely a break in stride, traded Maple Bluffs for the Maple Leaf; marvellous" (155). If Judith yearns to expose Furlong's secrets in revenge for his taking over the plot which she steals from John Spalding, what does she want to expose in the life of her family?

Finding eight bundles of wool hidden in a drawer, Judith realizes that Martin must have "withheld the project" from her (88). When she finds Martin "weaving his secret afternoons" (88), she wonders if her husband is having a love affair. She resents the fact that Martin has kept his secret from her; is it fair that Martin "possessed an existence of his own to which [she] did not belong" (95)? And does this authorize an act of revenge as she imagines one is due to Furlong?

Again Judith turns to Susanna Moodie for an answer to her moral dilemma. Moodie's letter to the governor of Upper Canada for her husband's job gives her the hint that "it is just as possible, even probable, that she kept her secret, kept it all her life, either

to spare his pride or to avoid seeming too much the schemer” (102). Susanna never tells her husband that she has written this letter in order to save his pride. For such reasons, Judith spares her husband. Martin does not tell her about the woollen tapestry because she would think it “gimmicky” and absurd to represent the themes of *Paradise Lost* in concrete form (84). To her, poetry is made out of words; it is foolish to remake it in wool. Only when Martin’s tapestry is approved by other scholars, can Judith admit that “[s]ecrets are possible. And between people who love each other, maybe even necessary” (102). For her part, she does not want to tell Martin that she has read John Spalding’s manuscripts because she is afraid to damage the balance between them. Now she comes to understand that Martin, “for perhaps the same reason, put off telling me about the woollen tapestries. He must have guessed how I would react” (103). From this, she begins to acknowledge that other people also have private existences; they have much the same right as she does to their own privacy.

At the same time, Judith becomes increasingly aware of Susanna Moodie’s private self in her biography: “A private life, completed, deserving decent burial, deserving the sweet black eclipse, but I am setting out to exhume her” (34). How can she then justify the indignity she might give to the dead, the dishonour she might do to a woman who can no longer speak in her own defence? Judith tries to look at Susanna Moodie objectively. “Does she live, breathe, take definite shape? Is the vein of personality strong enough to bridge the episodes? The disturbing change in personality: it bothers me. Dare I suggest hormone imbalance? Psychological scarring? It’s unwise to do more than suggest” (152). She wants to explain the essence, the core of Susanna Moodie’s personality. But she cannot. The mystery of her personality bothers Judith

because Susanna Moodie has no definite shape. As a matter of fact, the “real” Susanna Moodie changes with Judith’s moods and intentions. When she needs a model for her to hold back her own secrets from Martin, Susanna Moodie is there to show her how to do it. When she thinks of Martin “in his cork-walled solitude, selecting and blending his wools, threading his needles and weaving away, woof and warp, in and out, [she] wanted to sob with anguish” (107). For the moment “even Susanna Moodie has let [her] down,” because there are “no details anymore” (108). Needing a “double vision” to find her way out of her mad desire for revenge on Furlong, she finds her answer again in the life of Susanna Moodie: “irony rescued her from a pitiable vacuum” (123). Thus, Judith feels rescued, as well: “I too do my balancing act between humour and desperation.” How could Susanna Moodie ever have a definite shape if her biographer always changes? As Judith now sees, “People change, and I suppose everyone has to accept that” (99). But she also gains a sense that the life lived would be never the same as the life written because biography is always tinted by its writer.

Even Susanna Moodie’s own writing proves as much. Reading Susanna’s novel, *Flora Lindsay* or *Episodes in an Eventful Life*, she finds that “it is Susanna’s own story,” “an autobiography in fictional form” (153). “The heroine, Flora, is like Susanna, married to a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars. Like Susanna, Flora and her husband (also named John) immigrate to Canada. Even the ship they sail on bears the same name” (152). Although Flora’s experience is similar to Susanna’s in many respects, Judith has to admit that “it isn’t really Susanna; it’s only a projection, a view of herself” (152-3). Susanna Moodie depicted Flora as “refined, virtuous, bright, lively, humorous” because, when she wrote *Flora Lindsay* she was a middle-aged woman who had suffered all kinds of trials in

her life. So she could see herself as a “nimble and graceful heroine” with a settled philosophy of life (153).

In his *Fictions in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin points out how “any autobiography has some fiction in it,” and so we need “to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical” (10). So there is an inevitable tension between fact and fiction not only in Susanna Moodie’s own writing about herself but also in Judith’s biography of Susanna Moodie. In Judith’s opinion, Susanna Moodie is a “heavy, conventional, distressed, perpetually disapproving and sorrowing woman” (124); whereas in Susanna Moodie’s novel, “Flora is refined, virtuous, bright, lively, humorous” (153). Where is the real Susanna Moodie? Is there a “real” self, who is distinct from the public person?

This leads Judith to a closer view of herself in one photo: “large, loose, baroque, compulsively garrulous, hugely tactless” (153). But that is only her “public self”. Like Susanna Moodie, she also has a second self as a writer. Of course, she also has a private self as an invader of other people’s lives, a self she does not want to make public. Judith now comes to understand that there is no “real” self for the writer to “possess” or “disclose”. Each subject has to be translated by the writer from different points of view. The writer has to negotiate the distance between the public appearance and the private reality. How, then, can she negotiate that distance between her watching and her writing?

On the last page of the novel, Judith ultimately reaches a clear understanding of her role as a watcher: “I am watching them [the deaf-mutes signing], and out of the corner of my eye I see Martin watching—not them—but me. He has no need of the bizarre. What he needs is something infinitely more complex: what he needs is my

possession of that need. I am translator to him, reporter of visions he can't see for himself" (179). She has this epiphany of seeing herself as a translator for a party of deaf people at the restaurant; they are using their hands to communicate. It is an extraordinary scene, which she calls bizarre. However, instead of watching these people use sign language, Martin is watching her. This has become her ultimate justification for her watching because she has a better understanding of the world around her than he does; he needs her to translate the reality because she can see what he misses; she can translate what the gesture means; she can transmute and transform facts into stories.

What Judith comes to see about her interest in other people's lives is that they need her to watch and interpret them in her stories. So her lust for stories is not unhealthy. As Judith explains: "I am watching. My own life will never be enough for me" (179). And yet Judith's notion of translating does not merely beautify the idea of watching; it also explains the depth of her watching. With her new understanding of watching, she can "observe Martin with a startling new, almost X-ray vision" (94). Thus she has the capability of seeing beyond appearances into realities. She has a reporter's gift that others need because she can see through what is behind appearances to reach some deeper reality. She can translate all of life into stories. But how to translate a life becomes the crucial issue in life writing.

To bring Susanna Moodie to life, "[t]here is nothing to do but rely on available data, on diaries, bills, clippings, always something on paper" (53). Even then, there are major difficulties the biographer has to overcome: the reality that "[s]o much of a man's life is lived inside his head that is impossible to encompass a personality. There is never enough material" (53). The inner person is never fully revealed by the outward traces of a

life; and so the biographer is left in the position of a translator, seeing “how facts are transmuted” (176).

A second difficulty the biographer faces is the fact that it is “always something on paper” (53) that constitutes the trace of a bygone life. How does the biographer translate this paper identity into a flesh-and-blood life to overcome the sense that “[c]haracters from the past, heroic as they may have been, lie coldly on the page”? She tries to find the “real Susanna” through gluing together “small passages in her novels and backwoods collections of unconscious self-betrayal, isolated words and phrases” (7). Ironically, what Judith looks for is not a real life of Susanna Moodie but stories of her life that have already undergone a series of translations. If biography is a translation, there must be some gaps of understanding between the writer and the subject, between the subject and the reader. How can Judith, a twentieth-century North American woman, understand a nineteenth-century English woman, who immigrated to the wilderness of Canada?

A final difficulty faced by the biographer is her sense “of being boxed in by facts all the time” (54). Where the novelist has licence to invent details that explain a life, the biographer is confined to the known facts. Still, Judith sees a place for imagination to read between the lines of known facts; for instance, she finds “sexuality” in the “bridal bed she mentions in her story ‘The Miss Greens’” (33). She tries to catch Moodie in an unguarded moment, as when she is horrified at a death scene. Judith insists that all she does is to “encompass a personality” of the “true” Susanna Moodie. And yet she complains that “there are no details any more” (108). Finally, Judith has to admit, “I have a few hunches. About the real Susanna Moodie. But I can’t quite pin it all down” (173). The danger that attends imagination, or conjecture, is that these could actually obscure

Susanna's personality. When Furlong tells her that "[p]eople must be preserved with their mysteries intact. Otherwise, it's not real" (174), she comes to understand that imaginative translating is preferable to "sorting through buckets and buckets of personal revelation" (174). For now, Susanna Moodie "can be interpreted in a wider sense." At the same time, personality is ultimately untranslatable, especially with a person like Susanna Moodie who is reticent: "Quaint Victorian restraint. Violet-tinted reserve, stemming as much from courtesy as from decorum" (6). Judith could yet fail to understand her: "Could anyone love a man she called by his surname? Was such a thing possible" (53)?

Judith could easily fail to see cultural differences between a twentieth-century North American woman and a nineteenth-century British woman. In Moodie's time, it was proper for a woman to call her husband by his last name as a formal address. There could also be different titles for men like Susanna Moodie's husband, John W. Dunbar Moodie in public and plain "John" at home. Judith also fails to recognize differences between spoken language and written language. As her son, Richard tells her, "it depends on how she said it. Like the expression she used when she said it" (53). Judith wishes that she "could hear whether it was said coldly or with tenderness," so that she "could have travelled light-years in understanding her" (53). She still believes that she could get the "real" Susanna if she could go back in time. In other words, the problem of tone makes it hard for her to trust a flat, paper identity.

Judith also fails to accept multiple versions of Susanna Moodie's life. When she sees that Susanna Moodie's view of her autobiographical figure Flora differs from her understanding of the biographical subject, Judith asks herself: "Is it any wonder that I don't understand her" (153)? Is Susanna Moodie even capable of "real understanding of

herself”? Or is it Judith, the biographer who offers to translate her disconnected parts better than the subject herself?

Judith gains a better understanding of Susanna Moodie’s character when she learns how to translate her ironies: “Irony, it seems to me, is a curious quality, a sour pleasure. Observation which is acid-edged with knowledge. A double vision which allows pain to exist on the reverse side of pleasure. Neither vice nor virtue, it annihilated the dichotomy of her existence” (123). There is, for example, the irony of Susanna Moodie’s experience of Niagara Falls, where she expects a vision of the sublime, only to find the reality dull. “She can hear the thunder of water before she can see it, and her whole body tenses for pleasure. But when she actually stands in the presence of the torrent, she loses the capacity for rhapsody. She has exhausted it in anticipation.” The irony, of course, is that imagination is better than the reality, and that the inner life is richer than its outward manifestations. So what did Moodie do with this terrible disappointment? As Judith interprets the tone of Moodie’s writing, “irony rescues her from a pitiable vacuum. Turning from the scenery, she observes the human activity around her, and, paragraph by paragraph, she describes the reactions of her fellow tourists” (123). And she describes them ironically. Now, in Judith’s imagination, Susanna Moodie is able to live doubly, both in her disappointment at the scene and in her pleasure at the sight of other people’s responses. Does Susanna Moodie really see herself that way? Or does Judith need to see Susanna Moodie that way? Is that the life Susanna Moodie actually lived? Or is it a life that Judith imagines for her subject?

Clearly, when Judith depicts an ironic Susanna Moodie, she needs this irony herself to live outside of “an unidentifiable sadness.” The plot which she steals from John

Spalding's manuscripts has been "plagiarized" by Furlong. He uses it in his new novel, *Graven Images*, which offends Judith because she thinks that she "owns" the story that she writes about John Spalding's failure. By what conceivable right could Furlong borrow and translate her story into another version of the story? She cannot forgive Furlong, who, to Judith, is "the traitor, the thief, the liar" (149). As for her "own role as an agent of theft, [she] can live outside it. She can outline it with [her] magic pencil" (124). She believes that Furlong's theft is different from hers because she does not "profit from it the way Furlong has profited" (113). And so she remakes Susanna Moodie in her own image; like Susanna, "she finds her own way out" by doing her "balancing act between humour and desperation" (123). Again, the biography is tinted by the biographer.

Through the process of writing her biography of Susanna Moodie, Judith finally comes to see that Susanna "can be interpreted in a wider sense" (174). Now she sees that there are several possible identities for Susanna Moodie: "the gentle lady pose. The Wordsworthian lover of nature. And the good Christian mother" (173). Moodie's true self is "lost under all the gauze." The true story of her life has become a series of translations in which she has undergone metamorphic stages. Any story of a life is a translation of the act of living into an act of wording. No one owns a life; so no one can steal a life. If that is true, does Furlong "steal" Judith's plot of John Spalding's life as a failed novelist? Or does John Spalding "steal" Judith's story of a North American family in England?

Furlong is right to defend himself when Judith accuses him of stealing her plot of John Spalding's failure: "writers can't stake out territories. It's open season. A free range" (131). As Furlong puts it, "[w]here did Shakespeare get his plots? Not from his own experience, you can be sure of that. I mean, who was he but another young lad from

the provinces? He stole his plots, you would say, Judith. Borrowed them from the literature of the past, and no one damn well calls it theft. He took those old tried and true stories and hammered them into something that was his own” (131-2). The irony is that so little is actually known of Shakespeare’s life; the “paper identities” he has created for himself are translations, or transmutations, of the plots of other “lives”.

Two related events help to confirm Furlong’s explanation. John Spalding’s *Alien Interlude* can never really represent the Gill family because he is not really writing about them; he is writing about some mixture of bare facts that he has heard in the letters that Judith’s son has written to his daughter. In *Alien Interlude*, the facts are transmitted through different cultures, through different media and different persons. Ultimately, his writing is not a simple form of realism; neither is it a simple description of facts. It is a process of transformation in which Spalding translates Judith’s private story into a form which can be understood by the general public. It is through a process almost like a series of chemical processes by which the facts are transmuted and transformed into fictions. Thus, biography is not what Judith takes it to be, “a profusion of material [that] makes it possible and even necessary to be selective” (68), but a series of facts and life events that have to be translated and transmitted by the biographer. And this is what Judith comes to understand—that the role of biographer is really that of a translator. Could the life lived ever be the same as the life told? Is there inevitably a sense in which biographies are more like lives in translation?

John Spalding’s life as a failed novelist turns out to be Furlong’s successful novel, *Graven Images*, in which Spalding cannot recognize himself at all. In Furlong’s words, “One takes an idea and brings to it his own individual touch. His own quality. Enhances it.

Develops it” (131). In the process of enhancing and developing the idea, the story of a life becomes a translation of the act of living into the act of wording. Spalding’s “life” has been passed from Judith to Furlong. Earlier in the novel, Judith has reviewed this series of translations as a “crime within crime within crime,” because Furlong “stole the plot for *Graven Images*—stole it from me who had in turn stolen it from John Spalding who—it occurred to me for the first time—might have stolen it from someone else” (107-8). Ironically, there is no crime at all in this chain of “stealing stories”: Judith really does not “own” John Spalding’s story in Furlong’s novel in the same way that she does not own her life story in John Spalding’s novel. So what does Furlong do to make Spalding’s plot unrecognizable?

In a television interview, Furlong tells the audience, “The idea for *Graven Images* came to me in pieces. True, I may have had one generous burst of inspiration, for which I can only thank whichever deity it is who presides over creative imagination” (61). Then Judith has to admit the power of imagination in Spalding’s reading of the novel:

“Astonishing: He hadn’t recognized his own plot which has passed first through my hands and then into Furlong’s” (176). Likewise, Judith cannot recognize her own family in Spalding’s *Alien Interlude*, a novel based on letters sent by her son, Richard, to his daughter, Anita. In some way, Spalding does betray their trust by imagining their life in his successful novel. Nancy M. Killer is right in saying that, “Perhaps betrayal is contagious; I cannot name my own betrayal without producing another” (151). But does John Spalding’s novel turn out to be a significant betrayal in the end?

Judith’s confession best explains it:

And though I don't tell Martin, I, too, have reasons to believe we may not recognize ourselves in *Alien Interlude*. I have seen how facts are transmuted as they travel through a series of hands; our family situation seen through the eyes of preadolescent Richard and translated into his awkward letter-writing prose, then crossing cultures and read by a child we have never seen, to a family we have never met, then mixed with the neurotic creative juices of John Spalding and filtered by a publisher—surely by the time it reaches print, the least dram of truth will be drained away. (176)

When John Spalding comes to their home to explain to them that he is writing about a Canadian couple who lived in his house in England, in some way, he is apologizing to them for having stolen their lives: “That was why I wanted to mention this to you. So that when you read it, if you read it, you won't think I've—well—plagiarized from real life.” And then he acknowledges the absurdity of such a judgement: “If such a thing is possible” (164).

When John Spalding tells Judith about the plot in his novel, Judith is worried because their family “are about to be revealed.... It's a little frightening” (175). However, Martin's guess is right: “We won't even recognize ourselves.” The fact is that John wouldn't have recognized Judith's family in real life because “he had pictured [them] differently.” Neither would they recognize themselves in his novel because he does not “exactly *base* the novel on it” (165). As John tells Judith, “I have, in a matter of speaking, borrowed the situation of your family. A Canadian family who spend a year in England” (164). After these two events, Judith has to agree with Furlong: “A writer must get his

material where he can find it” (165). The difference between the life lived and the life told is too large to bridge. There will never be a “true story” of a life or a pure biography because the moment that the life is told, it blends with the narrator’s imagination as it is translated from life into art. What Judith concludes is that biography is, indeed, an act of translation into words. Then, if biography is an act of translation, what about autobiography?

One “thing about writing biography,” Judith tells the reader with unintended irony, “is that you tend to focus less on your own life” (59). And yet, time after time, the Susanna Moodie about whom she writes is a projection of her own concerns. “Susanna,” as she envisions her, is a writer rather than the wife of “a poor loser” (101). So, too, Judith proudly writes about herself: “I had entered into the public domain, had left behind that dumpy house wife, Mrs. Gill. *Judith*. I became Judith” (91). Like Susanna Moodie, she has some doubt about the abilities of her husband, a Miltonist who has his papers rejected. So she sees Susanna Moodie as “a kindred spirit” (6).

Secondly, Judith uses Susanna Moodie as her conscience. Faced with the moral dilemma of whether she should reveal her theft of Spalding’s plot to her husband, she gets the answer from her subject, who also has kept from her husband the secret of her intervention with the governor. Judith admires Susanna’s ability to keep her secret much as she does her own “tremendous effort of the will not to reveal” (99). As a consequence, she can still make her husband “look at her with love.” Thus, she better understands the necessity of keeping secrets: “Secrets are possible. And between people who love each other, maybe even necessary” (103). In turn, she also gives her husband space for privacy. She never asks him about his weaving of a woollen tapestry, thus sparing his pride.

Meanwhile, she also learns to respect Martin's secret of the tapestry as well as Furlong's secret of his real name. She proudly tells the reader, "I have respect for impulses and for the mystery they suggest" (96).

Thirdly, in Judith's mind, there are always parallels between her lived self and her written self. Susanna Moodie's husband "had failed as a backwoodsman" (103), much as Judith is not satisfied with her husband's teaching of Milton. To her, Martin is a pedant; "Martin has inherited the family ineptness" (95). Judith thinks that Martin "must see that his son will be heir to his inabilities and subject to his niggling expenses." Therefore, Susanna Moodie's husband is cast in her own husband's image: "He was, it would seem, a man who measured his life by episodes of pain, a negative personality who might easily have extinguished the fire of love in Susanna" (122). Recalling the remark of a girl she knew at university who says, "How could anyone fuck a Milton specialist?", Judith does not have to "wonder how a woman could love a man she called Moodie" (99). Her conclusion is that "she must have loved him first." Needless to say, that is her conclusion about her love for Martin.

In such ways, Judith evidently writes herself into the life of Susanna Moodie. According to Linda Anderson, "If the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical" (1). If that is the case, Judith's biography of Susanna Moodie has become an "enlargement" of her subject into an image of her relational identity with a dead woman and the woman she is still becoming. Therefore, the boundary between autobiography and biography blurs in *Small Ceremonies*. It is hard to tell how much is Judith's projection of her self into her biographical subject, and how much is the life that Susanna Moodie has lived. The fact is

that Judith uses her biographical subject to speak for her. What Judith does with her biographical subject is to create a reflexive text of her self as she is affected by her biographical subject. There is no pure biography; neither is there pure autobiography. As Eakin says, “[I]t is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical” (*Fictions* 10).

However, what Shields illustrates in *Small Ceremonies* is that life writing is necessarily a process of translation in which facts are transmuted into stories because “our lives are steamed and shaped into stories” (51). Judith’s autobiography is finally about her own transmutation from a watcher to a translator. Her moral dilemma of being a watcher of other lives is overcome by her new way of seeing her role as a watcher and a translator. In that sense, she is not invading the privacy of others, but she is fictionalizing a private life. She also feels “cleansed” of her guilt for stealing John Spalding’s plot because “writers don’t steal ideas. They abstract them wherever they can” (131); they translate them into fictions. So “the crime within a crime” has turned out to be a fiction within a fiction: Furlong’s *Graven Images* and Spalding’s *Alien Interlude* are all cradled in the text of Judith’s autobiography, *Small Ceremonies*. What we should be looking for in life writing, it seems, is not a faithful imitation of reality but a translation of reality into a faithful fiction. Moreover, throughout the novel there is an interweaving of writings about three lives: Judith’s writing life, the life of her biographical subject, and her private life as it is affected by her biographical subject. In this sense, *Small Ceremonies* is a meta-narrative of life writing.

Chapter 3: Kindness as a Doorway Out of *The Box Garden*:

The Search for a Relational Identity

The Box Garden, Carol Shields's second novel, is an alternate version of Judith's account of the McNinn family history, given to us as an autobiography by Charleen Forrest. In her own auto/biography, *Small Ceremonies*, Charleen's sister Judith has explained why she needed to compensate for the loss of a narrative identity in her story-deprived childhood by translating the life stories of others. Judith's story not only expresses a biographer's awareness of what she calls her "unhealthy lust for the lives of other people" (38), "my only, only disease in an otherwise lucky life" (179); it also shows her "embracing others along with their mysteries." However, Charleen "can never quite believe in the otherness of people's lives" (*Box Garden* 117). Far worse than the "great void" of story in her childhood "(152), she suffers from what she calls "the most debilitating of diseases, subjectivity" (109). As a poet, she buries in her writing "the greater part of [her] pain and humiliation" (152); and finally, she locks herself up in a "box garden," retreating to a visible form of solipsism. At the same time, she likes to think of herself as "a bit of a mystic" (83). Charleen's story is thus a painful account of her attempt to overcome the disease of subjectivity and step out of her confining "box garden" (126). As Judith puts it, both sisters have turned to literature "out of simple malnutrition" (*Small Ceremonies*, 47). But then why can't Charleen remake herself as Judith does, out of the terrible stasis and social confinement of her childhood? By tracing

Charleen's differences from Judith, Shields provides another version of the McNinn family history with a new eye to preventing a "hereditary disease" (126).

Comparing her life with Judith's, Charleen realizes: "We had the same childhood, but she somehow survived, and the margin of her survival widens every year" (13). In every respect, her sister lives a happier life: "Judith's life has been embalmed in a stately enviable suburban calm. She has a husband who loves her, healthy children, a large airy house in Kingston, not to mention a respectable reputation as a biographer" (68); whereas, Charleen is "a runaway younger sister, a casual libertine who has the edge on her, but only superficially, as far as worldliness goes. West-coast divorcee, a free wheeling poet, and now a sort of semi-mistress" (78). What a big difference! Charleen feels she has no "right to a little luxury now and then" (2). What is worse, now, as a poet, she has also "written away the well of [her] self. There is nowhere to go" (21). While Judith has been "able to translate her nonchalance into a well-meaning, soft-edged eccentricity which is curiously touching and even rather charming" (67), on Charleen's side, "there is a wish to project nonchalance and laxity, to preserve at least a shadow of that fiction"—the fiction of a self-contained, self-closed individualist who can live without society (78). To Charleen, Judith has "a seeming immunity to the shared, sour river of [their] girlhood" (68); but Charleen feels bound to be a victim of their girlhood, living in the shadow of her mother's life because her mother's sayings still "form a perpetual long-playing record on her inner-ear turntable"(3), even twenty years after she leaves home.

Charleen continues to lament the legacy of her childhood because the McNinn family leaves her nothing except the "hereditary disease, the McNinn syndrome" (126). In her memory, the house in which she lived for eighteen years with her parents "was a

house where implements were neither loaned nor borrowed, where the man who came to clean the furnace was not offered a cheering cup of coffee, where the postman was not presented with a box of fudge at Christmas.... In this house there was no contribution to the Red Cross nor (what irony) to the Cancer Fund. Meagreness” (88). The irony is that Charleen’s mother, Mrs. McNinn, will herself suffer from breast cancer. Obviously, this house seems like an isolated world where they need no help from society, nor need to care about others. It is a house filled with both physical and emotional “meagreness.” And the physical meagreness never leaves Charleen. She still keeps her mother’s motto: “A penny saved—this last saying never fully quoted, merely suggested” (3). As she observes about herself, “Food. I am frugal” (2). As for clothing, she still wears “an old blouse, six years old at least... I should have thrown it out long ago” (24). And her haircut is always “just a cut, a simple cut” (27). In a pouring rain, on the way to visit her mother in Scarborough, she is forced to run to the subway from downtown Toronto. Or, rather, as she later confesses, “I am the one who lacks the largesse to phone a taxi. Meagreness. I am Florence McNinn’s daughter, the genes are there, nothing I’ve done has scratched them out” (125).

Besides the physical meagreness and frugality of her life, Charleen has not learnt from her family how to love and care for people. As she recalls her mother’s mode of childrearing, “She *had* loved us but with an angry, depriving love which, even after these years, I don’t understand. The lye-bite of her private rancour, her bitter shrivelling scoldings” (61). She calls her mother’s love “primitive, scalding, shorn of kindness.” As a consequence, Charleen never acquires the moral quality of being kind: “For me kindness is an alien quality; and like a difficult French verb I must learn it slowly,

painfully, and probably imperfectly. It does *not* swim freely in my blood stream” (104).

To her credit, however, Charleen has seen clearly her mother’s problem and her own lack of kindness. She admits that “it is part of the burden of my life to pretend that I am a benevolent and caring person” (42). Nonetheless, she tries to be a “loving person, a giving person,” by playing a game of letters. As she confesses: “It is a kind of game in which I pretend, to myself at least, that I, with my paper and envelopes, my pen and my stamps, that I am one of those nice people who care about people” (13). By writing to people she knows, she yearns to prove that, “At least I want to care.”

Charleen is also aware that the dullness of their family’s existence conceals a “terrible hurting void” (48) in their mother’s life that cannot be spoken or revealed in any way. “It is the void we must not mention,” because her mother is “hard enough” as it is to communicate with (48, 13). Many years after she finds that her mother no longer has an “eccentric passion for home decoration” (44), she still does not dare to ask her about it. As she recalls, “I yearn desperately to talk to her...without shyness, without fear” (114). “These offhand conversations which I always rehearse in my mind before seeing my mother never materialize because, once in her presence, I freeze back to sullen childhood when such phenomena were accepted without comment. To question would be to injure the delicate springs of impulse and emotion” (48).

Obviously, a relational identity with her mother is suppressed in her childhood. As Eakin argues, “All selfhood is relational” (*How Our Lives* 50). And in a child’s life, the “mother may well be the primary source of relational identity” (56). Incidentally, in Charleen’s childhood, there seem to be no “memory talk” between her and her parents. According to Shotter’s theory of social accountability, “‘memory talk’ exchanges

between children and caregivers, between clinicians and their patients, conditions us to believe that our recognition as ‘persons’ is to be transacted through the exchange of identity narratives—no narrative, no self” (126). Since there is never communication or conversation between the mother and the daughters, Charleen has failed to develop her identity through “memory talk” in her childhood. In Charleen’s own words, “Never, I don’t know what it was—something in my childhood probably—but I was robbed of my courage” (*Box Garden* 1).

Charleen also fails to find a relational identity in communities of friendship. She inherits a narrow world-view from her mother, whose belief is that “people ‘should keep to themselves.’ They should stand on their own feet, they should mind their own business, they should look after their own gardens” (123). What Mrs. McNinn has tried to teach her children is the value of individuality over social relations, the importance of self above all. As Charleen criticizes her mother, “From her weakness flows not gentleness but a tidal wave of judgement. No wonder she has no friends” (122). Judgment “colors her every encounter” (123), and keeps her friends away. However, Charleen inherits the same unhealthy judgment. When she first meets Louis Berceau, a former priest, whom her mother is going to marry, instinctively, she makes this judgement: “He has always—I feel certain—been ugly; he wears his ugliness with such becoming ease as though it were a creased oilskin, utilitarian and not at all despised” (107). Given her harsh estimate of Louis, she naturally feels herself “grow tense” in talking to him. To the same extent, she feels sorry for her mother in meeting “a defrocked priest” (149).

In like manner, Charleen judges her only colleague, Doug Savage and his wife, Greta, contemptuously: “They get frowsier, coarser, more earnest or more ridiculous” (4).

She is nonetheless sympathetic to Doug because “great gushes of his energy are channelled into the sorting out of my life” (19). She dislikes Greta, because she has a “clinging admiration for [Charleen’s ex-husband] Watson” (176). Thus, she sees the Savages’ kindness to her as a form of adoption: “In fact, they fuss in an almost parental way about their younger friends, of whom I am one” (5). After a dinner given by Doug and Greta, she notices that they would like to go to her home, but she refuses to invite them: “I sense their yearning for my straw-matted living room and my blue and white striped coffee mugs, my steaming Nescafé. Their faces turn to me. But I shake my head. Hold out my hand” (8). Charleen remains withdrawn and withholding in all her friendships.

Then again, since childhood, “guests have never been frequent” (112) in their household. Her father lives “a life of unrelieved narrowness;” and “in [her] mother’s narrow lexicon women don’t have male friends. They have fathers, husbands and brothers” (69). In her parents’ lives, she finds few examples of how to make friends. So Charleen has no idea how to keep friends once she has found them. In fact, she is critical of herself for her dependence on others, “for chief among my diseases is an unwillingness to let friendship die a natural death” (13). Charleen also rejects friendship from Eugene, an orthodontist she meets after she divorces Watson. When Eugene does not take money for her son’s orthodontia, she feels caught in “an absurd martyrdom;” but she dares “not risk the suggestion that I was a woman willing to sell her body for dental care” (19). She is even afraid that her son Seth has friends: “But they are true, he *does* like everyone, a fact which makes me feel—and not for the first time—a little frightened at my own child’s open, unquestioning acceptance” (79). Obviously, Charleen has no idea whether it

is “natural” to accept friends without question or whether it is dangerous to be open and vulnerable to others.

And yet, contrary to her mother who “was stuck with the heart-racking futility of altering mere surfaces and never reaches the heart: her world was immutable” (48), Charleen has a strong yearning to change her life. At the age of eighteen, Charleen couldn’t “wait to get out this house” (122). She had eloped with Watson, hoping to leave her old life behind to gain a new life for herself. However, having stepped out of her mother’s “box garden,” she was forced to live in Watson’s narcissistic world, becoming an audience for his display of multiple selves. Watson, “like an actor,” “plays a number of roles one after another” (153). First he becomes a heroic figure by unlocking Charleen from “an enslavement” to her mother’s “brick box” (44). When he is young, he stuns Charleen with “a whole new set of mannerism and attitudes” (154). As a “Young Professor Self,” and “rebellious young intellectual,” he truly wins Charleen’s adoration. As a tutor, he makes Charleen a poet, “a sort of phoney poet,” as she calls herself, because “poetry was grafted artificially onto my lazy unconnectedness, and it was Watson—yes, Watson—who did the grafting” (150). In fact, Charleen becomes Watson’s obedient pupil: she reads whatever he selects for her. She is satisfied to see Watson playing the “role of tutor, one of his many incarnations: he became a kind of magician and I the raw material to be transformed” (151).

Even after Watson leaves her and their son Seth, retreating into the Priory from the real world, Charleen is again taken with Watson’s ascetic charms as a reclusive admirer. She still hopes that “Watson would return in another disguise” (156). As a matter of fact, Watson continues in disguise to haunt her as “a contemplative man like

Brother Adam” (116), a hermit who cuts himself from society. Watson is rather like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who abandons that “false shame and fear of public disapproval” that “at first prevented me from living in accordance with my principles, and from openly insulting the maxims of my age” (Rousseau, 366). Indeed, Brother Adam teaches Charleen that, “A determined indifference is the perfect cure for anxiety” (100). He becomes Charleen’s model for her present anti-social self, his letter-writing companion in a world of self-sufficient isolation. With his theory of “the importance of grass to human happiness” (81), Brother Adam seeks to fashion Charleen on the model of Rousseau’s (or even Thoreau’s) solitary self.

Brother Adam’s identity is problematical for more than one reason, however. As “Watson”, he is married to Charleen for eight years; it is impossible that she would fail to recognize Brother Adam as Watson. However, Shields creates this Rousseauistic, solitary self as another disguise for Watson to prey upon Charleen: “*Watson was someone who picked up people. I was someone who had allowed myself to be picked up*” (62). In this sense, Charleen allows herself to be seduced by a version of the romantic self. For Rousseau, “The true strength involves having few needs” (Taylor, 359), much in the same fashion defined by Charleen’s mother. “It is our dependence on others, on appearances, on opinion which multiplies our wants, and thus in turn makes us even more dependent,” Rousseau writes. “True freedom is found only in austerity.” At the same time, “the idea that we find the truth within us, and in particular in our feelings” (368), leaves the self open to every wind of change, to appearing, from moment to moment, as an ever-changing self. Indeed, the self that Rousseau portrays in his *Confessions* glories in “being continually modified by our senses and our body organs” (Rousseau, 422), and so vows

“to follow nothing but the caprice of the moment” (666), whoever or whatever that self might be at the moment.

Like Rousseau, Watson feels no need to conceal these multiple selves; however, none of the selves has any space of concern for others. All Watson cares about is perpetual youth. But he does not know how to make “a conscious decision to hold onto [his] youth” (92). So, “[a]t the age of thirty, he fell apart. Watson broke into a thousand pieces, and not one of those pieces had any connection with past or future” (93). If Watson does not possess some kind of personal identity through time, how can he hope to attract the same woman again? If he is “a man without center” (153), how can his actions be coherent? If he has no self-continuity, how can he have a meaningful life? Taylor argues, “We want our lives to have meaning, or weight, or substance, to grow towards some fullness, or however the concern is formulated.... If necessary, we want the future to ‘redeem’ the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or purpose” (50). In this sense, Watson’s life makes no sense. If his own life has no sense, how can he make his life meaningful to Charleen?

On occasion, Charleen also yearns to change her identity. After she has a haircut at Mr. Mario, she is delighted with her physical change: “Always, always, always I’ve wanted to look like this. Soft, shaped, featured into a new existence. Me” (31). At a party given by her old friends, Merv and Bea, where she meets Eugene for the first time, she has “dressed for this evening with deliberate declassée nonchalance... I had also brought my special party personality, the rough-ribbed humorous persona which I devised for myself after Watson left me” (64). She tries to show that she is not a “victim of separate modern diseases” (37). However, like her mother, she has only altered “mere surfaces,”

so that her identity-change “never reaches the heart.” She allows herself to remain a victim of her failed marriage because she does not even want to change her name, Charleen Forrest, to announce her singlehood, not even after twelve years of being a divorcée.

Escaping the McNinn family, which has “no family pride” (124), still does not mean that Charleen has liberated herself from “a life of relieved narrowness” (53). With Watson, she lives in “another sealed-off area” (124). After Watson, Charleen next takes poetry as “a strange narrow aptitude, a knack” in which, she thinks, her “loneliness could, by [her] secret gift of alchemy, be shaped into a less frightening form” (152). And yet her writing is not an effort to express herself: “poetry became the means by which I saved my life. I discovered that I could bury in my writing the greater part of my pain and humiliation” (152). In fact, she is afraid to write out of her own life lest it be a disease of her subjectivity, “the most debilitating of diseases” (109). But she cannot even face this fact; instead, she retreats into an isolated world to express her loneliness to Brother Adam in letter after letter. Indeed, she adds, “As I have no one I can really talk to, Brother Adam, no one in the world” (26).

Charleen’s other problem is her lack of imagination, which is just as harmful to her as her self-imposed isolation. For five years she has not seen her mother; now, she can’t even imagine what her life is like: “What fills her life I cannot imagine; I have never been able to imagine” (23). She cannot imagine her meagre mother “submitting to the luxury lunch at the Wayfarer’s Inn. And it is even more difficult to imagine her absorbing—in this room at one of these little tables peopled with local businessmen and white-gloved club women—a declaration of love” (144). She can’t even imagine that her

“unloving mother has found someone finally to love” (126). Having been close to her son Seth every day, Charleen can’t imagine, either, how he embraces otherness the first day he starts school: “I came home the first day after taking him and grieved, not out of nostalgia for his infancy or anxiety for his future, but for the newly revealed fact that he had entered into that otherness, that unseeable space which he must occupy forever and where not even my imagination could follow” (117). But why does Charleen fail to imagine the lives of other people?

Again, Charleen has some awareness of her problem: “I can never quite believe in the otherness of people’s lives. That is, I cannot conceive of their functioning out of my sight. A psychologist friend once told me this attitude was symptomatic of a raging ego, but perhaps it is only a perceptual failure.” But where does this perpetual failure originate, if not from the solipsistic views of her mother? That is why she can’t understand how Eugene could rent a car for them to use in emergency: “Such a simple thing, renting a car; Eugene would never be able to understand why my family stands in awe of such simple facts” (182). However, “heredity suggested a partial answer” (123). She cannot blame her perceptual failure wholly on family tradition, because Judith has been able to embrace others along with their mysteries.

Ultimately, Charleen goes to literature for an answer. She takes literature as her “friend and ally” (151). She thinks that she could remake her childhood by writing her loneliness into “a less frightening form” (152). She writes constantly; but she has never found herself in writing poetry. Nonetheless, she takes literature as “the real world,” and falls in love with “a strange narrow aptitude” of what she has written. Unlike Judith, who seeks answers for life in writing about others, Charleen has written away the well of

herself and finds no other way to go. Why can't she remake herself out of literature? As one critic of her poetry suggests, she writes "from the floor of a bitter heart." If she cannot find her way out of her solipsist world through writing poetry, is there any way for her to escape from her "box garden"?

Actually, Charleen first has to learn to "require bravery from Eugene" (57). Although she still yearns for "him to demonstrate an aptitude for heroism," as she has done before with Watson, she cannot find any. Contrary to Watson, "in Eugene's stories he seems deliberately to choose for him a lesser role." However, Charleen finds herself becoming "more robust and redeeming, a note for valour." Next, she learns how to be kind by observing Eugene's interactions with her mother. When they are at the McNinn's home for her mother's wedding, Mrs. McNinn is angry with Charleen for bringing Eugene home. She is embarrassed because she has run short of food. However, this seems nothing serious to Eugene. Instead, he gives "the most charitable explanation, the most kindly interpretation" (104): "Mrs. McNinn is angry because she is not in good health;" she has run out food because "she hadn't been expecting an extra guest." Charleen is also grateful for his company at such a critical time. She feels that they are a good match: "what a pair we are, half-educated, half-old, half-married, half-happy" (128). Now Charleen starts to think of others, to think of Eugene before herself: "I should marry him and relieve a little of the guilt he suffers." Having reviewed "snapshots" of herself, she also determines: "I am not deformed by unhappiness.... I am not visibl[y] disfigured, bent over and shredded with grief. In fact, except for my bitter, lime-section mouth, I look astonishingly healthy" (155-6). She realizes that if she could learn the three skills of "gentleness, generosity and compromise" (104), she could still embrace others as Judith

does. If she could leave the McNinn family after eighteen years, she could also leave Watson behind after their eight-year marriage. Indeed, Watson's sudden arrival into her life has already proved the possibility of change in her life. If she could divorce Watson, why can't she be remarried to Eugene? Changes are always possible if there is bravery and courage. If she can open her heart with Eugene, "[t]hen something happens: I look at Eugene in a frenzy of tenderness and begin to be happy" (200).

Meanwhile, Charleen comes to a clearer understanding of Watson's problem: he does not have self-continuity. What she cannot forgive in her ex-husband, Watson, is not his abandonment of himself to every latest fashion in thought, or every new "phase" in his existence, but "the way in which he coldly shut the door on his past" (155). Such a continuous past, as "the existential imperative driving our claims to continuous identity," needs to be constantly reconstructed (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 98). Finally, when she sees through Watson's disguise as Brother Adam, she realizes that Watson is still narcissistic even though he keeps some distance from her. He still needs her as an audience; that is why he still writes to Charleen in the disguise of Brother Adam. He even sends her a box of grass seeds to encourage her solitary self. Now, she consciously criticizes him in her thought: "Poor Brother Adam, his love of grass which I had believed was prompted by an Emersonian vision of oneness, was only one more easy commitment, an allegiance to a non-human form, a blind and speechless deity" (201). For Watson cares more about grass—a non-human form, a blind and speechless deity, than people in his surroundings; he would rather be a lonely blade of grass than be a social being. Obviously, Watson has modelled his new self on a version of Thoreau, who is also a self-confessed "hermit in the wood" (Thoreau, 162). For such reasons, Watson becomes a hermit in the Priory. He

rejects family life as well as social life. Meanwhile, he shuts himself off from the current world and from his traditional history as well. In that case, he can offer Charleen no version of self-continuity, or even of meaningful connection with her past.

The irony is that Charleen's solipsistic self has been completely "shaken with the violence of change"—the kidnapping of Seth—from the outset of her narrative (1). Facing Greta, an admirer of Watson, and a "kidnapper" of her son, she should have spent all her rage on her; however, kindness has led Charleen to understand Greta in a different way. "Without really intending to, I heard myself defending Greta, explaining to my mother that Greta had taken Seth as an act of love. She loves Seth, and, in a neurotic labyrinthian way, she loves me too" (206). Charleen finally learns to be kind to the people around her: "Like the kind people of the world—like Eugene-the-orthodontist—I had judged with instant charity; like the good folk in fairy tales I had performed magic, spinning gold from straw, transforming apples to golden guineas. Kindness, kindness—a skill which I have nourished and rehearsed and worried into being—had jumped out and taken me by surprise. Without thinking, without laborious reflection I had fallen into its easy litany" (207). What surprises Charleen most is that her mother, who is always so cruel and critical of others, has finally been silenced. Now Charleen understands, "perhaps kindness and bravery have a common root" (207). Her mother has actually become kind by remaining silent; Charleen becomes brave by giving the best interpretation of the kidnapping. Thus, her final discovery that her "kindness" is not an "illusion," but is real "bravery" (206), shows that kindness is her true doorway to social being.

As an autobiographer, Charleen also begins to realize the importance of “an extended self,” of knitting together a self across time. In fact, the “self in time...constitutes the foundation of the self represented in autobiography, providing a proto-narrative, temporal armature that supports and sustains our operative sense of who we are” (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 102). She comes to understand that her lack of identity is also a longstanding part of the problem of her own family: “Our father too had been a man without ancestors: to go back three generations was to find nothing but darkness” (124). But how to extend herself into the future becomes her next project of awakening: “My childhood is over, but at the same time—and this seems even truer—it will never be over” (213). She has to make an effort to overcome what she calls the McNinn Syndrome: “dullness and drudgery, ignorance and self-preservation” (124) are the family’s particular enemies of social being.

Compared with *Small Ceremonies*, *The Box Garden* is weak in form, even though Shields dramatizes the kidnapping of Charleen’s son and offers something of a mystery in the identity of Brother Adam. It might be that Shields wants to shake Charleen out of her narrow world, because it is only at this moment of external crisis that she feels “the approach of another era” in her life, “a new way of seeing” (80, 86). In an interview with Marjorie Anderson, Shields confesses: “In *The Box Garden* I wrote about a kidnapping and I was very sorry I did that” (63). However, this rather simple novel helps to sketch the larger direction of life writing in Shields’ developing oeuvre, because she is fully aware of the danger, at least on a thematic level, of being a self-contained, self-enclosed, autonomous subject. *The Box Garden* thus becomes a metaphor for Charleen’s and her mother’s problem: they are stuck in a narrow form of individualism.

The reciprocity of autobiography and biography in her first novel, *Small Ceremonies*, makes that novel a far more interesting meta-narrative of the problems in writing a self. In a less complex way in *The Box Garden*, Shields raises questions about the self and identity that are better treated indirectly, as they are in *Small Ceremonies*. Even so, by placing Brother Adam as the first-named character in Charleen's autobiography, a figure who haunts her through to the end of the novel, Shields provides a stage for Watson to perform his "multiple selves," from Rousseau's momentary self to Thoreau's solitary self, none of which can survive because they offer no room for "a self as a being who exists in a space of concerns" for others (Taylor 51), or as "the interpersonal self" that Eakin describes in his own conversion as a theorist from "the myth of autonomous individualism" (*How Our Lives* 22, 51).

In Charleen's autobiography, there at least remains a healthy tension between self and community. As much as she writes about her lonely self, Charleen comes to better understand herself only when she becomes a social being. As Taylor points out, "A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it" (35). According to him, "Selfhood and the good...turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes" (3). So in this sense, Charleen's autobiography belongs to a long tradition of the social novel which defines the self as "a product of social discourse" or, at the very least, as "a self-created aspect of concrete social dialogue" (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 65).

Shields then uses these companion novels to define the relations between the "internal" and "external" life, between a life lived in self-sufficient isolation and a life lived in relation to others. Quite deliberately, Shields sticks to first-person narration in these two companion novels to show the narrowness of Charleen's self-enclosed life, as

well as the possibilities for writing the self in relation to other lives. If *Small Ceremonies* is a meta-narrative for life writing, *The Box Garden* is a showcase for “the disease of subjectivity,” at least as it appears in the myth of autonomous individualism.

Chapter 4: “Alternate Versions” of a Married Life: The Tensions between History and Fiction in the *Happenstance* Novels

After the “alternate versions” of the McNinn sisters’ autobiographical writing of their family history—Judith's account of the justification for her “unhealthy lust for the lives of other people” as a biographer in *Small Ceremonies* (38), and Charleen's meditation on “the most debilitating of diseases, subjectivity” (109) as a poet in *The Box Garden*—Shields turns to a more biographical form of writing in two companion novels, *Happenstance* (1980) and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (1982). In these two fictional biographies, she adopts “the rather more complex tactic of pluralizing the dominant narrative perspective, telling the same story twice from contrasting, frequently competing, viewpoints—those of the husband and the wife” (Gamble 47). In her study of the *Happenstance* novels, Sarah Gamble does point out the tension between history and fiction insofar as Jack is a historian whereas Brenda is an artist, and she also notices how “contrasting points of view become identified with their different creative practices” (49). If she demonstrates how Jack “wrestles with language and syntax” and how Brenda’s work “with fabric and thread is ‘ridiculously easy,’” it still seems to Gamble that the tensions are between different media or different modes, and each of them has its own problems.

As Linda Hutcheon has noted, “history's problem is verification, while fiction's [is] veracity” (112). According to Gamble's understanding of Hutcheon's theory, “history and fiction do not exist in dialectical opposition...but side by side” (43). But I would argue

that history and fiction, in some respects, overlap, in that they are both constructed narratives; if so, then there is an inherent competition between them for "truth value", and there is an unresolved tension in their use of a similar form. My purpose in this chapter is to show how the "historian" and "artist" are counterposed to blur the boundaries between history and fiction in these two novels. Both these novels are conventional stories of mid-life crises in married life, revealing how the couple have "undergone a gradual and incomprehensible mending of spirit" after Jack's loss of faith in history and Brenda's loss of love for her husband and her loss of faith in reality (Shields, *Happenstance* 215). In a fairly unconventional way, however, Shields raises questions of how to tell "shared stories" by exploring the problem of historical "truth".

As the fictional biographer of both Jack and Brenda, the narrator chooses a five-day period of their lives to rehearse the twenty-year history of their marriage. For the first time, Brenda leaves Jack at home alone in Chicago to attend the Philadelphia Exhibition as a quilter. The old tale of a faithful wife waiting for an adventurous husband to return home is the first casualty of this modern woman's history, parodying Homer's *Odyssey*. Now, a husband stays at home and faithfully awaits his wife's return, oblivious to the fact that she is suffering a crisis of faith in both love and marriage: "She had a glimpse down a deep historical hole containing millions of couplings—it was bottomless" (Shields, *Conventional* 73). Nor does Brenda sense the "the wave of anger [that] overtook her at the thought...that all her life had been a mistake" (56). As an historian, Jack can see the way his own father 'had been cheated by time' (96), "too young to fight in the First World War and too old for the Second...Jack would call it historical accident, happenstance." But he fails to see how Brenda "had also felt a heartbreaking sense of

exclusion. She had missed another decade, first the sixties, now this.... She might never catch up now; she would spend her life in this perplexing cul-de-sac which time and circumstance had prepared for her" (99). He is conscious only of his own loss "of faith in the written word" (*H* 120), a sense that he has simply cheated himself by failing to question the value of "happenstance", to understand "the place of illusion in history. The value of illusion" (113).

In "this pair of linked texts" (Gamble 48), Shields is at once questioning the value of Brenda's "bondage to facts and to the present moment" (*C* 140), and of Jack's longing "to see time architecturally, as something structured and measurable, something precise and non-transferable" (*H* 206). This twin biography of a threatened marriage—of "all that shared history down the drain" (*C* 157)—thus becomes a double story of a threatened history--of "what all recorded history becomes eventually, a false image, bannered and expository as a public frieze, a mixture of the known and the unknowable" (*H* 124).

In terms of their structure, the two novels are perfectly symmetrical with 30 chapters and 216 pages in each book. By design, rather than "happenstance," the London Publisher Flamingo has printed *The Husband's Story* and *The Wife's Story* together as the *Happenstance* novels, with these back-to-back texts printed upside down from one another, as if to indicate the opposing positions that Shields takes in telling the stories. In fact, the novel has dual endings placed squarely in the middle of the book, leaving blank pages of both the husband's and the wife's story for the readers to fill in with their own versions of the story. Obviously, the publisher realizes Shields's intentions of narrating domestic history. But must we accept Jack's theory that "the ends of all stories are contained in their beginnings" (2), suggesting a linear design to the history of one's life?

Or should we accept Brenda's theory that "most stories have three or four endings" (*C* 157), thus allowing for multiple readings of a life-fiction? Is the history of a life an end-determined fiction? Or is history a fiction with multiple possible readings?

As Melissa Pope Eden suggests, "Shields the biographer also stands on this border of history and fiction" (152). Taking an historian and an artist as the figures of biography, Shields sets out to explore the relationship between history and fiction. At the level of content, she dramatizes a psychological crisis of "a shared history" that could easily spill "down the drain" (*C* 157); but at the level of form, she uses her characters' doubts to express her own doubts about the historical "reality" and the "truth" of representation.

Jack's Crisis: Loss of Faith in History

At the outset of Jack Bowman's story, the historian, having worked in the Great Lakes Research Institute for twenty years, has begun to lose his faith in history: "History is eschatological," he says. "And it's not the story itself. It's the end of the story" (*H* 1). Ironically, what he fails to see is the potential "end of the story" of his own marriage. But then history itself is impossible to see directly: "History is putting a thumbprint on a glass wall so that you can see the wall. The conclusion of an era defines and invents the era" (1-2). Since history is "a thumbprint", it must be constructed and artificial, rather than natural and "real". Moreover, if "history is putting a thumbprint on a glass wall," then the thumbprint must reveal the presence of the historian in everything that is seen; history does not exist independently, but requires the historian to mark its "presence", to supplement whatever signs or traces it has left with a trace of himself. According to Jacques Derrida, "The supplement 'is' an 'addition [that] comes to make up a deficiency'"

(lxxi); and Jack announces at the outset a "deficiency", or a lack, in history, that does require a supplement, an addition that can only come from the historian. But the problem, as he begins to understand it, is that the historian is not continuous with the story that he tells: "Historians in the past have thought of history as a continuum. And we haven't been able to see what was patently obvious" (6). The historian can't begin to see "history" until he recognizes that it is fundamentally alien, or "other", to him, or that it is really discontinuous with his present time. What he represents as "history" is more likely his own thumbprint, or personal perspective, clouding the "transparent" glass.

Yet more problematically, Jack has begun to question language as the medium in which he works, as a medium that is adequate to represent the object of his research. At first, we share his misunderstanding about the topic of a book on which his former lover, Harriet Post, is working as treating the same theme—*Indian Trading Practices Prior to Colonization*—since he has been working himself for more than three years on the concept of trade and property among North American Indians. And suddenly he finds an announcement in *The Historical Journal* of a book that threatens to make his work irrelevant: "Six hundred pages.... Also maps, charts, and rare woodcuts. Rare woodcuts *never before published*" (7). Without reading Harriet Post's book, Jack comes to the conclusion: "Here I've been grinding away at this Indian thing for years. And all the time she's been up to the same thing" (10). What "the end of the story" of their broken relationship reveals is a trope of revenge: "The ending is Harriet jumping me to a book twenty long years later" (8). Unsettled by his fear of being "scooped", Jack begins to doubt the value of history. Only at the end of the novel does he find out that his book and Harriet's are two completely different subjects—his on the trade practices of North

American Indians, and hers on the trade practices of the Indian subcontinent. At this first level of content, we then see the inherent ambiguity of language, its ability to misrepresent the historical object. While Jack's reading of "Indian" is no more than lexical confusion, it marks just the first level of doubt about language.

A second level of doubt about the power of the written word to mislead the historian appears in a note about the telephone messages left by his son:

Gone with Bernie K. to Charleston. Back around 7. Sue K. phoned, wants you to phone her back at hospital 366 4556. Mrs. Carpenter phoned and said Mr.

Carpenter would live. Rob (118)

The meaning of "Mr. Carpenter would live" certainly needs a supplemental explanation, otherwise the phrase makes "no sense at all" (118). Jack cannot blame Rob for carelessness, because Rob is "fairly reliable when it came right down to it, fairly responsible" (118). Neither can he be critical about the boy's vagueness because he is "generally efficient about taking down phone messages." Then how should Jack read a sentence such as "*He would live*"? Is he supposed to read it ironically, suggesting that Mr. Carpenter "would survive his hangover" (119)? Or does it mean that "a calamity of some kind had overtaken Larry Carpenter" (125)? Given only his note as a clue, how would some future historian explain the event? For good reason, Jack is beginning to admit that he "mistrusted paper, anyway. Words, ink, paper, the limitations of language and expression, human incompetence; it was absurd, the importance that was put on mere paper. For a historian he had always had a peculiar lack of faith in the written word" (120).

The written word is not only ambiguous, or helpless to explain itself without a

supplement; sometimes, it is simply false. While Jack is figuring out that Mr. Carpenter is in hospital, he comes across a notice by the editor of the newspaper: "*Our regular reviewer, Larry Carpenter, is on vacation*" (143). How could this be true? How could Carpenter spend his vacation in hospital? Or how can the fact that Larry Carpenter is in hospital be represented in the words, "*Larry Carpenter is on vacation*"? Again, Jack's faith in the written word is shaken: "On vacation! So much for history. So much for the reliability of the printed word" (143).

In another case, Jack and his father watch in person as hunger marchers demonstrate in Columbus Park. His first response, on scanning the story in the newspaper the next day, is his regret at being left out of the photographic image of the event: "If the photo had been half an inch wider, they would have landed in *Chicago Today*—his father would like that. Perhaps they *had* been in the picture; these pictures were always being cropped to make them fit on the page; it could be that he and his father ended up in a wastebasket at the *Chicago Today* office" (143). At the same time as he recognizes the exclusionary power of the historian—in this case, a photo editor—he is jarred by the discrepancy between the images and the caption which locates them: "*Hunger strikers demonstrate on behalf of Russian dissidents Sunday in Humboldt Park.*" How could the venue be changed from Columbus Park into Humboldt Park? Who has made the mistake in recording this historical event? The photographer who forgot where he was? Or the caption-writer who has garbled the photographer's report? And yet, surprisingly, perhaps, for a historian, Jack "felt perversely pleased by the fact, almost triumphant—it represented a false recording, similar in a way to Larry Carpenter's 'vacation'" (144). At the same time, the historian is forced to concede the obvious status of all primary sources

for history: "It was this false form which would undoubtedly survive; this moment of history would have taken place in Humboldt Park. The picture would be filed away forever, and what was written underneath would become the truth" (144). Of course, this further shakes Jack's faith in history: "You can't trust second-hand accounts" (207). But what can one trust if the primary sources are inherently unreliable?

A further problem for the historian is the reliability of personal memory, of oral sources, when printed sources are open to distortion or falsification. In Columbus Park, where he and his father take walks on Sunday, he finds that his father's memory is "unreliable, especially lately, but at the same time the explanation had a simple, locked-together rationality about it" (112). Is it "a deliberate tripping up," or an unconscious memory of "the woods as being perpetually forbidden and dangerous, a kind of private wildness positioned in a pure, unmarked cosmic zone of timelessness?" Associating his father's unreliable memory with history, Jacks begins to wonder about "the place of illusion in history": "all kinds of fantasies bumped along through history, half of the time obliterating the facts, half of the time contributing something human, a pleasing transposition of logic, a way of balancing the seeming precision of clocks and calendars" (113). What is "[t]he value of illusion?" To simply imagine "a part of the human past" in "all these masses, tentative notations, illuminations, recordings?" Perhaps, Jack concludes, "History was no more in the end than what we wanted it to be. Like the woods in Columbus Park." Besides, "the words were both true and not true" (114). History, whether oral or written, comes very near here to the condition of fiction.

History comes even closer to fiction when one considers "the reliability of the recorder, the one who performed the actual task of writing" (120). Jack begins to see that

the recorder is not the norm, but an aberration, so that what is written is more likely an exception to the rule; and what is left unrecorded is really the bulk of human experience. Many historical moments have probably lacked someone to record them. As Jack realizes, "This moment was historical. It happened. But in no way did it enter into the written record" (123). Then what gets presented as "history" is only "happenstance", hardly more than a constructed thing written in "a kind of mirror language" (120). To him, "it was absurd, the importance that was put on mere paper," because "history was exactly the reverse—what wasn't written down."

All in all, Jack has to concede that "the historical knot is hard to untie; unlocking one moment of history can be a life's work" (144). It is not only time-consuming but is also "heartbreaking. The men who choose to be witnesses and recorders of the historical process must partially remove themselves from society." If you stand apart from the event, then you are estranged from your own history. As such, he "would always be a man who listened to the accounts of others, a man who comprehended the history of events but not the events themselves. He was a secondary-source man" (143). Jack thinks that "there must exist...an instinct for melding particular but seemingly unrelated facts, and this instinct, which required a leap of imagination, was accessible only to those fortunate few" (144). He was once among the few "who possess that vital element, a historical sense," but now he is more aware "of the failings of the historical perspective" (216).

One of these failings has to be the assumption of a unified perspective in any primary recorder of the historical event. Jack takes the case of the English barmaid, a hypothetical instance of a person writing a memoir of her "life and times":

If, for instance, she had somehow been taught to write in her old age—Jack pictured her bent over a rough table, a small leaded window furnishing light—what she would put down would be something altogether different from her actual experience in the tall grass; the minute her pen touched ink, a second self would begin to flow, conditioned, guarded. (124)

Obviously, what the barmaid has written is not her life when she was a young barmaid; rather, it is her present perspective on her past self. And so we see “the words becoming what all recorded history becomes eventually, a false image” (124), inasmuch as the emergence of a second, written self can never be identical to the first, lived self. Also, what she has written is only a shortened form of her life on paper, “a mixture of the known and the unknowable” (124), because her perceptions vary in different times and places. Furthermore, as he tells his friend Bernie, he chooses to locate the English barmaid in the town of Birkenhead in the year of 1740, because “the records were less reliable in the provinces. And the 1740 because that puts her fairly safely in the camp of the illiterate” (121). Obviously, Jack pounces on the lack of reliable information about the place where the English barmaid lived, as well as her illiteracy, to give him more space to create her story as history.

If the story of the English barmaid is then taken as history, history must be “a double-souled art,” in which there is a mixture of fact and fiction. Even then, what is a fact, if there is always a failure of “connection between perception and the moment itself” (215)? And beyond the historical moment, what “truth” of representation can we expect, if the “moment” is already bifurcated between “perception” and “event”: “What if the barmaid got old and forgetful and happened to mention the encounter to a passing

minstrel who was really a novelist in disguise and who later wrote a book called *The Tall Grasses of Birkenhead*" (123) ? Or what if the barmaid converted to "Methodism, quit her job, married a very up-tight shoemaker and lived the rest of her life as a god-fearing woman. She never told a soul?" Then there would be no true "written record of this event." Much of her life history would be left unwritten. Can we still call unwritten events a history? As Jack explains, "This moment was historical. It happened. But in no way did it enter into written record." Therefore, there is no way that "you can possibly call this a historical event."

Jack's problem with history, as Bernie tells him, is that "you want history to be more than it can possibly be. You want it to contain everything" (124). History is little more than "a human invention—rather a presumptuous one." Since it is a human invention, it has "all the human limitations. Plus time limitations, technological limitations, the whole thing. It's never going to be more than the dimmest kind of story telling." Jack used to think "all that was required of him was that he record and chart the flow of events" (13). He would never believe that the record could be corrupted. In fact, as Bernie remarks, "the historian in you resists corruption" (44). But now Jack has to admit that, "To record was to announce yourself as a human aberration, a kind of pointing, squealing witness who by the act of inscribing invites suspicion" (121). And the more he thinks about history and about what he has done as a historian, the more he doubts the possibility of representing the past with any accuracy. He even decides to give up his book: "The whole thing would have to go; tears stood in his eyes. I have no faith in this" (46). At the same time, he realizes how "[a]voidance had led him to a dead end; a gigantic spiritual pratfall awaited him." Occasionally Jack sees himself and Bernie as

being "absurd and a little pitiful in their scrambling for the big T Truth" in history (60).

In *Happenstance*, Shields thus shows the problems of representing the past. Should we read history as facts or do we read it as fiction? By exploring such problems in reading history, Shields also points to problems in reading biography: what is the "history" of a life? What is worthy of recording in auto/biography? Is the written life a true representation of a lived life? Or is it an artful selection, repressing "alternate" truths? Can life writing ever represent the "truth" of a life?

In the "Translator's Preface" to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out how "Derrida sees 'truth' (if one can risk that word) as being constituted by 'fiction'" (lxiv). It is equally fair to say of this novel that Shields sees history as being constituted by fiction. Both history and fiction are discourses in which narratives are constituted by what Jack calls the historian's "screening mesh". So it is a logical fallacy to take what is written as truth; and it is "an even greater fallacy, as Jack saw it, the fact that most of life fell through the mesh of what was considered to be worthy of recording" (*H* 121).

"Shared History": Marriage as a Failure of "Connections" Between "Perception and the Moment"

At the very beginning of the husband's story, Jack insists: "History consists of endings" (*H* 1), but he soon contradicts himself in the idea that "[h]istory is no more than the human recognition of endings." In his doing so, Shields emphasizes the gap between events and perceptions, between the raw material of history and the design imposed on it by the historian. Late in the novel, Jack accepts that historians "tend to see time

architecturally, as something structured and measurable, something precise and non-transferable. A hundred years is a hundred years. Five days is five days" (206). However, in reality, he has been taught by recent experience that "five days can be sometimes short and sometimes long." A period of five days in a marriage is really short; however, he feels that Brenda has been away for "a hundred years, not five days. He remembered what she looked like, but he couldn't remember the sort of the thing they talked about on midweek evenings." Now, he realizes that there is "such a thing as slow time and fast time." For the first time in his life, he sees that "[h]istory was a double-souled art, a yardstick and a telescope."

Time is problematic for Jack on both a professional and personal level. As an historian, his sexual history returns to swamp his professional integrity in a seeming story of personal revenge. Before he met Brenda, he had dated Harriet Post, a professor's daughter, whom he met in an American Civilization seminar. His memory of their sexual encounter as "an event that had filled him with astonishment and joy" (150), now seems to be "a thump that banged thrillingly on his heart" (180). While Jack is happy with his choice of Brenda and is still pleased that his "slow body" seems to be more comfortable in his sexual life with her, he sometimes wonders if he chose Brenda as a form of "prized and possible safety" (150). Even though the "historical underpinnings of that choice had occasionally tormented him," he never regrets his choice. However, when he thinks that his research is going to be jeopardized by Harriet Post's research, he takes what she has done professionally as a personal revenge. "The world wouldn't end because Harriet Post had cut him out—what was the use of crying over spilt milk" (170), Brenda would have said. However, Jack's present life is overshadowed by Harriet Post again.

In dealing with past emotions, Jack admires his mother for her courage to survive her first marriage to a shoe salesman whom she met at a dance and married at seventeen, but who deserted her as soon as he lost his job. However, Jack's mother had managed to "absorb this short marriage and desertion and put it behind her"(104). Jack wishes he could put Harriet behind him and let her remain in his past life. But appearing as a rival in his academic life, Harriet Post also now appears to Jack as his "historical destiny" (10), his past self returning to haunt his present self.

On the other hand, Jack prefers looking back to looking forward. The only problem is that "[e]verything had to be read backwards in a kind of mirror language" (120), which tinges the past "moment with the gauzy brightness of nostalgia" (160). Recalling his life with Brenda in the past always still brings him a kind of nostalgic happiness: he falls in love with Brenda at first sight and he loves her in many ways. He even loves Brenda's name, "A good Chicago name, Pulaski, Brenda's maiden name" (182); he especially likes the way Brenda names herself, "Pulaski, like the street," because she says it "lightly, but with a meaningful intensity." He also loves Brenda's honesty—how the first time they met, she told him that she had no father. To Jack, "father" represents the continuity of one's history. Perhaps this would explain her lack of "historical sense; a sense of history, a relatively rare thing" (144). At least, this is an alibi Jack gives for Brenda's lack of historical sense: she "lacked all sense of historical curiosity" because she has no father (146); her "missing historical sense seemed to Jack to be inextricably linked" (145). While he pities Brenda this lack, her lack of feeling for her father is comprehensible to him: "it's like being born with one toe missing. You never miss it if you've never had it." He guesses that this must be the reason why Brenda is

accustomed to the "blank." Jack even admires the way that Brenda is "able to function in the world without it [an historical sense]" (145).

In some respects, Jack is happier thinking of his life in the past: in the seventies, he was always amazed to "hear people talk about the tumult of the sixties. *His* sixties had been passed in a daydream" (137). He possesses "a shelf full of evidence" to show that, "within the framework of relativity, he is happy, or at least a fortunate, man" (11); physically, he is healthy; financially, he owns his own house, which is valued at "an astronomical eighty thousand dollars." Academically, Jack sees himself as "a kind of boulevard historian with an intellect both spry and elastic" (127). Parentally, he and Brenda are blessed with a son and a daughter, both of whom are "intelligent, responsive, alert, agile, inventive, self confident" (138). In a sense, he is blissful that he is married to Brenda because very few marriages have lasted as long as theirs. Indeed, Jack's life in the past has its "particular rhythms and satisfactions" (11). Even the "thought of these things, their arrangement and persistence had filled him then with amazement" (138).

Part of Jack's comfort in the backward glance is that his concept of time is patterned: "The time line in his head curved and circled—each century with a colour, an aura, of its own" (147). Whenever he thinks of an event, there will be the same colour and aura in his mind. His perspective is thus fixed and never changing. He is confident that the "time line had touched him then, connecting him directly to all possible events and creatures. Past and present flowed together" (148). And so he is proud of his uncommon sense of history, even if "its rarity made him doubt, in his case, its truth."

The problem with his fixed view of time is that it does not allow for changes in the self. Watching an improbable and dreadful movie of "Betty's sequin-splashed

resilience, he felt despair resting lightly on him. He would like this moment to stretch out forever, an eternity of Betty" (152). He still assumes, after he is married to Brenda for several years, that she has been "truthful" and "not curious" (146). He lacks the necessary curiosity himself to see that Brenda has become an artist. Nor does he see that his children have grown up and developed their own personalities: "it wasn't that the children had disappointed them, were no longer beautiful" (138). "They had been taken in; the early vision had been false." He is always wondering: "How could he and Brenda have divined what was to happen?"

Jack might well be keeping his eyes fixed on the past because he does not want to see the future, or to face the ravages of time or the travails of change. For instance, when he sees Brenda off at the airport before her journey to Philadelphia, he has this fearful illusion : "Brenda had seemed, momentarily, to lose possession of her body, as though some vital supporting fluid had leaked away, flattening her, making her seem for a moment like someone else's wife" (26). And he will carry this fear till he meets Brenda at the airport on her return. He even fears that "something in his greeting might fall apart. Some connection between perception and the moment itself would fail, would always fail" (216). At this moment, he is more self-critical about his loss of faith than curious about Brenda's adventure. He could never imagine Brenda's encounter with Barry because she does "not want revelations" (C 215); he fails to see how Brenda has had to reconcile the "young self" and "the Brenda of old" (215-6); he cannot imagine that she must do something similar to what he has done to reconcile himself to his younger self. Instead, Jack makes up his mind that "[h]e must, whatever else happened, keep her from ever knowing" (H 216).

In a famous moment in his own auto/biography, the French theorist, Roland Barthes had asked, "What right does my present self have to speak about my past self" (121)? Jack's present self not only feels unqualified to comment on his past self; he also begins to feel incompetent to comment on his present self. Without any faith in history, how is the historian to define his identity? What Jack seeks in history is a fixity that can resist surface changes. He uses the old glacial lake, Lake Chicago, to defend his view of an "eternal" history: "For him the lake was still there, would be always there, a sub-image that a thousand layers of concrete couldn't obliterate" (147). But now, in Brenda's absence, he has had to confront "his lost faith" (89), and to recognize "that the void left by his shattered faith had inexplicably grown; it had spread alarmingly in all directions" (90). In truth, Jack is changing in ways that make him feel a stranger to himself; but his inability to accept these changes, or to bridge the distance between his past and present selves, makes him feel inauthentic.

For good reason, Jack tries to imagine how he must look through his "boy's eyes—my old man's nothing but a stupid jerk, a royal prick"(17). He recalls how swift to anger he has been over small things, such as hearing his son call the food he prepares "crap"; at once, he feels the "room rock. For a fraction of a second—it couldn't have been more—he was sure he was going to kill Rob" (65). Why is Jack so sensitive to his son's criticism of his cooking? Does he associate it with what he has done all these years as a historian? As he later realizes, "It wasn't just today; today's explosion was months overdue. But today, finally moved, he had wanted to smash Rob's face in, to bring his fist up against Rob's nose; he wanted to knock those teeth right out of his head" (66). Worse still, Jack is frightened by "his own inability to let the matter drop." He almost takes it as

"a punishment of some kind, a way of reminding them of the enormity of her [Brenda's] absence" (67), making him feel that he is "a man abandoned by his wife" (69). Not quite "unconsciously, he cursed Brenda for abandoning him on this day of all days." Jack also sees himself in his daughter, the way she exercises willingly and cheerfully two dogs for their neighbour the whole Saturday afternoon just for one dollar. It is as if she "inherited something from his weakness, his dependence on the good will of others" (38). Brenda calls it "a crime," "sheer exploitation" (39), and for once it occurs to Jack that "Brenda, and not he, might be the one who was on the right track" (35).

At the deepest part of his crisis, Jack even identifies himself with Larry Carpenter, who "decided to terminate his life, and almost succeeded" (155): "Dear Larry, I know how you feel. I know exactly how you must feel" (156). Having lost his mooring in the past, Jack now thinks that "[a]ll suicides are victims of the moment." He also imagines how he would comfort Carpenter with his own nostalgic experience: "Hope you're feeling your old self again" (155). At the same time, without thinking of his glory days, he feels that "the whole world was plagued with disappointment...a series of disappointments" (169); he is going to be "stomped upon" by Harriet Post; he is going to "fill the emptiness of her [his secretary, Moira's] disappointment with his own misery."

While Jack feels that his suffering from a loss of faith is "too strong a word, too noisy with literary echoes, too Protestant" (90), he now realizes that he has arrived at a point of "immobility, self-insulated, sealed off." Thus, he takes himself to be "a man without substance" (89), "a man defined by nothing at all except the invisible band that connected him to" Brenda (26). Jack fails, however, to see how Brenda has also been changing; the way her "imagination...was confined to a thin slice of the present" (146).

Although he loves her being "a quiltmaker in her own right," and "he adores her for that" (74), he never figures out that quilts are Brenda's narrative of her life. To Jack, she seems to have turned to quilting simply "out of boredom or restlessness or perhaps a frenzied half-comforting, half-angry reaction to the many women magazines she read at that time" (25). Their children have been in school for years and already have lives of their own. He has been busy with his own research on Indian Trade and Property. While Jack worries about Brenda because "she had grown more compulsive and even a little demanding," he sees that "in bed she had become every day less ardent, less sure of herself" (28). In that sense, he is relieved to see her take up quilting seriously as one of "the alternatives" of her life (29). When their neighbour, Hap Lewis calls Brenda "an artist," he even likes "the combination of practicality and visual satisfaction." At the same time, he contrasts Brenda's satisfaction with her quilting with his "higher" research on Indian trading practices.

In Jack's opinion, Brenda is "not curious" and she lacks "all sense of historical curiosity" (146). For example, he could appreciate quilting because it has a historical tradition: "Medieval knights wore quilted material under their armour for warmth and to prevent chafing. Mary Queen of Scots quilted in her prison to pass the time" (30). However, he fails to see that quilting, for Brenda, is a form of self-expression and self-creation. Jack's linear view of history blinds him to the mosaic design of Brenda's quilts, where the "shapes meant nothing to him. There was no recognizable image here" (214). He thinks the colour Brenda uses in quilting is too simple; he fails to acknowledge a "whirl of colour, mostly yellow with a few slashes of violent green in her work. Indeed, there are "so many shades of yellow," to say nothing of so many stitches in her quilting,

which are "purposeful and relentless, suggesting something contradictory and ironic."

Having been an historian for so many years, Jack has only a logical and rational way of seeing things. He cannot understand why his father, at sixty-eight, is still reading self-help books such as *Take Charge of Your Life*, *Imaginative Marriage and How It Operates*, *The ABC's of living yourself*, etc. Jack's attitude towards these books is "basically skeptical" (102). Although he clearly sees "the transparencies of the self-improvement vision, the simplistic assumption that the human will can be snapped back and forth like a rubber band," he has serious doubts about the "possibilities" of "new systems of thought, new life styles and modes of behaviour" that his father might achieve at his age. To Jack, these seem to be "possibilities that he could not possibly achieve or even entertain at this time of his life" (103). Jack, in other words, refuses the prospect of change. As a result, the past self dominates the present self in order to prevent the emergence of a changed future self.

As a matter of historical fact, however, Jack has always had a side of himself that demands change; he "could never reconcile" his spiritual side to his factual side of things (33). In his mind, the "worship of *things* ran counter to the whole struggle of the race" (34). He laughs at Brenda and her friends who are busy at knitting and spinning for their loss of "sight of the fact that all their energy led back, in the end, to things." As an historian, Jack understands about the value of things such as a particular ancient earthenware bowl which is "much mended and badly faded." Dr. Middleton refers to it as "a holy object." However, Jack thinks that "we should go beyond that" to get "the spirit behind the bowl." Jack would like to get "the platonic idea of truth behind all objects." He asks, "Wasn't the refining and shaping of ideas the important thing, and not filling up the

world with more and more objects?" He even identifies Brenda's prize-winning quilt, *The Second Coming*, "with the happily married, with the reasonably content, the spiritually intact" (35). However, he is "not altogether certain about the philosophical underpinnings of an argument about materialism"; nor is he "sure he could defend a life based on the abstract without sounding like a puerile hypocrite." Instead, sharing his uncertainty with Brenda, Jack imagines "this discussion might take place" in a romantic atmosphere with Brenda "nodding slowly, reflectively" to his argument. However, he never sees a "moment when the question had possessed relevance or promise." Only when he starts to question the truth of history, does he have to "acknowledge the realities, roll with them" (170). One phrase Jack hears often is that "*these things happen*". What would people say about Larry Carpenter's attempted suicide? What would Brenda say about his disappointment at Harriet Post's book? These "words had a seductive ring of magic about them—say them fast enough and they expelled blame and responsibility. They had the power to defuse all kinds and shades of disappointments."

However, when he has to confront reality, Jack is "something of a social retardant, a woolly academic type" (32). Keeping and maintaining friendship is not Jack's favourite pursuit; he has "achieved only one friendship"(52), with Bernie Koltz, with whom Jack talks about history at Friday lunches. However, Brenda doubts Jack's "faith in his friendship with Bernie" because he never talks with Bernie about his wife, Sue's adventures; he never mentions Bernie's daughter, Sarah, five years old, who has never achieved consciousness. To Jack, "it's a somewhat painful subject" for both Bernie and him to talk about, whereas to Brenda, "[p]ain is supposed to be shared" by friends. How could Jack be a close friend to Bernie without talking about his sorrows? Jack has "grave

doubts about the wisdom of casual sharing" (62). He never proposes topics about Bernie's marriage and their disabled daughter, not because he does not want to offer help, but because emotions are uncertain and dangerously changeable. Jack notices that the kind of friendship Brenda has is "caring, dependence, support, consolation." Although he believes that Bernie and he would each supply the help the other needed, he holds back the topic of Harriet Post and her damned book. He is "not one to confide easily in others" because he does not want to reveal his "selfish desire to possess for himself his imperfections." Besides, Jack's policy of socializing is that a "better man refused invitations from those for whom he felt a casual aversion; he had better things to do than squandering his life on social trivia" (77).

Jack always feels "amazement at the way [Brenda] managed to carry her friends like floating troops in and out of the openings of her life" (52). However, he thinks that there is "something inherently selfish about the idea of closeness" (53). To Jack, it is too selfish and demanding to say, "Let my grief be yours. Let my anxiety rest on your head tonight, old pal, take my weakness, give me your strength in return." Besides, "secrecy, always secrecy, the abrupt, theatrical, almost literal running down of a curtain" is safer. Jack has no idea how Brenda would talk to her friends: "Once or twice, Jack had chanced upon a roomful of Brenda's friends, and the conversation, warmly flowing before he entered, had lapsed awkwardly into a secretive, bitten off, embarrassed silence" (54). When asking Brenda for an answer, he gets this: "Well almost everything;" "Well for one thing, we don't assign topics the way you and Bernie do" (54). In some sense, it is true. "For almost a year now the topic of their [Jack and Bernie's] Friday lunches had been the defining of history" (1). But what is friendship if the topic is limited to history?

Sue, Bernie's wife, has once said to Jack, "It's all history now, as you and Bernie would probably say, something metaphysical like that" (200-1). For twenty years, Jack and Bernie have been discussing topics limited to history. Jack remembers that Bernie once said to him when they did Kierkegaard, "Happiness was only a useful abstraction" (201). But on a Sunday visit to his parents' home, Jack finds that happiness has a basis in material reality as he watches his father doing his mother's nails, carefully cutting them, then filing and painting and polishing them. However, it only takes his father a minute to do the whole thing, from which Jack can tell that he must have been doing this for years, "something that had never occurred to him" (204). Now, for the first time, Jack finds a tangible happiness in his parents' lives: "their concern for that crazy thing, that illogical and shapeless thing—his happiness"(205). However, he has "imagined them powerless in his absence." Jack feels ashamed of his inability to see the hidden life of his parents; but at the same time, he wonders whether we all have "another life" hidden from others (182).

How about Moira's sexual confession to Jack? Will he pursue this "love affair" as part of his life hidden from Brenda? Or does Moira want to reveal "another life" in her head? First, he is terrified by Moira's sudden request: "Would you like to make love with me" (171)? Consciously he knows that Moira attempts to seduce him into "sexual fantasies" for the sake of "a change" (172), while Jack "never even thinks of doing something, without playing at doing it." But Moira's "outburst had left him giddy; a shaky euphoria filled his head; his teeth were chattering; he felt overwhelmed and dizzy" (175). "The inside of his head had loosened to plaster, a buzzing whiteness" (172). He does not know how to deal with it: "a sudden perception of human secretiveness came to him, the depth of it, the uselessness of it, the waste" (174). He does want to say, "I love you, too,"

to respond to her "I love you;" however, Jack, the historian, who "works with words and abstract concepts" (Gamble 47), fears "the entrapment of words" (*H* 174). He hopes that "order could be yet made of his life" (179); however, he does it by escaping from reality so that "he could not be reached"; he wants to become "an invisible man" where "he could not be held accountable."

When he does come to understand that "we cannot always be escaping into easy exits," Jack starts to do something to heal Moira's sadness. Passing a florist's shop on his way to escape Moira, he has the idea that "he should send Moira Burke a bouquet of flowers;" and "the idea hit him up with happiness" (183). Although he feels "dazed" at what he has done for Moira, he is "happy" (184), because he does not violate his ideal of marriage, which is "doggedly monogamous and domestic" (180). Does he have no imagination, or is he "possessed of a dull nature?" No, he does have sexual fantasies, but "his fantasies invariably circled around Brenda, his wife; and always they were played out in the safety of familiar surroundings." Although Jack deals with the "love affair" rationally, he decides that he will "keep [Brenda] from ever knowing." Finally and most importantly, he is surprised to find that "he had lived another life all these years inside Moira Burke's head" (182). Will he read "another life" as a secondary source or can he live the life as a primary experience?

Jack feels that his role as "a secondary-source man" (134) has cut him off from primary experience, and that there will always be a gap in his experience between "the moment itself" and his "perception", and that the "connection" would always fail" (215). And yet his realization that there is no absolute truth to tell also leaves him more able to balance truth and falsity in his life; when his son asks him whether he has ever been

untruthful to his wife, he firmly answers with "Never" (196). But he feels that the "force of declaration in his voice almost took his breath away," because there are "so many dishonesties in his life, so much false posing and faithlessness," that nothing he can say would be the absolute truth.

During the week without Brenda at home, he has faced one disturbing event after another: their neighbour, Mr. Carpenter attempts suicide but the story ends with a notice that "*Larry Carpenter is on vacation*" (143); his best friend, Bernie's, marriage breaks up, but his wife, Sue, still worries about him; Jack's secretary, Moira, makes her sexual confession to him but he ends the drama by filling the "emptiness of her disappointment with his own misery" (169). Worst of all, he thinks that his years of research are going to be erased by his ex-lover's identical book. It is only "[p]ure happenstance [that] had made him into a man without serious impairment or unspeakable losses" (11). And now his luck has turned. Will he tell all this to Brenda when they meet?

Jack has no idea whether he should share all this with Brenda. But her "way of defusing the strangeness of reunion" throws some light on telling "shared history" (C 214,157). Each time she had come to meet him at the airport, she would tell him "first the good news and then the bad news" (214). And the "real best and worst news was inevitably saved until they got safely home." However, "these revelations in the car only skated toward truth." "What they settled for on the way was something in between, some mild and humorous representation, the kind of anecdote that told well in the car, that eased them back on their first step toward familiarity" (214-5). Can Jack now do as much for Brenda on her return? If he keeps something untold in his life, will their "shared history" be true or complete?

To complicate matters, Jack is also aware that his perception of his wife's "history of herself" is probably quite different from her own self-history, and that we are likely all fated to have "lived another life all these years" in the minds of others (*H* 182). But are such forms of silence and non-revelation that he favours any kind of solution to the problem of differing histories, not only in a marriage but at different stages of narrating one's own life? As Jack realizes, "The number of histories one person might have locked in his head was infinite." He is also aware that "he carried a film strip around with him, a whole history of Brenda Pulaski Bowman that was all together separate and different from her history of herself. No doubt she had a film strip on him, too." However, it is "only some perpetual failure of his own that kept him from knowing" (12). That is why he cannot imagine what Brenda's film strip on him would consist of, but he is sure "its details would be puzzling and foreign" (182). However, even the "most sophisticated tracking device in the world couldn't collect them all and consolidate them." Nonetheless, it is necessary to collect as much as we can, for, without an "alternate version," what basis do we have for understanding any "primary" version?

Finally, Jack comes to see the true essence in his academic life, how "the mere thought of abandoning the book had come as a release" (170). If he could walk away from the history of the North American Indian Trade and Property in this way, he would have "an alternate version" of his life history. And it is philosophically true as well: "The small spark of possibility had burst into flame—he could, he saw, with a measure of dignity, walk away; he could put away his notes forever." As Dr. Middleton has anticipated, "these things happen."

Jack has another epiphany while walking through the aftermath of the blizzard

after meeting with Moira's sexual attempt. To his surprise, he discovered that "the snow had obliterated geographical boundaries," and "the whole harsh, seedy nexus of city blocks and masonry and traffic—and now all this buried in snow" (176). He could not find any traces of streets, farms, villages and lakes that have been named in history. But he has been enlivened by the erasure of whole districts because "this new namelessness" "made him feel oddly safe." For years he has been on guard against the borders between history and fiction; and now he finds a kind of liberation in letting the boundaries go.

Brenda's Crisis: Loss of Love and of Reality

By contrast with her husband, Brenda's loss of faith in reality owes "nothing to logic" (C 36). She does not have any logical explanation for why she marries Jack, how she stays with him for twenty years, or why she has suffered "a lapse of love" in an instant. (198). She has no idea why "[love] had fled. Love was gone. The world was spoiled. For months she had no idea what to do. Trapped in her own reputation for sunniness, she had to carry on as though nothing had happened. She could only pretend" (199). And yet there was no pretending when Brenda, working as secretary at the Great Lake Institute, fell in love with a thesis student named Jack Bowman. At that time, she did not even know what a thesis was. For such reasons, Jack believes that her "view of the world was simple" (48); and this is what attracts him, "the simplicity, the grace; it had done him in" (49). Indeed, that is "what he loved about her" (48). Brenda loves Jack, too. She loves his face, "even though it struck her as being overly wide and rather blank. This effect of blankness was false" (122); she loves his "puzzled withdrawn look of readiness" (171); she loves his words which have "the quality of being chosen rather than spilled,

and Brenda sensed a consciousness as carefully mapped as a coastline" (123); she loves "his shyness, his difficult courtesies, and especially his eager hands groping under her winter coat, searching over the softness of her sweater front" (123-4). Does Brenda love his body? She cannot tell because she has not yet "banked on his body" (171).

Nonetheless, they get married when Brenda is only nineteen and Jack is twenty-one.

Later, when people ask her why she married him so young, she simply says that she was "dying to have a pink kitchen" (121). As a matter of fact, Jack gives her more than a pink kitchen. They buy "a two-story red brick house," which is expensive. Instinctively, she loves it "on sight" (15). When Brenda "thinks back to her typing pool days at the Institute and to the time when she first met Jack, she cannot believe her own luck" (125). She was easily satisfied at that time. For twenty years, Brenda has "never been unfaithful to Jack" (107).

And yet when Brenda looks at "something these days—a face, a house, an expanse of scenery—she was more likely to think, is this all there is" (49)? She even wonders whether "all her life had been a mistake" (56). More and more, Brenda has a sense of being "cheated by time" (96). For years, she has known that "her life was out of joint with the times" (95). She has noticed this from her "richly simulated, commanding voice on the phone" and from the "articles she read in magazines;" the voice is full of "certain expectations;" and the articles are all about "the new women" (96). She is regretful for letting herself be "detained too long in girlhood, an abstainer from the adult life" (95). She feels herself caught between her own era—"too soon to be one of the new women" and "too late to be an old-style woman" (96). Brenda begins to have "feelings of estrangement" from both the real world and her own marriage.

It first happened four years ago during a holiday Brenda and Jack had spent in France. They went to see The Winged Victory of Samothrace because their friends told them, "You can't go all the way to Paris and not see The Winged Victory" (135). However, when they were "standing on the grand staircase in the Louvre directly before the statue, she and Jack had felt bewildered. Was this all there was?" To Brenda's disappointment, she finds that the statute has nothing "interesting" and "profitable" for her imagination (138). She looks at the "way the figure is striding through the stone;" nothing is special: "The legs seem to know just where they want to go" (136); she concentrates "on the wings and legs", as they "sort of try to fill the rest of it in mentally." But Jack insists that "it does have a kind of power," because of its thousands of years of history as "the model for The Winged Victory of Samothrace."

Other things also give Brenda a feeling of loss. For example, their next door neighbour, Miss Anderson, is "old, odd, relentless, and in some strange way, content" (138). She is "a witch" (137). To Brenda, "Her reputation for witchcraft derived chiefly...from one of her eyes, which sagged shut, yellowed with chronic ulcers, and from the long black coat she liked to wear." While she was alive, Brenda never thought of the "mythology [that had] grown around her." She died only two years ago; however, people "seem to have forgotten her, referring to her...as that old lady in the coat, or simply The Coat Lady" (138). Brenda finds it "hard to believe, and somewhat unfair, too, that a human personality...could be so quickly and thoroughly obliterated." She now comes to realize that, "Something historical had predetermined that straightforward gait. Something historical, too, had touched her mildly with madness." Thus she regrets not having "tried to know her better when she was alive." She wonders why, "during the last

few years certain things had begun to annoy her. Enraged her" (52). At the same time, she has no idea whether her new anger comes from her "seismic sensitivity to the cheapness of things" (55).

In the past, Brenda had never experienced disillusion because she had few illusions: "'Brenda is a realist,' Jack used to say, back in the days when he made such statements. 'Brenda sees things the way they are'" (47). But lately, Brenda has not felt protected by her "realism": "Something had happened, she wasn't sure what, but nothing seemed as simple as it once had. She had children who were growing up. Her mother was dead. She herself was forty years old. There was a reluctance, now, to say: well, that's the way it is.... At times she found herself longing for that other self, the Brenda of old, smiling and matter-of-fact" (49). As a matter of fact, Brenda has changed; but she has no idea how to reconcile her new self with her old self.

A journey to Philadelphia to an art exhibition seems like an occasion for Brenda to come to terms with her new identity, to complete the stages of her transformation. Even before she leaves, the very name of the "City of Brotherly Love" is enough to send her into ecstasy: she murmurs Philadelphia "into the coffee-softened air of the kitchen" to feel the reality of herself being happy; she tries it with a voice which is "low and so secretive she might be addressing a priest or a lover" to express her desire to go (1); she says the word, Philadelphia, "into the rising coffee fumes, she feels engorged with anticipation, a rich, pink strangeness jingling round her heart that interferes with her concentration" (3). However, her pleasure in the journey is first spoiled by her traveling companion on the plane, who has "all his life to cope with" (45), but who takes the fact that Brenda has no father as a "stigma". Brenda even thinks it "stupid" or "foolish" now

to be on a journey to Philadelphia. So, when she is asked about her destination, she replies, "not at all the way she had pronounced it at home, not the way she had whispered it over the morning coffee: Philadelphia" (46). And this is not the end of her disappointments.

When she arrives at the hotel which she booked long before for the craft convention, Brenda is told that the hotel is full because the International Association of metallurgists are having a conference there and she has to make other arrangements. The dream she has had for months has been broken: "a small room of her own, a single bed, severely made up with hotel linen, almost a nun's bed" (61). Nothing is what she had anticipated; and so "a wave of disappointment struck her" (62). Finally, she gets a room in another hotel to share with another craft person for the convention. Unfortunately, when she seeks to rest from the fatigue of her journey, she is stopped by her "glimpse down a deep historical hole containing millions of couplings"—her roommate is having sexual intercourse in her room (73).

With all these disappointments, Brenda begins to realize that "something had happened" in her life (49). However, she is "not sure what, but nothing seemed as simple as it once had." She recalls that even the "small reminders of events past and present carry with them a suggestion of disappointment or risk" (2). She used to take for granted that what is written in newspapers and magazines was real. Now, she tends to "get stuck most mornings with the business section, which she has found over the years to be surprisingly interesting" (6). In newspapers and magazines, there are many stories of success: "everyday there can be a new batch of these success stories" (7). And the "success seems to Brenda to be dazzling but contained; they are poised for action, about

to leap off the page, but something restrains them." So, when she comes to the "real people," she finds out that "even the strongest of them, were sadly perforated by weakness and inconsistency. Failure was everywhere, also selfishness, cowardice, disharmony, and physical imperfection" (47). Like Jack, she begins to see the distance between what is written and what is really there.

Brenda, however, has never believed in the media; she never trusts them because she thinks that "they told lies." As she observes, "Fashion models, TV stars—they had nothing to do with the way people really were." She also gets angry while reading an article in the *Tribune* which says, "It was no longer fashionable to talk about one's identity" (98), just when she has realized she wants to be "one of the new women" (96). Thus, she has felt "a heartbreaking sense of exclusion. She had missed another decade, first the sixties, now this" (99). When she is interviewed about her quilts, she also finds that her works are misrepresented as a "kind of regional-motif thing," which resembles "the whole Navaho-Mexican influence" (112-3). Brenda wonders "what they mean by Midwest perspective" (112), and she "can't remember having had any thoughts which encompassed both quilting and the Midwest" (113). She could not even agree with the idea that "quiltmakers have to 'aspire to cosmology'". In response to what the media impose on her, she is tempted to announce that, "What sets quilting apart from other crafts is the built-in shiver of history." But it is not her phrase; it is Jack's: "'the shiver of history'—borrowed from Flaubert" (114). To Brenda, there is nothing "historical" in what she does; the forms of quilts just "come out of our fingers." She does not even have to think of them, "instinct and spontaneity, they're like flip sides of a coin" (115). Brenda trusts her hands rather than her mind in quilting. As she says, "our hands are a move or

two ahead of our times."

And yet, because of the shaping expectations of the media, Brenda also "detects something vacant in the words" spoken by herself and others (132). At the craft show, Brenda compliments a prize quilt, *Terracotta*, by a woman called Lenora Knox: "*Terracotta* leaps right out at you. You could put your arms around that central panel. Really, Lenora, I mean it, it's absolutely wonderful" (131). She "has to restrain her incredulity." At same time, she does not really believe that it is "a work of art that shimmers with originality," although it is "original to sew a wide band of velvet, around the edge of the hot, kindled center panel." She thinks of "a plain casket filled with dazzling primitive treasures." She has the same feeling about the vacant words, when Lenora praises her show piece, *The Second Coming*. She knows clearly that "she and Lenora are locked now into a kind of ritual of too-generous praise" (132). This makes her start "throwing into doubt such steady, accustomed things as praise, condolence, sympathy—even, at times, truthtelling." Brenda hates to think that she has come so far from her simple realism, although she realizes that "[e]normous shifts of perspective had taken place" (99). She also finds that she no longer "see things the way they are" (47); she has her own perspective of news and events in the media; she has her own interpretation of other's art; she even has different understandings of the compliments she received from her exhibited quilts. But she couldn't fully explain her "changes" consciously: "What did it mean anyway to be 'utterly changed'" (175)?

Brenda's doubts about her self-discovery are finally dissolved at the workshop on "Narrative Quiltmaking" when she meets Dorothea Thomas, whose "speciality was story quilts" (155). This seventy-eight-year-old lady showed her quilts, which were "based on

plain old everyday family stories." One of her quilts about "the life story in eight panels of a family pet" has thrown light on Brenda's changes in perspective. Dorothy's own experience of telling stories in quilting exactly explains Brenda's change in perspective:

I used to think stories only had the one ending. But then this year or so, I got to thinking that that's not right. The fact is, most stories have three or four endings, maybe even more. (158)

Brenda starts to think of stories—"her own stories, or rather the stories she shared with Jack" (156). Does she lose faith in her love for Jack or are there multiple endings to the story of her love? "The thought was frightening, unthinkable. She could not imagine it" (175).

What is worse, Brenda knows that she can no longer take for granted the ground of her love for Jack. They have been married for twenty years; however, to her surprise, Brenda "had wakened one morning in her blue-and-white bedroom and looked at her sleeping husband. Jack's face in repose had been blank and shuttered and unfamiliar" (198). As usual, they perform "the motions of love," but that day Brenda has "registered with awful chilliness" (199), a change in her feelings. She could not feel Jack's affection for her any longer; all she can think of is how tediously he repeats his physical movements after his shower. At the same time, she has a strange feeling: "I don't love him any more." Love, like water in a bowl in the sun, can evaporate without being noticed. Brenda, who likes reasoning in terms of cause and effect, tries to figure out why her love for Jack has "fled". She cannot believe that "[l]ove was gone. The world was spoiled."

Even so, Brenda has tried to "carry on as though nothing had happened. She could

only pretend." Fortunately, Jack is not entirely "taken in by her pretence". He tries by every means to heal "her terrible grief" and "her failure to admit to him that she no longer loved him" (201); he takes her out for dinner; he urges her to sign up for an evening class; he also takes her to "see a return of *Laura* at the Arts Theater, where she *endured the soft pressure of his hand on her thigh*" (199, my emphasis); he even recommends "the advisability of psychiatric counselling for her;" he takes her on a sightseeing tour, etc. Finally when they visit a small country church, they are both awakened by "a scene of villagers in medieval dress, their bodies healthy and rounded with thankfulness. These people were carrying baskets of fruits and vegetables into a church, and astonishingly, the church in the picture was *this* church—the church they stood in, only when it was new" (201). In the darkness of the church, by instinct, Brenda puts her arm around Jack and begins to cry: for "it seemed to Brenda that at that moment they were one person, one body" (202). Luckily, her "long nightmare, the loss of love, had inexplicably dissolved. Love was restored for whatever reason."

As Brenda loses her love for Jack with no reason, so does Sue lose her love for Bernie without clear reason. They have a five-year-old daughter who has been hospitalized since she was born. Bernie and Sue go to see her every week, which takes all of their emotion and energy. However, they continue to take care of each other until one day, while they are watching a movie, Sue suddenly finds that she does not love Bernie any more: "we never go to movies. Hardly ever. In the middle of this movie, I turned and looked at Bernie. He was eating popcorn. I looked at the side of his face, and I knew I didn't like him anymore" (*H* 200). Happily for Brenda, however, her love comes back like a light switched on, and "her long nightmare, the loss of love, had inexplicably dissolved.

Love was restored, for whatever reason" (C 202). Although Brenda is not able to explain why she is so vulnerable in her love for Jack and why she finds herself restored again in her marriage, her encounter with Barry Ollershaw, a Canadian metallurgist, during her trip to Philadelphia, helps her to understand better her "complicated self".

Accidentally, Brenda blunders into a "love affair" with Barry, whose wife is "utterly changed" after the loss of their daughter. He suffers from the losses of both his wife and his daughter and gets stuck with his loneliness. When they meet, Barry takes Brenda as an intimate friend, to whom he can open his heart. They become congenial companions in the journey. As Brenda tells Barry, they are a "special race of people. The race that calls a spade a spade" (150). Carefully, she listens to Barry talk about how he has lost his daughter, and about his several love affairs after his wife went crazy. Instead of calling him "a lousy fuck," she comes to understand why Barry has been, "in the last couple of years, through scenes of almost adolescent awkwardness, absurd fumbblings" (211). Meanwhile, she uses her body to heal Barry's wound of loneliness: she holds her arms tightly around Barry's neck because she wants to fill "the whole void left by [Barry's wife's] absence." "And only so many degrees of loneliness that can be banished by an hour of ecstasy in a double bed." Is this episode an old tale of marital infidelity? Or is it another ending to Brenda and Jack's "shared history"? How is Brenda going to tell her "love" story with Barry?

While it is "such an easy thing to give, comfort," Brenda decides that it would be "an act of unfaithfulness to withhold comfort" (212). She uses her physical love to help Barry to restore his loss of his daughter and wife. If her story ends this way, the "love affair" with Barry turns into a healing process for Barry. As a result, the "marital

infidelity" becomes a "transcendental moment" in both Brenda and Barry's lives. As Brenda sees it, "The world turned suddenly orderly and neat as a pin" (211). Brenda also supplies another kind of ending to her encounter with Barry, which allows her to feel "the return of her younger self" (216), and an extended self from which she "can't disconnect" (210). Meanwhile she is shaken by awareness of the complexity of the self: the "older, less happy, but unconquerably sane [self], greets her old ally and merges with her briefly" (216).

"Shared History" in Brenda's View: "No More Than a Chain of Stories," but "the Patterns of Entire Lives"

As Jack tells the reader, he has "a whole history of Brenda Pulaski Bowman that was altogether separate and different from her history of herself" (*H* 182). When Brenda and Jack watch a demonstration in Lincoln Park, she is "amazed and excited by the spectacle," where bodies are stretched everywhere and TV equipment makes "its own circle of light" (48); whereas Jack views it as hardly more than "a morsel of history". But Jack never finds out that Brenda's "ripe female acceptance" has been replaced by "a disturbing existential edge: is this real? is this really happening."

Brenda is also shaken by her awareness of her change from a "matter of fact self," a simple realist, into one who sees falsity and cheapness everywhere. She never has "a version of things" as being "romantic, withheld, speculative," not as Jack does. When she watches fashion models and TV stars, she thinks, "they had nothing to do with the way people really were" (47). She is even cynical about the ways in which she sees the world: "People did not live for great ideals or for noble visions; they lived for their divorces,

their promotions, the instant gratifications of sex and food. They told lies, they smiled slyly at themselves in mirrors as they passed." In this sense, Brenda is more than a realist. While she reads the business section in the *Chicago Tribune*, she is not interested in the articles about Gross National Product, or in the graphs showing the economic trend; "what she likes is to look at the photographs, the column-wide pictures of men... who have achieved some sort of recent executive splendor" (6). Ultimately, what these stories tell her is about Jack's relative lack of success, and his marginal position in local history; "he would probably like to have had his picture in the paper" (7).

On the one hand, Brenda sees no "executive splendor" in Jack as a historian, because "[h]istorians didn't solve existing problems. They set the problems themselves, plucking them out of the banked past like prize jewels, and then played with them for years on end" (182). This is still what Jack is doing: he has been working on his book about the Indian trade practice for three years. Brenda finds the "project bewildering in its purposelessness." She wants to tell him to "forget about writing this book if he honestly felt it was a waste of his time" (183). Secretly, she cannot help but feel that "history was a monster" (140). On the other hand, Brenda tries to find excuses for Jack: "there is no room in the world for so much success and money." Otherwise Jack "might have had his picture in the paper when he was made Acting Curator of Explorations" (7). In a word, Brenda carries a dual image of Jack in her "film strip."

However, Jack, the historian who used to believe in the "written word" as history, has a fixed image of Brenda: her "view of the world was simpler" (48). And he has had this image since he first met Brenda. Actually, Jack "had fallen in love with her level glance, with her quick way of nodding and absorbing and calling a spade a spade." He

even takes a "simple act of shrugging" as "a gesture which proclaimed with wonderful helpless Slavic silence" (48, 49). In fact, Brenda's way of shrugging with her voice "made her appear to her friends to be a woman of great reasonableness" (*H* 24). He likes Brenda's "ripe female acceptance" and thinks that she is lucky that she is not involved in the complexity of history: "lucky, lucky Brenda" (*F* 48). He takes his work as "the serious one, the one whose work had taken precedence" (183). And to be fair, Brenda once loved Jack as an historian. She has willingly taken all the housework and taken care of their children so that Jack could work more on his papers. Now that Brenda is "more serious than Jack about her work" (182-3), Jack is willing to give the brightest room in the house for her quilting, but he fails to see "the very different ways" in which he and Brenda "apprehend the world around them" (Gamble 51).

For Brenda, the fact that she has no father is nothing more serious than a blank in her life. She never feels it. At the age of about six, she does not care very much when someone at school calls her "a bastard"(43). Even today, when she looks for the actual meaning of the "real word" as well as the "infinite layers of meaning" of the word (47), she does not mind. "At least not very much." For her, the word, bastard, has no "such a thing as allegory," no "such thing as metaphor;" it is merely a word which means that she has no father (47). She sees it as a real fact: "In the real sense of the word, yes, I was a bastard" (44). However, Jacks thinks that is "the only thing about her that set her apart [from history]: her fatherless state" (81).

In some other respects, the "very different ways" that Jack and Brenda "apprehend the world around them" also differ in "their different creative practices" (Gamble 49). For instance, names, to Jack, indicate ownership, "events and genealogies" (*H* 147). Once

names are given to places, properties and history, they are "profiled and indexed." So, in this sense, history is given by names. But to Brenda, naming is an artist's privilege and right. She feels happy that she has the right to name her creations because "there were lots of people who never had a chance to bestow names" (19). Names such as *Spruce Forest*, *Rock Splinter*, or *Buddha's Chant* are part of her creative history as well as her life history. In the act of naming, she expresses her personal connections with her creation. Therefore, "She preferred real names which tied the designs to her; even though she knew the quilts themselves would pass into other hands" (C19). So, for Brenda, "history" is something you have to create for yourself. By naming her own quilts, she creates her own life history: the name *The Second Coming* has "all kinds of overtones" (20) of her life story, one of which seems, to Brenda, "to be unbreakable and dipped into earlier memories of happiness" (21). In the act of naming, she changes, too; she comes more into possession of herself, a different self.

Actually, quilting becomes a medium to change her consciousness. Her self-expression in her art is, in many ways, to make a new self. At the same time, Brenda recognizes that "her quilts were changing. The birds and flowers and boats and houses of her early designs...were giving way to something more abstract. The shapes interlocked in different, more complex, ways" (19). As a quilt maker, she converts her sexual "way of invoking youth...a kind of play they put on for the entertainment of their younger self" into her art, *The Second Coming*, with its special colour and particular form, expressing her second self in a sexual sense. But Jack understands it in another way: "at least confrontation had placed the two of them in the safety zone: with the happily married, with the reasonably content, the spiritually intact" (H 35). Another piece of her work, *The*

Unfinished Quilt, is both a critique of Jack's "end of history" and her own vision of life—"a pattern that was severe but lyrical" (50). But to Jack, "it represented a worrying departure" (56). Brenda tries to make her quilts "something finite and explanatory... more than mere cloth and stitching could accomplish" (C 50).

In Brenda's opinion, she and Jack, "by luck, and by the sheer length of time they've been together—twenty years is not to be sneezed at these days—have come in silence to certain understandings. The distances between them are delicately gauged, close to being perfect" (174). As husband and wife, they both believe that "marriage stood a better chance if the male had had some previous sexual experience" (171). But Brenda is still "worried about—was tormented by—the thought of Harriet Post" (172). And Jack is very careful not to mention Harriet Post to Brenda: "Once or twice Jack came almost to the point of telling Brenda about Harriet Post's book, but held back out of reluctance to disturb this rare tranquility" (19). Brenda believes in Jack's fidelity; in fact, she is "sure he was. Despite Harriet Post—how that was incised on her brain—she felt he was monogamous by nature" (173). But in her mind, "Marital fidelity had become a thing of the past" (169).

In fact, it is Brenda's "nature to resist the images of the past" (140). Maybe she "could see backward in time, but not with the perspective and shading that Jack had long taken for granted" (147). Her concept of time is more like a mosaic: "a handful of coloured slides," "lying in the same old box" (146, 147), which is different from Jack's. Brenda feels it is "not entirely true that she lacked a historical sense. In a way, her ability to perceive history whole was greater than Jack's" (140). Because their views of "time" are different, their views of history differ in the way they tell their life stories. Jack thinks

that "the ends of all stories are contained in their beginnings" (*H* 2). History, to Jack, seems to be "a chain of stories" that "come to form the patterns of entire lives" (140). Therefore, his life story would never go beyond history. As the saying goes, "History repeats itself." If there is any change, it is only the change of time. However, Brenda's mosaic view of time leads her to see her life as "a stock of stories," and "most stories have three or four endings, maybe even more" (157). Thus her life is not shaped by history, but rather is changed by giving different endings to it; meanwhile it is also tinged with various stories. She also discovers that "the timing and rephrasing have reached a state of near perfection." Even their telling the story of the same five days in the lives of Jack and Brenda shows different patterns of their entire lives: for Jack, the disturbing events take place one after another, in a linear history, even if he doubts the "truth" of history.

However, Brenda takes her five days away from Jack as a change in her life, as "though her life at forty was so impoverished that the thought of spending five days in Philadelphia could stir her to exaltation" (*C* 3). She also wants to test her connections with her children. What amazes her is that "in the four short days she'd been away, she has completely forgotten what they were like" (197). Paradoxically, "the intensity of their attachment to the present moment—to the trivia of weather records, the drama of their unfolded stormy day—touched her to the heart." Obviously, she is unwilling to lose the connection of love between her self and her children.

Moreover, this five-day separation has also become a test of their twenty years of marriage. Brenda "has never been unfaithful to Jack. She has never once been unfaithful" (107), though she has had several opportunities that could turn her into an unfaithful wife:

Dr. Middleton, Director of the Great Lakes Institute, has told Brenda that her eyes "could melt a man's heart;" Bernie Koltz, Jack's only friend, tells her secretly once, "I love you, Brenda"; Bud Lewis, their neighbour, invites her out "for a drink at a bar"; the travel photographer whom Brenda meets at a party, suggests that "she drop into his studio" (108). Brenda never considers "having an affair with either Dr. Middleton or Bud Lewis or Bernie Koltz. Or the travel photographer—whose name she never did discover. She loved Jack and trusted him." Brenda is grateful for Jack's fidelity. At the same time she is quite critical of herself for being together with the photographer: "for the first time she felt she had stepped into unfaithfulness." But she understands herself very well about this "affair," which is not for "sex at all, but novelty, risk and possibility."

Brenda even takes her encounter with Barry as "a transcendental moment," which "utterly changed" her concept of marital fidelity (211, 175). Physically, she merely "moved and slipped beside him" (212). But emotionally, she has opened her heart to Barry to share his pain and sorrows. If it is such "an easy thing to give, comfort" to Barry's wounded heart, why should she say "no to things" like that? It "would have been an act of unfaithfulness to withhold comfort." Thus, she sees "herself grow luminous, transparent." Conceptually, Brenda thinks that "Marital fidelity had become a thing of the past, the word itself antique" (169). Although Brenda replies to Barry's "I do love you" with a parroted "I love you, too," she clearly knows that "what they were saying was at least partly true" (212). In her own words, "I don't mean just marriage vows. I mean my whole life" (210).

Although it "seems to Brenda that all couples of long standing must have just such a stock of [shared] stories," she and Jack "love their stories and tacitly think of them

as their private hoard, their private stock" (157). While Brenda used to be upset with her "secretive and ultimately mysterious" children, and with Jack's "deeper mysteries", with her own experience, she comes to accept that "there are areas of his life ... that will remain unknown to her" (174). Jack's father serves as her analogue: "His father does not want revelations" (215). But on the other hand, "What a loss it all was, Brenda thought, all that shared history down the drain" (157). So what one has to do in "building up a fund of tellable stories" is to have stories "with three or four endings, maybe even more" (158). In fact, these "stories rose out of mysteries, took shapes of their own, and gave way in good times to newer and different stories. It was all so simple" (140).

Both Brenda and Jack provide their own endings to their "shared history": Jack ends his story with a realization of the failure of "connection between perception and the moment itself" (*H* 216). He finally understands that he can't keep the "clean preserving gel of history." Brenda ends her story with her "love affair" in which she sees herself change from a "matter-of-fact self" to a sophisticated self. But the "multiple endings" do not appear just in what has happened, but also in what she has imagined: a new Brenda, who "greet[s] her old ally and merges with her briefly." Finally, it is in a story with multiple endings that she finds continuity in her married life, as she tries to preserve the "fund of shared stories" that couples lose when a marriage breaks up, and "all that shared history" is gone "down the drain."

Then why do we need alternate versions of our life stories? Because they enlarge our lives with more possibilities. Jack has this idea of "the alternatives" when he sees Brenda take up quilting in her middle age (29). Jack's father believes that people "never go back, never read the same book over again, never rent the summer cottage two years

in a row, never retrace a mile of road if you find an alternate route" (29). As Brenda sees, every life has at least three possible endings: "the ending a person [hopes] for, the one [she's got her] fingers crossed for. That's real.... And then there's the ending [she]'s scared to death is going to happen. And worst of all...there's the way it might have been if only...the road not taken" (144).

As a fictional biographer, Shields seems to tell us that alternative versions of a married life are necessary to renew and enrich that life. By showing how Jack sees history as constructed and how Brenda takes art as a map for living in these two novels, Shields also convinces the reader to believe that the boundaries between "history" and "fiction" are not fixed and final. At the same time, we clearly see that "verification" in history is as impossible as "veracity" in fiction. In the end, both novels show how history can be an alternate version of fiction.

Chapter 5: Inventing a Poet's Life: Alternate Versions of the Biographical Record in *Swann*

Unlike the fictional biographies of a married life that inform the *Happenstance* novels, the multiple biographies of a dead poet in *Swann* have already received some critical attention with respect to form. For example, Burkhard Niederhoff sees the novel as dramatizing the process of researching a life. He envisions Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, Rose Hindmarch and Frederic Cruzzi as "contemporary characters doing research" (71) in their related fields, on a dead poet, Mary Swann. Concerning himself with the "connections and echoes between the two lines of action, the researched life and the life of the researcher," he reads *Swann* as "a historiographic novel," in which "researchers reflect on the problems and possibilities of historical and biographical reconstruction while they are engaged upon this reconstruction" (72). But he fails to see that these self-reflexive versions of Mary Swann's life from each researcher may well have less to do with "research," and more to do with "invention." To Niederhoff, "research is fundamentally akin to the events that are the object of this research" (82); to me, however, *Swann* has more to do with the process of projection that underlies the "historiographic" reconstruction of a life. That is to say, the novel shows how each writer projects his/her own life onto the subject, thus producing a "life" of the biographer as something more or other than a life of the biographical subject.

Employing Foucault's theory of the author function to analyse the stories of the four main characters in *Swann*, Brian Johnson anticipates elements of the reading offered in this chapter. In Foucault's terms, the critic "must locate the space left empty by the

author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (cited in Johnson 57). According to this theory, the author's "history" is simply a record of her disappearance, a reminder of inescapable limits in recovering the historical subject. Thus, to Johnson, "the authority of the critic also depends on a particular definition, or circumscription, of the poet's life" (56), since "the reader can only create him or her by forcing the text to yield only certain predetermined meanings that are bound up in the critic's own schemes and desires" (62). What this reading lacks, however, is any analysis of the differing discourses that "predetermine" the meaning of each of Mary Swann's biographers: the feminist discourse of Sarah Maloney; the biographical discourse of Morton Jimroy; the archival discourse of Rose Hindmarch; and the editorial/publishing discourse of Frederick Cruzzi.

Another useful tool of "biographical recognition" is offered by Helen Buss, a term she adapts from William Epstein to show how "the process by which biographers 'recognize' their biographical subjects is not a 'proof of existence' but a demonstration of just how easily emerging consumer society could reinscribe the biographical subject in its new 'pattern book'" (427-8). For Epstein, "recognition" is more like "abduction" (cited in Buss 428), an assault on the integrity of the subject, which leads Buss to question each of the biographers' motives for writing about, or discussing, the life of Mary Swann. Focussing on "the satiric effect of Carol Shields's *Swann*," Buss demonstrates how each of the four biographers abducts the poet "so that she can be 'recognized' by current commodification standards" (428). What this reading misses, however, is the way that each biographer is in turn "abducted" by the Mary Swann industry. When one considers how "biographers use autobiography as a source of information about the life of the

biographical subject” (Eakin, “Henry James’s” 676), one begins to see how the life of each biographer can also be “abducted” in turn by the institutional power of the subject.

Another limitation in critical readings to date is their inability to account for the film script which ends the novel. What is the formal significance of this shift from print-biography to screenplay? How does it comment on the (possibly unethical) project of life-writing? Anna Benson Gyles’ film adaptation of *Swann* (1996) is a good place to start, although her film concerns only two biographers: Sarah Maloney (played by Miranda Richardson), who is writing a book about Mary Swann, and Rose Hindmarch (played by Brenda Fricker), who is operating a small museum dedicated to the dead poet. In the film, Rose seems to become the most authoritative resource-person because she possesses the only original copy of the manuscript of *Swann’s Songs*; she also claims to be the only friend of Mary as well as the last person to see her alive. In this film adaptation, it is thus Rose who helps Sarah to recover the “real” life of the dead poet. The film also reveals Sarah’s professional and private life during her journey of writing the poet’s life, and Rose’s personal dedication to processing the “authentic” life of the dead poet. What it omits, crucially, is the telling process by which the editor Frederic Cruzzi invents, rather than discovers Mary Swann’s poems. In a curious way, the film adaptation reinscribes the “truth” of history in making Rose Hindmarch, the museum curator, the ground of Mary’s “life”. But in its failure to consider the formal effects of Shields’s shift to a screenplay at the end of the novel, the film adaptation may actually open a door that leads beyond satire, or even beyond “deconstruction”, to a new understanding of the possibilities, as well as the perils, of life writing.

As Shields has admitted publicly, “Biography is my consuming passion” (cited in

Roy 113). From the time of her first novel, she claimed that "the task of the biographer is to enlarge on available data" (*Ceremonies* 35). However, a fictional dead poet who has been chopped to pieces by her brutal husband leaves almost no data except twenty copies of *Swann's Songs*, her Parker 51 fountain pen, her journal, and her dictionary of rhyme. The "possibilities" for unethical or self-centred biographers may thus seem limitless in this novel, but Shields does not rest in the satirical demonstration of how four "biographers" write their own lives on a blank screen. To the contrary, she gives us a meta-auto/biography based on multiple versions of a "life", in which she poses the much larger question of the relationship between biography and autobiography: How much is the life of the subject, and how much is the life of the biographer, a function of the medium of writing? And what happens to "life writing" when it is translated into another medium, such as film? How, in this larger sense, can "life writing" offer alternate versions of a recorded life?

A Feminist Discourse: Pruning the Biographical Record

As a "feminist writer and teacher who's having second thoughts about the direction of feminist writing in America" (*Swann* 11), Sarah Maloney is fascinated by the life of a Canadian poet who is "a poor and abused farmer's wife, geographically and culturally isolated in rural Ontario" (Sweeney 22). "Reading Mary Swann and discovering how a human life can be silently snuffed out" (*Swann* 20), Sarah decides to give a voice to the dead poet by promoting the Swann business academically. Still immersed in the success of her published doctoral thesis, *The Female Prism*, Sarah has single-handedly initiated the Swann business when she discovers the only remaining book of Mary Swann, *Swann's Songs*, fifteen years after the poet's death. With this

discovery, she cannot help but recall her achievement in her feminist writing:

"Immediately after my book was published I received about two hundred such letters, mostly from women, though three were men, crediting me with changing their lives" (59). She hopes her writing on Swann might change women's lives and "[liberate] them from their biological braces," as *The Female Prism* did. However, Sarah finds that Swann is not at all like the canonical female writers of British and American literature she has read and taught before, such as Virginia Woolf and Amy Lowell, who were "throwing off kilowatts of womanly brilliance" (12). To Sarah, Swann seems to be "a prime example of the female castrator" rather than a modern poet (13), because she "spoke haltingly, shyly, and about such trivial matters such as the weather, laying hens and recipes for jams and jellies" (18); even her poems have "a prickly roughness that exposes the ordinariness of the woman behind them, a woman people claim had difficulty with actual speech." But then why is Sarah interested in Mary Swann?

In fact, "how Mary Swann's book found its way down from Canada to a cottage on a lonely lake was a mystery" (17). During the time before she discovered Mary Swann's book, *Swann's Song*, Sarah's life was less than satisfactory. Although she is successful in her career, she has never been settled with the right man in her life. Three months after she married Olaf, she said goodbye to him. Currently, she is with Brownie, who has a "certain erudition, an appealing, splintery intelligence," but "thinks of a book as a commodity" (15), which she does not like. So she loves him "with reservation." Meanwhile, she finds that he has "never [promised] the possibility of love. That almost kills me, his blindness to love" (52). Thus, there is loneliness in her life. As she realizes, "I am tempted to grope under the band of my shirt, grab hold of my flesh and see what it

is that's weighing me down—whether it's Mary who has taken up residence there or the cool spectre of loneliness that stretches ahead of me" (58). In this sense, as she tells us, "What I need is an image to organize my life" (51). "Images can speak, yes, but some of us need to be directed toward the port of entry" (28). Therefore, Sarah takes this obscure poet as an agent to make her own "brain to be all sinew and thrum, chime and clerestory, crouch and attack." And Mary Swann is "the right person at the right time for one thing; a woman, a survivor, self-created" (32).

What is closer to the truth is that Mary is not self-created at all, but is invented by academics like Sarah. As "a hot-shot scholar" (54), Sarah wants to make Mary Swann "a major poet" in the literary world (18). In her eyes, "*poor* Mary Swann, with her mystical ear for the tune of words, [was] cheated of life, cheated of recognition." She decides to make known to modern academics Mary's "unearthly insights and spare musicality." So she launches the Swann Symposium. To promote Swann, "the indomitable Sarah" even keeps herself "humble," cajoling academics to attend the Swann Symposium: "On behalf of the Steering Committee of the Swann Symposium, may I say how much we regret that you will not be presenting your paper in January" (24). With all her efforts, she believes that "Mary Swann is going to be big, big, big" (32). And her hard work will also be recognized by academics.

Willard Lang, a literature professor from the University of Toronto, "the authority" in this burgeoning Mary Swann industry, has made an official announcement in his 1983 paper, entitled "Swann's Synthesis," that Sarah is "the one who is 'most responsible for bringing the poet Mary Swann to public attention'" (30). Responding to his compliment, Sarah feels honoured because this is "a simple declaration of frontier

between authority and discovery.” On the other hand, she feels heavily committed to her own role to expand the “literary phenomena” (Sweeney 22). Thus, she has to admit, “In a sense I invented Mary Swann and am responsible for her” (30).

Sarah's declaration of responsibility is in fact more defensive about than truthful to Mary's life. She fears that Mary Swann will be swallowed up by academics such as Willard Lang and Morton Jimroy. She sees Willard Lang as a "swine incarnate ... capable of violating [Swann] for his own gain" (31). She is afraid that the "absent-minded, paranoid, and feckless Buswell" might do the same thing as Willard Lang has done to violate Swann's privacy. She also fears that Morton Jimroy will "try to catch her out or bend her into God's messenger or the handmaiden of Emily Dickinson; or else he'll stick her into a three-cornered constellation along with impotent Pound and that prating, penis-dragging Starman" (31-2). To Sarah, "[t]hese guys are greedy;" and they "will abduct Swann for [their] own nefarious purposes" (Buss 427). If she does not stand up for Mary, "[t]hey would eat her up, inch by inch. Scavengers. Brutes. This is a wicked world and the innocent need protection" (*Swann* 32). Sarah decides to become "Swann's watchwoman, her literary executor, her defender and loving caretaker" (31). As Buss puts it, "Sarah feels that only she can save Mary Swann from being pigeon-holed into a minor literary star category by academic men" (427). But how can Sarah make Swann into a major poet?

Sarah decides to make Swann a modern feminist poet so that she will not be underrepresented. As a biographical critic, she seems to be interested in finding biographical records to support her assumption. She has made trips all the way from Chicago to Mary Swann's place in Nadeau, Ontario; she has had interviews with local

people who actually knew Mary Swann. The irony is that what she sees and hears about Mary Swann is not the "real" biographical records (as will be discussed in other sections of this part). Besides, Rose Hindmarch, whom she believes to "know Mary Swann pretty well" (44), actually, "had scarcely done more than pass the time of day with Mrs. Swann" (152). In any sense, the oral version of the biographical record might not be true to the facts. As a result, Sarah shares the same sense of guilt as Judith Gill does in *Small Ceremonies*: "I felt the queasy guilt of the trespasser. The fact that art could be created in such a void was, for some reason, deeply disturbing. And what right did I have to dig up buried shame, furtive struggle" (44)? Thus, she sees herself as a "thief but not missing a word" while taking notes from Rose (42). Does Sarah really respect this information she obtains from Rose?

Perhaps not, given the way in which Sarah selects the biographical records which fit her political agenda. From Rose, she finds out that Mary Swann's favourite writer was Bess Streeter Aldrich and that she was also "a true-blue Edna Ferber fan" (42). However, she never mentions this in her later writing about Swann. Rose also gave her two things which "had belonged to Mary Swann" (45): "a small spiral notebook" that Sarah takes as "a diary" and "a cheap paperback book"—a rhyming dictionary titled *Spratt's New Improved Rhyming Dictionary for Practicing Poets*. As a matter of fact, Mary Swann's rhyming dictionary and notebook are her only documented records of Swann's life, or the way she worked as a poet. And yet she offers "no explanation, no note or sign" to support her assumption that "Mary Swann invented modern poetry" (55). While the rhyming dictionary also reminds her of Sylvia Plath, who "used a thesaurus when writing her poems" (45), she nonetheless feels "sorry to be thinking of Sylvia Plath's thesaurus." She

is even disappointed to know that Mary Swann used a rhyming dictionary. As she confesses, "[P]rofound disappointment is what I felt when opening that notebook for the first time. What I wanted was elucidation and grace and a glimpse of the woman Mary Swann as she drifted in and out of her poems. What I got was 'creek down today,' or 'green beans up,' or 'cash low,' or 'wind rising'" (49). Of course, these trivial folk adages and self-help guides will not help to make Swann a modern feminist poet.

The problem with Sarah Maloney is that she has already predetermined the life of her subject as "a model of endurance and survival" even before her biographical research. So, no matter what she finds in the research, it will not change her feminist discourse, because what she wants to do with her research is to offer "small careful proofs" for her presumptions. Finding that Mary's notebook was no more than "a trail of trifling accidents ('cut hand on pump') or articles in need of repair (a kettle, a shoe) or sometimes just small groupings of words (can opener, wax paper, sugar)" (49), she "felt let down, even betrayed." The irony is how could a dead subject betray a living biographer? If Sarah feels betrayed, her decision to exclude these biographical records betrays the woman represented in Swann's life. As Sarah tells us about her dilemma, "I haven't yet decided how I'll present the journal at the symposium, whether to cite it as a simple country diary ('Swann has one foot firmly in the workaday world and the other ...') or to offer it up as a cryptogram penned by a woman who was terrified by the realization that she was an artist" (50). Actually, the disappearance of the notebook has not upset her, although "Jimroy will be disappointed—I picture his collapsed face, its pursed mouth and shrunken eyes—disappointed by the notebook itself, disappointed by Mary Swann." However, it bothers her more when she thinks of Jimroy's "holy attitude

toward prime materials.” She is afraid that Jimroy might come back to her for the notebook.

As Buss points out, “biographers, while seeking to represent their subjects, must, by necessity, exclude and /or revise portions of the subject so that she can be ‘recognized’ by current commodification standards” (428). Sarah, however, throws the rhyming dictionary into a garbage bin along the highway so that the original record will be lost forever. What she has actually done is to suppress information so that no other biographers will see Mary Swann as a rustic and naive poet who uses a rhyming dictionary. In that case, she is free to invent her subject as she wants her to be. By excluding the existing records, as Buss says, “Sarah Maloney is just as likely to ‘abduct’ Mary Swann as are the bad boys of the academics” (431).

An obscure poet to begin with, Mary Swann’s life is now further obscured. Without revelation of Mary’s notebook, “the ups-and-downs accounting of a farmer's wife" need never trouble Sarah's invented poet (*Swann* 49). Neither does she have to reveal Mary's "chance observations of the natural world [as] primitive." In certain ways, Mary becomes a blank slate that everyone can fill: she comes out of nowhere, without cultural models or poetic influences. The value of Mary’s “life” is really its freedom from history, from cultural conditioning. But then Sarah needs to see Mary’s self-invention and self-creation as an essential model for the New Woman: “Mary Swann discovered herself...like a hammock without strings, [therein] hangs the central mystery” (31).

Sarah’s whole interpretation of Mary Swann thus depends on a myth of autonomy, or the notion of self-invention. However, the moment she advances this myth of self-creation, she has to question it: “My life is my own. A moving cry, a resounding cry, but

what does it mean” (11)? Looking back at her own life, Sarah realizes that every moment of her life has been influenced by what she has read: “I’ve read my Thoreau, I know real wealth lies in the realm of spirit;” “Virginia Woolf is the only person in the universe I want to talk to.” She also clearly senses the different selves that she has left behind in reading different writers: “the old Sarah Maloney, dimly remembered even by me, is far behind—that mild Catholic daughter, that reader of Thomas Hardy, with shoulder-length hair and wide pleated skirts. Another Sarah has taken over, twenty-eight, sanguine, expectant, jaunty, bluffing her way. Her awful sprightly irrepressible self appals me” (35). And even at the moment of thinking of the “odd little book of poems written by a woman named Mary Swann,” she seems to “inhabit an earlier, pre-grad-school, pre-Olaf self” (17). By retelling her own history, she comes to understand herself better: “Once I knew exactly what freedom meant and now I have no idea. Naturally I resent this loss of knowledge” (11). By looking at herself, she also implicitly admits the lie that “Mary Swann was deeply influenced by...” (55). But she, and she alone, knows that “Mary Swann hadn’t read any modern poetry. She didn’t have any influences.” Again she comes back to the same problem: “How did Mary Swan, untaught country woman, know how to make that kind of murky metaphorical connection? Who taught her what was possible?” Is it a fact that “poets shape their art from materials that are mysterious and inaccessible?” Or is it more likely true that “biographers use autobiography as a source of information about the life of the biographical subject” (Eakin, “Henry James’s” 676)?

Without any way to show Mary's influence from poets like Pound or Eliot, Sarah has to rely on Mary's poems, which she finds to be "profound without being brilliant" (30). She insists that "the utterances, the shape of them, are spun from their own logic.

Without knowing the poetry of Pound or Eliot, without even knowing their names, she set to work. Her lines have all the peculiar rough thrusts and the newly made syntactical abrasions that are the mark of the prototype" (54).

If it is difficult to tell how much of Mary Swann's life is embedded in her poems, it is easy to see how Sarah Maloney projects her own life onto Mary Swann's life. From her own life experience, she concludes that there is a "blood-hyphen" or connection between mothers and daughters: "It's my belief that between mothers and daughters there is a kind of blood-hyphen that is, finally, indissoluble" (47). To her, "clever women ... are created by their mothers." She also sees herself as "a professional daughter or at least a serious hobbyist" (33). She visits her mother every Sunday and thinks of herself as "the luckiest of women, brimming with home-cooked food and [her] mother's steady, unfocused love," while being together with the woman who created her.

Being a feminist, however, she is more cynical about men: "Clever men create themselves" (47). Thus, she is not at all surprised by Morton Jimroy's "biographical diggings[.] As yet he hasn't turned up a single thing about Mary Swann's mother, not even her maiden name, and he shows not the slightest interest in pursuing her" (50). To Sarah, he does not "understand anything about mothers," which is true. As Jimroy complains in his letter to Sarah, "Childhood has been greatly overestimated by biographers in the past, as have family influences." With her own belief in relational identity, Sarah imagines that "Mary's poems are filled with concealed references to her mother and to the strength and violence of family bonds" (50), which "reinforces one of [her] life theories: that women carry with them the full freight of their mothers' words. It's the one part of us that can never be erased or revised" (48). So she produces a

feminist reading of a poem, which we later learn is reconstructed by Frederick Cruzzi and his wife, Hildē:

Blood pronounces my name
Blisters the day with shame
Spends what little I own,
Robbing the hour, rubbing the bone. (51)

To Sarah, these four gnomic lines prove “the inescapable perseverance of blood ties, particularly those between mothers and daughters” (50-51).

Obviously, to Sarah, Mary Swann does not see herself cut off from history, cut off from the blood tie. Instead, like her, Mary is also bounded by blood. And so she gives us a feminist reading of Swann's "tree" poem:

A simple tree may tell
The truth—but
Not until
Its root is cut.

The bitter leaf
Attacks the stem,
Demands a brief
Delirium. (13-4)

In Sarah's eyes, Mary is "talking about societal and family connections" rather than "thinking about crude anatomy. Roots! Stems! "(14). She also reads Swann's "water poems" as "the clear contours of birth and regeneration;" her "Lilacs" as "a piercing

statement of a woman severed from her roots" (50).

Sarah's understanding of Swann's poems is little more than a projection of her own experience. In her own way, she is little better as a critic than Mr. Homer Hart, retired school principal in Nadeau, Ontario, who reads and interprets Mary's poem as "'De dum, de dum the apple tree.' Something like that"(41): "You read that poem and all of a sudden you can see that tree in your own imagination, the blossoms coming out, a picture made out of words. It was extraordinary what that woman could do with hardly any schooling." Needless to say, Sarah's competing interpretation of the poem makes it "a limpid expression of female sensuality" (50).

Sarah does not only interpret Swann's poems out of her own experience, but also makes Mary's life over in her own image. As she suggests, "Luckily, for me, there have been several such incredible moments that have pressed hard on that quirky narrative I like to think of as the story of my life" (20). What does it matter if she creates a fiction of Mary's life, seeing how her own life is also a fiction?

It happens fairly often, this sensation of being a captive of fiction, a sheepish player in my own *roman-à-clef*. My dwarfish house is the setting. The sacked events of the day form the plot, and Brownie and I are the chief characters, sometimes larger than life but just as often smaller. (37)

In the same way, she asks of Mary's life, "what if she did have a lover...a secret" (279)? She even thinks that Mary might have been killed by her husband because of a secret love. Thus, she sees Mary as "the mistress of the inverted image" of her own "present state of despondency" (50, 51).

Not surprisingly, then, "Imagination" is the topic of Sarah's paper for the Swann

Symposium: "Mary Swann and the Template of the Imagination." Thus, she plans, "I'll do a close textual analysis, showing how Mary, using the common task of thinning a row of radishes—the most grinding toil I can imagine—was able to distil those two magnificent, and thus far neglected, final lines, which became almost a credo for her life as a survivor" (54). Privately, however, she admits that "[m]y thoughts were of Mary Swann, how she must also have performed night rituals, though not the same ones as mine. I tried to imagine what these rituals might be" (30). However, she could not figure out "[w]here in those bleak Ontario acres, that littered farmyard, [Mary found] the sparks that converted emblematic substance into rolling poetry[.] Chickens, outhouses, wash-day, woodpiles, porch, husband, work-boots, overalls, bedstead, filth. That's the stuff this woman had to work with" (31).

On the one hand, we might say that Sarah Maloney "abducts" Mary Swann's life by projecting her own life onto Mary's life: Mary, like Sarah, has a lover; Mary writes the "tie" to the mother, etc. On the other hand, her own life is also "abducted" by writing about Mary. Seeing Mary Swann as "a poet of great sophistication of mind" (26), Sarah has to structure her own imagination to make her themes fit her "template". Following the "hevings of the universe," she finds her own life "squeezed into digestible day-shaped bytes", and so "transparent" (21). As Barbara Goddard suggests, Sarah "values Swann's 'dailiness'...seeing her as a sort of Mrs. Ramsay, an aesthete of the quotidian, and as Virginia Woolf's prototypical female artist" (62). Making her dailiness a "redemptive" way of living her own life (22), Sarah now greets new acquaintances with the quotidian question, "Tell me about your average day."

Reliving Mary Swann's dailiness in her greetings, Sarah then lives a life inside

Swann's poems: "For the last few years, haven't I lived chiefly inside the interiors of these poems—absorbed their bumpy rhythms and taken on their shapes" (54)? As she admits, "They are toys...little wooden beads I can manipulate on a cord." In other moments, such as the frustration with the loss of her original copy of Swann's notebook, or the librarian's refusal of her quest for the copy of Swann's notebook in the archive, or uncertainty about her life mates, she retreats to Mary's poems for an answer:

The rivers in this country
Shrink and crack and kill
And the waters of my body
Grow invisible. (63)

This poem seems to tell her that, "There are times when the stately iris fails, when it's necessary to take a hot curling iron to life's random offerings. Either that or switch off your brain waves and fade away." With that in mind, she forgets about her sadness and sees hope in anything she does. She even feels more comfortable with new choices in her life, leading her to a dream of a wedding with Stephen Stanhope. In return, she turns the self-reflexive narrative of her subject's life into a feminist discourse about her own life. However, no one can doubt the "real Swann" that Sarah has written about because the exclusion of the biographical records prevents all knowledge of the original. And there is no way to recover the print-version of the original, which becomes one of Shields's ultimate concerns in biographical writing.

Shields's concerns are dramatized by Sarah's feminist discourse of Mary Swann's life. We see more of the biographer's life through her own interpretation of Swann's poems than we do of Swann's life. The exclusion of contradicting documents gives Sarah

a free space to invent the dead poet's life. Meanwhile, the invention of Mary's life, in turn, affects her own life; or in Buss's term, the "abduction" of the subject's life leads to her own life being "abducted".

A Biographical Discourse: Devaluation of the Historical Record

As a "world-famous biographer" of "giants of our literature"(256)—Ezra Pound and John Starman—Morton Jimroy should have found it easy to write a biography of an unknown female poet, Mary Swann, who has nothing to recommend her except her tragic murder by her brutal husband. However, his biography of "the obscure Canadian poet" turns out to be even more difficult than writing of the two literary giants, because in some way he "had loved her" (87). "The discovery of her poems a few years ago had rescued him from emotional bankruptcy" when his wife, Audrey, "had departed." He took Mary as "Mother Soul" to heal his wound from the separation. What is more, Mary's "modesty was genuinely endearing and came as a relief after two monomaniacs"—Pound and Starman—whom Jimroy detests as biographical subjects. In his turn, Jimroy "detests the popular fallacy that biographers fall in love with their subjects. Such cosy presumption; its very attractiveness makes it anathema to him" (83). Moreover, "writing biography...can, as easily as not, be an act of contempt," even though Pound and Starman are too great to deserve contempt. However, as a cynical biographer, Jimroy desires "to hold [them] up to ridicule" by exposing their secrets and laying bare how awful they are. His only joy is in bringing "greatness" down to his own level.

Paradoxically, Jimroy "is always moved when his thoughts settle on the riddlesome nature of his two large, imperfect men, Pound and Starman, thick-fingered,

crippled by provincialism, morally clumsy—but made graceful, finally, by their extraordinary reach" (86). But, in the end, he finds himself going out of his way to expose his subjects. For instance, he “set out Pound’s spacious social prescriptions so that they sat on the crisp typescript in all their deadpan execrable naivety for all the world to see” (84), because he “felt himself being slowly crushed to death by Poundian horrors” (83). He feels no better about John Starman, finding in his “shallow, and injured feelings, a gaping self-absorption that rivalled Pound’s” (85). Thus, he exposes “Starman’s childish misogyny” and “the man’s greedy seeking after fame.” In fact, as a biographer, Jimroy is given to character assassination. At the same time, he plays with each character, in order to dominate it and finally to own it. A “body snatcher” (75), he makes his “academic reputation as a biographer of the great” (C. Thomas 109), gaining recognition by association.

However, having to write a biography of a farmer's wife, who had “a life lived, as the saying goes, in the avoidance of biography” (110), causes Jimroy to lose “faith in his old belief that the past is retrievable” (111), to say nothing of being able to hold up to ridicule Mary’s secrets. Conforming to biographical practice, he has “gone over and over the chronological events of her life” (108) from birth, to childhood, school, marriage and even to her writing life; “he has even made a detailed chart, hoping his inked boxes and arrows and dotted lines may yield the one important insight, the moment in which she broke her way through to life.” Actually, from all these, Jimroy is seeking “the small careful proofs that he pins down and sits hard upon” (49), such as Dickinsonian influence upon Mary Swann. Such “proofs” are the “oxygen of the biographer,” even if Mary Swann has never read Emily Dickinson, or any modern poetry. As dishonest in his own

way as Sarah Maloney, Jimroy has to invent a poet influenced by "Emily Dickinson, [or] Stevie Smith" (256).

In order to establish "the small careful proofs" (106), Jimroy conducts "extensive interviews" with people associated with Mary Swann, such as a critic of Mary Swann, the publisher of *Swann's Songs*, several neighbours of Mary Swann (Nadeau), a librarian and other local people in Nadeau, as well as Swann's niece and daughter. However, the biographical record he obtains from them contains no sign of Mary's greatness; instead, it suggests that Mary's "life seems a paroxysm of renewed anonymity, for although he is a careful interviewer, his proddings and probings have not yielded much that is *specific* about her" (110). He even thinks that "he [is] wasting his valuable time" (109). Though Mary's daughter has told him that Mary liked Edna Ferber, and though he knows from Rose that they did not even have Jane Austen at that time in the library in Nadeau, "[h]e is going over some notes covering Mary Swann's middle period (1940-1955) and making a few additions and notations with a freshly sharpened pencil. *It is highly probably that Swann read Jane Austen during this period because...*" (118). He knows that this is not true; but he needs to develop her portrait in terms of a literary tradition that makes one artist descend from another great artist. And so he places Mary Swann in this category of life fiction.

Worse still, Jimroy also devalues those interviewees who cast doubt on his presumption of *his great* Mary Swann: he sees Willard Lang as a "lumpish man. A man whose thought waves come in unindented paragraphs" (106); he takes Frederic Cruzzi for a "[p]ompous old boy, fond of the sound of his own voice;" he thinks that Mary Swann's neighbours are "[u]nreliable" (107); he considers Homer Hart, the school principal, as

"confused and unreliable." To Jimroy, the people he interviews are either "retarded," "senile," or their memories are "intractable." In his eyes, even the helpful Rose Hindmarch gives signs of something "awful in a woman, being needy." The only hope he finally has is Mary Swann's daughter, Frances Swann Moore. Jimroy goes down to California all the way from Winnipeg to see her, hoping to find "proof" that Swann read Jane Austen. But to his disappointment, he discovers that Mary Swann never even read "what [he] called great literature"(93), but only cheap popular literature such as *Five Little Peppers* and the Bobbsey Twin books, which are the worst kind of writing. Also, Mary "liked Edna Ferber," not Jane Austen or Emily Dickinson. She has not been influenced by modern poetry at all. The only "poetry" she has read is *Mother Goose* and "all those nursery rhymes." Jimroy's conversations with Mary's daughter do not even "spring open an unconscious revelation, something that will expose the key to Swann's genius" (111). To "prove" her greatness, then, Jimroy must "surmise certain things, influences, for instance. He is almost sure that she came in contact with the work of Emily Dickinson, regardless of what Frances Moore says. He intends to mention, to comment extensively in fact, on the Dickinsonian influence, and sees no point, really, in taking up the Edna Ferber influence; it is too ludicrous" (110).

As a professional biographer, Jimroy knows the importance of textual evidence, of verbal genealogies which are self-evident. He tries to get "a simple direct quotation from Mary Swann, but even Rose Hindmarch, the only real friend she ever had, is halting about direct quotations, and Mary's daughter, Frances, is unable to recall with accuracy anything her mother ever said" (111). He wants to find "something that will expose the key to Swann's genius." However, the only answer he gets from Frances is that "she used

to get after me about mud on my boots and doing homework, but Ma wasn't a great one to talk." For a moment, Jimroy questions whether it is "a personality defect, this bent for invisibility, or a daughterly reflection of the larger opaqueness that was Mary Swann's life." Unlike Sarah Maloney, however, he cannot exploit the blood relationship between mother and daughter. So he starts to "curse Mary Swann's silences and admits to himself, finally, that he's disappointed in her," and sees Mary Swann's life as "a record of dullness and drudgery" (110).

Apart from his fantasy of a Dickinsonian influence upon Swann, Jimroy also yearns for a "central cathartic event in Mary Swann's life," which he thinks is "what a good biography demands" (111). He wants to know about Mary Swann's death, and "[r]eticulated detail is what he needs," because "it will be impossible to enter that life without understanding its final moment." However, Mary's daughter, Frances, "refuses to talk of her mother's death." Neither can Rose Hindmarch give him any clue as to why she was killed by her husband. Nonetheless, Jimroy cannot give up the "biographer's shameless silky greed" (113). Hoping to own the life of the dead poet, he is driven to steal Mary Swann's photo, the "only copy in existence," from Rose's Mary Swann Room, and her 51 Parker pen from Mary's daughter, thus proving quite literally that he is a "body snatcher". Although he insists that "a biographer has a moral obligation to his or her subject" (81), his actions speak louder than his words.

Even so, Jimroy tries to exculpate his guilt for what he has done to his two subjects: "One certainly respects the living, that goes without saying. And perhaps this will explain why my work, so far anyway has focused on deceased poets." Poor Mary! Unable to escape her death at the hands of a brutal husband, she is equally powerless to

escape the "grotesque parody of her bodily death" at the hands of her biographer, Jimroy. And so his confession of motive is more than a little ironic: "How our fingers itch to separate the tangled threads of theme and anti-theme, moral vision and moral blindness.... It was just a matter of time before the theoreticians got to Mary Swann and tore her limb from limb" (81). The biographer has already done worse to the "body" of her lived life.

Interestingly, Jimroy's writing life goes hand in hand with his married life. As there is no "romance between writer and subject" in his writing life (83), there is no romantic love in his personal life, either, before he starts his third biography. He has no idea why "in his fortieth year [he had] saddled [himself] with a wife, particularly a wife like Audrey", a "coarse, awkward woman" (103). She "didn't know research from beans" when he hired her as a research assistant. In anyone's eyes, Audrey is no match for his talent or "his tenderness" (102). But then he knew, "when he married Audrey Beamish he had been prepared for pity from his acquaintances. He braced himself for their questioning faces" (103). As he laments over his empty marriage, he has to admit, "*My wound is that I have no wound.*"

Working on his biography of Pound, however, he "observed the disgust he felt" (84) for the way Pound treated his wife, Dorothy: "And poor Dorothy, did anyone ever spare a thought for Dorothy?" Reflecting on his relationship with Audrey, he "recognized a moral ungainliness in himself that vibrated with a near-Poundian rhythm." And so he spares himself further self-criticism by describing Pound's marriage as a "'marriage of decency and distance'—delicious phrase. Jimroy likes to chant it to himself as a kind of mantra on sleepless nights" (85). After he began his book on Starman, Jimroy "took Audrey back to Birmingham for a visit," which he saw as "a disaster." When "Audrey

finally lost all patience with him," he felt he was like "the exasperating, unhappy, unswervingly self-regarding John Starman." And the "discovery of emptiness affected him like the beginning of a long illness." It was during this time that Mary Swann came to his life. He started to love her immediately when he discovered, in Swann's poems, "intelligence masked by colloquial roughness" (87), which reminded him of something he found in Audrey, "a coarse, awkward woman but something in her nature appealed" (103). By writing Mary's life, Jimroy could then substitute Audrey as his subject, since they are both "extraordinary[ly] unattractive women" (102). Now, the moment he thinks of Mary Swann, he feels "a momentary sense of elation, the by-now-familiar nascent ritual. A new beginning. Rebirth" (87). As the saying goes, Jimroy can kill two birds with one stone: on the one hand, by imagining Mary Swann, he can get rid of "the most widespread of modern diseases" (97); on the other hand, he can "take revenge for her. Make the world stand up and applaud" (87), and then claim himself to be "Mary Swann's official biographer" (121).

Emotionally, what Jimroy has done is to use Mary Swann to compensate for his failed marriage. In other words, his attitude towards his subject changes as his own emotion changes. At the beginning, Jimroy chose to write the biography of Mary Swann as compensation for Audrey's separation from him. But now he has "come to distrust Mary Swann slightly" (88), given his doubts about his own life. When he could not "deal with the biographical considerations in his book" (87), "he has felt his disgust turn to dislike" (88). He felt "the old anger returning" (116). Several times, Jimroy has even dialled Audrey's phone number to let off his anger, "shivering and staring into the mirror and listening to the sound of his own breath" (117). However, with Sarah Maloney, who

is interested in getting him involved in the Swann “industry”, he suddenly sees a new hope in his life. Writing a biography of Mary Swann “can [then] be explained as a trick of love” (100), since he longs for the “healing perplexity and substance of Sarah Maloney’s voice” (119). Mary Swann is loveable because she has brought Sarah Maloney into his “impenetrable solipsism” (88).

Sarah’s salutation, “Dear Morton Jimroy,” has brought him “connection with the world, a world redolent with intimate pleasures, sight, sound, touch, especially touch” (79). He feels that “he is in the brace of happiness. The proof of it is flowing out of the graphite of his pencil, out of his moving hand” (119). “Why should a biographer be expected to explain, justify, interpret or even judge? These are acts one commits out of love, or so Jimroy has always believed” (84). In fact, he writes a love story of his substitution of one woman for another: of Mary for Audrey; of Sarah for Mary. Working on his biography of Mary Swann one Christmas Eve, he dialled Audrey’s phone number, and “then, from nowhere, came the thought of Sarah Maloney.... It suddenly seemed the most important thing in the world to know what Sarah Maloney’s voice sounded like. He loved her, he loved her. He had every right to the sound of her voice. He was a lover” (117).

Jimroy’s biographical discourse is nonetheless political more than it is romantic. Lacking his PhD, Jimroy not only shows contempt for his subjects, no matter how great they are, but he also expresses his bias on university education and scholars: “Universities are nothing but humming myth factories” (81). To him, “Scholarship was bunk,” because scholars separate life from literary works. Paradoxically, Jimroy is “a biographer of a writer [who pays] attention to the work as to the life. But the life is more

than gossip and disclosure. It is what the work feeds on. One's own experience, before it is tainted by art" (82). In this sense, Mary Swann is his best choice because she "had lived all her lean, cold, and unrewarding years in rural Ontario, a place more northerly and restrictive than the most northern state" (87). Her experience could not then be tainted by art: "Poetry was the prism that refracted all of life" (86). He always believed that "the best and worst human experiences were frozen inside these wondrous little toys called poems. He had been in love with them all his life" (87). Like Sarah, Jimroy is also aware of the fact that there is no connection between Mary's poems and her life: "the poems and the life of Mary Swann do not meld" (108). He knows that the "problem was not to reconcile Swann with her background, but to separate from it, as the poetry has done" (107). So he turns to *Swann's Songs*, knowing "these poems so well that he could, if he were called upon, recite most of them by heart" (107):

A green light drops from a blue sky
And waits like winter in its jar of glass
Tells a weather-rotted lie
Of stories of damage and loss. (108)

As he murmurs these lines, Jimroy begins to despair: "how is he to connect Mary Swann's biographical greyness with the achieved splendour of *Swann's Songs*?"

So far as Jimroy knows, Mary's [p]arentage [is] unremarkable" (108). In her case, "genius owes no debts to parents" (109). He can only resort to the idea of self-invention, to the old myth of autonomy. Even if he is frustrated by a lack of facts, he invents a mysterious Swann that fits his frame. First of all, if he has "no mysteries to compensate for the long haul between birth and death" (119), "[e]ven with the background material

and critical commentary, this book will be a thin book” (109). Secondly, it will lose the “epic wholeness that is a human life, gold socketed into gold” (119). As for the “truth” of a life, “[t]here are gaps, as in every life, accidents of silence and misinterpretation and the frantic scrollwork of artifice, but also a seductive randomness that confers truth. And mystery, too, of course. Impenetrable, ineffable mystery.” But if the life itself does not have the pattern that the biography puts into it, then life, it seems to him, does not have any logic. The logic must then come from the biographer’s construction. In other words, it is the biographer who constructs a life, not the subject.

So what Jimroy does is to create the “wholeness” of Mary Swann’s life: “The disjointed paragraphs he is writing are pushing toward that epic wholeness that is a human life” (118). Clinging to the Romantic Myth of organic wholeness, he traces out a specious unity: “Their actual experience, what happens to them in their lives, is really beside the point. It’s their genetic disposition, a mutation, of course, which urges them forward and allows them to be filters of a larger knowledge” (149). As he tries to persuade Rose Hindmarch, “This is the central mystery of the poets.... We examine the roots of our poets, their sources, the experiences they draw up, and it never adds up.” In the end, he uses this theory to justify his claim that, although Mary Swann might not have read “the existentialists,” nonetheless, “she was most assuredly affected by the trickle-down despair of our century.” Based on this premise, he reaches a grander conclusion about her poems: “She wasn’t writing poems about housewife blues. She was speaking about the universal sense of loss and alienation.” Mary Swann’s poems are thus closer to his own understanding of life than they are to anything in Mary’s own experience. Even her failures are thus able to support his self-interpretation as he projects it into her work:

"Not her best stanza, but when you think of the anguish behind it! How that poor woman needed someone to 'watch' her. How we all do" (97). Thus, what we have from Jimroy is a biographical discourse emptied of any biographical record, but still expressing the "poet's" emotions in the name of a biographer.

A Discourse of the Museum: "Found" Objects

It is ironic to call Rose Hindmarch a Swannian scholar because she writes nothing. Even her role as a librarian does not give her "an [earned] reputation for being a scholar" (125). However, her role as a museum curator of the Mary Swann Memorial Room has allowed her to create a kind of life history by providing "true" sources for biographers and scholars of Mary Swann. Indeed, it was she who "conceived the idea of the Mary Swann Memorial Room, and it was Rose who spent her spare time scouting around for the articles on display there" (124). As a result, Rose has portrayed a version of Mary in the Swann Room, which "contains a number of mementoes of Mrs Swann's life—a kitchen table and chairs, a golden oak sideboard, an iron bed, handmade quilts; and many household articles" (129). Swannian scholars come to her museum from across North America to view artefacts which place Mary in her true historical context. But are the artefacts in the Mary Swann Memorial Room as authentic and true as these scholars expect?

When Rose started to furnish the room, she was fortunate to get grants both from the Nadeau town council and Ottawa, which allowed her to buy from the Swann place "the kitchen table, two of the better kitchen chairs and a few cooking utensils, pathetic things with worn handles and a look of hard use" (163). With these simple pieces, Rose

could "imagine the figure of Mary Swann bent over the painted table scratching out her poems by the light of the kerosene lamp." And her imagination, as Donna E. Smyth suggests, "shapes a new reality which some might call fiction," the fiction of a modern poet (138). As for "the other articles in the Memorial Room, she bought them from the Antique Barn and from Selma's Antiques in Kingston: a cherrywood churn, a fanciful, feminine iron bedstead, a walnut bookcase and the set of tattered dull-covered books (Dickens, Sir Walter Scott) that came with it. At an auction in the town of Lyndhurst she bought three old quilts and a set of blue-and-white china and a framed picture of a cocker spaniel"(Swann 163). As a reflection of Mary Swann as a farmer's wife, these pieces of furniture do portray life on the farm in general during that period. However, the "tattered dull-covered books" of Dickens and Sir Walter Scott specifically conflict with what we know from Mary Swann's daughter, Frances Moore. As she tells Jimroy, her mother never read "great literature" (93). But these books by Dickens and Scott have entered the record to show that Mary Swann was influenced by great writers. Rose, perhaps, has never felt guilty about her fabrications; instead, a "measure of pride flowed around her not-quite-secret purchases, and she watched with joy, with creative amazement, as the room took shape, acquiring a look of authenticity and even a sense of the lean" (163).

As for the handmade quilts, we do not know whether Mary Swann quilted or not; but we do know that Rose co-made with the Nadeau United Church Women an "extremely attractive quilt" as "a Centennial project" (129). So the quilts are likely Rose's idea rather than Mary's products. Thus, the museum curator is just as guilty as the feminist critic or the historical biographer of "writing" her own life over the blank slate of the subject's life. Since biography, as Epstein maintains, is "an individualizing tactic"

(cited in Buss 427), then Mary has lent to her something of her own individuality.

However, "[i]f you suggest to Rose that her room has been wrenched into being through duplicity, through countless small acts of deception, she will be sure to look injured and offer up a pained denial" (*Swann* 163). To her, "these articles, after all, belong to the *time* and the *region* of which Mary Swann was a part, and therefore nothing is misrepresented." But the question is, what is the responsibility of Rose, as a curator of the Swann Room, to the truth of Swann's literal life? Many of the articles are substitutes and translations, but are labelled as the real thing, having "touched" or "affected" the poet, as the immediate image of her daily life. What we get from Rose's collection is the pretense of history, the pretense of contact and cultural continuity with the poet in her private life. However, as Shields ironically points out in the novel, "The charm of falsehood is not that it distorts reality, but it creates reality afresh" (163). Certainly, more collections will be added to the Swann Room to update the cultural record. After *The Swann Symposium*, "[w]ith all her heart Rose would like to display the papers found by Professor Lang under the linoleum—and the Parker 51 fountain pen that Mary Swann was reputed to have owned" (163-4). "Meanwhile Rose is keeping a lookout at local flea markets for one of a similar vintage" to the missing pen that Mary used before. In this sense, as an historian, Rose creates the museum through "duplicity, through countless small acts of deception." So, on a physical and material level, Rose is doing what Sarah Maloney and Morton Jimroy are doing on a verbal level.

Clearly, Rose knows what she has done to the Swann Room. Thus, she plans to avoid the topic of her collections in the Symposium. As she tells her friend, Belle Waterman: "As long as they don't expect me to contribute to the discussion.... I wouldn't

dare open my mouth if they did" (141). And Belle immediately notices her falsity: "Now, Rose, that does not sound like you. I've never known you to be shy or hold back" (142). Belle is right in that Rose does not hold back in her claim to "friendship" with Mary Swann, but Rose is clearly holding back about the provenance of most items in her museum.

As she does with the Swann Room, Rose is also complicit in portraying herself as an "empowered fan" who enjoys a particular intimacy with Mary (Buss 432). When she was interviewed by Morton Jimroy, she felt honoured by "this famous author and scholar" (*Swann* 151). Instead of being shy, she has pretended to be a "*local expert on Mary Swann, a woman with an extraordinary memory and gift for detail, able to remember whole conversations word for word, able to put precise dates on...episodes that were years in the past.*" She tells anecdotes one after another: "One day Mrs. Swann and I—;" "I forgot to tell you about the time Mary and I..." (152). On another occasion, in her letter to Frederic Cruzzi, she writes to say that she "was a great friend of Mary Swann's before she passed away" (194). She thus empowers herself as the "source" or as the closest thing anyone is ever going to reach as a "source": "you're the expert, Rose. If anyone knows about Mary Swann, you're the one. The only one who really got to know her" (141).

However, Rose Hindmarch finally realizes that she is "far from possessing moral perfection" (152). As an atheist, she seldom goes to church; but, for the sake of confession, she had gone to church "after Morton Jimroy returned to Winnipeg, she begged forgiveness from the pine pulpit rail. She had never meant to be untruthful. She had not intended to exaggerate her friendship with Mary Swann. Friendship! The truth

was that she had scarcely done more than pass the time of day with Mrs. Swann.... Mary Swann had not given Rose Hindmarch copies of her poems to read and comment upon. They had not—not ever—discussed their deeply shared feeling about literature or about families or about nature. None of this has taken place." In fact, she knows no more than anybody else: "Mary Swann had been a virtual stranger to Rose Hindmarch, just as she was to everyone else in Nadeau, Ontario. A woman who kept to herself." So why does Rose claim an intimacy with Mary Swann that never existed?

In an interesting way, Shields introduces Rose's true social life at the very beginning of her section, under the title of "Rose's Hats" (123). By offering Rose "a number of hats" locally in Nadeau, Shields makes this lonely soul feel comfortable in her community. She is the town clerk, the librarian in Nadeau, the curator of the Nadeau Local History Museum, a church elder, a village councillor, and the local telephone operator. Even Rose, herself, appreciates the multiple roles she acts: "I wear too many hats for my own good." At a semantic level, she even writes about herself in the third person: "'The minutes were read by Rose Hindmarch, and then Rose Hindmarch presented the interim library report,' just as though Rose Hindmarch were a separate person with a different face and possessed of different tints of feeling" (125). However, "there are moments when she experiences an appalling sensation of loss, the naggy suspicion that beneath the hats is nothing but chilly space or the small scratching sounds of someone who wants only to please others" (126). Her small-town Canadian life does not even meet the minimum satisfaction of glimpsing a world beyond her own circle. She seeks admission to a world that is not as cramped and provincial as the one where she must occupy virtually every role in society. So, "if you were to ask Rose which of her

hats means the most to her, she would say her role as museum curator. It has, in fact, rescued her from the inexplicable nights of despair she once suffered. This is especially true in recent years, ever since she's taken an interest in the life of Mary Swann" (125). She is able to talk about herself in the wider world through Mary. And "this new historical interest has not so much opened the past to Rose as it has opened the future. Her life has changed. She has connections in the outside world now, the academic world. Quite a number of scholars and historians have come to Nadeau to call on her" (125-6).

As a Swannian scholar, Rose is even invited to *The Mary Swann Symposium* in Toronto, which will burn "a small bright orange hole in the future" (139). She has to admit that, "when I think about who's going to be there, [i]t gives me the shakes. They are all scholars" (141). She is going to rub shoulders with literary and academic people such as Sarah Maloney, Professor Lang and Morton Jimroy. They have all come to see her in Nadeau for their research on Mary Swann and they will invite her to talk about Mary as her close friend. So, in this sense, she enriches her life by involving herself in the academic world as well as a wider, outside world.

"Intimacy" with Mary Swann has really created a myth both for Rose and for Nadeau. As Smyth observes, "we know Nadeau almost as well as Rose because, in some ways, Rose is Nadeau" (145). Shields even exaggerates the myth by describing Nadeau as "the geographical center" of Canada (126), where Rose acts as "the leading lady of the Nadeau township" (131). So if people write letters to Rose, envelopes will be "addressed simply: Rose, Nadeau, Ontario. No box number, not that it mattered." Rose becomes the centre of Nadeau as much as Nadeau becomes the centre of North America. Symbolically,

people will locate Rose's signature in a collaborative quilt done by the Nadeau women in the same way as they locate Nadeau on a map:

There's one square near the centre of the quilt, just an inch or so to the right —yes, there! —that contains a single embroidered butterfly in blue thread. And beneath it is the stitched signature: Rose Hindmarch. (130)

If you were to place your finger on the map of Canada where this geographical centre is located, and then move it an inch or two to the right (and one-quarter of an inch downward) you would discover yourself touching the dot that represents the small Ontario town known as Nadeau. (127)

Furthermore, one can then understand why "happiness seized her" (170), as a line from one of Mary Swann's poems swam "into her head like a little fish" (171):

A pound of joy weighs more
When grief has gone before.

Rose's life has indeed been transformed by the dead poet, Mary Swann. All her life is now devoted to the Swann business: to the same degree as she "abducts" Mary Swann's life, her life is also "abducted" by a poet she has created with fabricated biographical records. Rose now basks in the light of the absent poet's "fame": "Such a pleasure. Such an honour. Morton Jimroy—he was a famous author. She hadn't realized how famous he was until now. He was in *Who's Who*. She'd looked him up. He was a world authority. He knew everything there was to know about poetry, including what it all meant. Except for that poem of Mary Swann's—he couldn't seem to get the drift of that" (150).

"Poetry, though, poses a problem for Rose. Except for Mary Swann's book, she has trouble understanding what it's about" (137). So she challenges Jimroy with respect to

Mary's religious belief. For Jimroy, Swann did not go to church because she "felt her spirituality was, well, less explicit than it was for regular churchgoers in the area" (147). However, Rose believes that Mary "had made do with old rags as country women still do occasionally. Never two nickels to rub together" (151). Thus, Rose insists that Mary "wouldn't have had a decent Sunday dress or stockings or anything like that" (147). But in the Swann Memorial Room, Rose never presents publicly any shabby clothes that Mary had worn before. Since Rose "found" many objects for the Swann Memorial Room, why wouldn't she have something to show Mary's poverty?

As "the leading lady of the Nadeau township" (131), Rose Hindmarch clearly knows how to dress Mary Swann up to make her socially acceptable for a small town such as Nadeau "with a population of 1,750" (127). Nadeau is really put on the map by the Swann "industry", because Mary "has lately been recognized as a distinguished, though minor, contributor to the body of Canadian literature, and there are those who have gone so far as to call her the Emily Dickinson of Upper Canada" (129). The whole region is commemorated in the Swann Memorial Room, together with the Local History Museum, where there are "various articles of clothing that include a christening gown from the 'nineties' and a woman's grey wool walking costume, piped in red (1902)" (128). Certainly, if Mary's shabby clothes and socks are displayed, they will bring shame on the community. Only better furniture, better books and better artworks could make Nadeau look sophisticated and worldly. Actually, "[n]ext to the Mary Swann Memorial Room is the room that has proved to be the most popular with the public. Visitors can stand in the roped-off doorway and admire what is, in fact, a re-creation of a turn-of-the-century Ontario bedroom" (129). Again, Shields points out the fraud: "Of interest is the floral

wallpaper, an exact duplicate of an authentic Canadian wallpaper of the period."

Consequently, the "fanciful, feminine iron bedstead" and the "walnut bookcase" Rose bought for the Swann Room have to match with the handmade "Ontario spool bed" in this room. The handmade quilts Rose has found in antique shops also have to be similar to the "extremely attractive quilt on the bed" made by the Nadeau women. In other words, Mary has become a token of Nadeau's splendid place in the world; her greatness, like that of Nadeau, cannot come from shabbiness, no matter what the realities were in Mary's time.

Although Rose Hindmarch believes that she herself is "powerless in her ability to hurt or destroy" (166), her revaluation of Mary as a type of the public good, in one way or another, destroys the real Mary Swann. What we get from the discourse of the museum is a farmer-poet dressed up in her best for the collective good of a small Ontario town—the aspiring citizens of Nadeau.

An Editorial Discourse: Remaking Mary's Poems

Frederick Cruzzi, the Kingston-based publisher of *Swann's Songs*, has been "the only one who midwifed the original text and the only one to lay eyes (and hands) on the manuscript" (191). His "role as Mary Swann's first (and only) publisher and one who early glimpsed her extraordinary textual genius" (186) is formally recognized by the committee of the Swann Symposium. Thus, he is invited as a keynote speaker. However, Cruzzi does not like the whole idea of the Swann Symposium. For him, "the glory of Mary Swann's work lies in its innocence, [and] it does not invite scholarly meddling or whimsical interpretation." He also detests critics and scholars who try to do historical,

literary studies and dissemination of the poet's life and work: "Critics are to art as ornithologists are to birds" (187). Cruzzi believes that "Mrs. Swann would resist with all her 'kneeling-down pain' any attempt to analyse and systematize what came out of her as naturally as did her own breath." So, he declares, "I remain grateful for the words and rhythms Mrs Swann left us, and I have no wish to tamper with their meaning."

Actually, what Cruzzi affirms is meant to protect the power of the publisher, especially in his ambiguous role in editing *Swann's Songs*. As an editor, he truly perceives "reality through print" (206). However, he does not reveal how the printed words become "reality" out of the author's manuscript. To him, it is "rather tiresome," this notion of "the holiness of working papers," which suggests "the endless checking of one text against another" (192). And he sees the process of verification as the "tyranny of accuracy that rules the academic world." Nor does he like the idea of "cherishing of original manuscripts." To a print-man like him, a manuscript is "only a crude representation of that step between creative thought and artefact, and might just as usefully be employed as kindling for a fire or in the wrapping of fishbones" (192).

In fact, Cruzzi's wife, Hildē, had accidentally thrown Mary's manuscripts into the bag that contained "fishbones from their dinner, the ooze of fish innards, the wet flashing scales of fish skin, fish heads raggedly cut, fish tails" (220). Because Mary Swann's poems were written in "washable blue," "[t]wo or three smudges and a page became opaque and indecipherable" (221, 221), which nonetheless offered a "golden opportunity" for Cruzzi and Hildē to refine Mary's crude representation of her life to express their own understanding of life. Evidently, this had been their dream for a long time.

Originally, as an editor of a local newspaper, *The Kingston Banner*, Frederic

knew that the product was "something of an anomaly as a regional newspaper," with "its constituency being an uneasy yoking of town and gown, farmers, civil servants, and petit-bourgeoisie" (199). What he likes is "to look at the universe with a squint, to subject [himself] to a deliberate distortion." Besides, both Frederic and Hildë like poetry: he had learnt ancient rhythms from Rashid's *Persian Songs* and later while working on *Swann's Songs*, felt "the poet Mary Swann" to be a "cosmic cousin to the great Rashid" (197). Since Hildë attempted to write poetry, she and her husband had launched "a small literary venture, the Peregrine Press" (183). On the one hand, they could "print the work of a number of new Canadian poets who had come to their attention," such as Mary Swann. On the other hand, they would have the opportunity to voice their own view of the world through publishing and printing. Hildë had already proved her gift in editing a collection of "unprintable poems," which she entitled *Inroads* (202). And *Inroads* received favourable reviews: "The newly launched Peregrine Press must be congratulated on its discovery of a fresh new Canadian voice." "Cruzzi himself, ever the editor, was sometimes guilty of polishing his disjointed dreams for Hildë's benefit, giving them a sense of shape and applying small, elegant, decorative touches"(196). But he kept in mind that *The Peregrine Press* had taken "a stand on self-publication and was anxious to avoid even the appearance of being a vanity press" (204).

Cruzzi sees self-publication as the mere writing of autobiography, "a form that offends him" (181). When the current editor of the *Banner* tried to "bully Cruzzi into writing his life story," saying that "an unrecorded life is a selfish life," he retorted, "The cosy cherishing of self is only part of the problem. There is the inevitable lack of perspective, not to mention hideous evasions, settlings of scores, awesome preciousity, and

the appalling melted fat of rumination, barrels of it, boatloads." According to Frederic, "Most people in the world...could write their autobiographies in one line." However, he has wittily "boiled down" his life to one sentence in a section called "Frederic Cruzzi: His (Unwritten) One-Sentence Autobiography" (182). Interestingly, it is written in the third person rather than the first person, demonstrating the overlap between the two genres. Indeed, there are no "hideous evasions" to his life, nor "awesome preciousness" in his description of the self. It is rather like a résumé of Frederic Cruzzi, in which he is objectively situated in time and space. But it lacks a narrative in which moments of the past are meaningfully connected to the future, such as his brief meeting with Mary Swann.

Actually, it is Cruzzi's brief meeting with Mary Swann that has directly led to the Swann industry. Fifteen years ago, in an afternoon thunderstorm, Mary Swann came to Cruzzi's house with a batch of her poems. Without asking who she was and what she was here for, Cruzzi "took her arm, murmuring a stream of comforting words, and drew her into the hall, then into the living room, steering her firmly in the direction of the fireplace" (210). He tried to offer any help he could, "feeling like an actor in a fine old play;" he rubbed "her feet between his hands, conscious of her acute embarrassment and also of his strange happiness;" he also gave her sherry and tea, "forcing himself to hum a jaunty little tune, feeling still the shapes of her frozen feet in his hands" (211). While he was reading her poems, his "heart squeezed with pity" (215), because all the poems were written on pieces of lined paper, which had been "torn from a spiral notebook and bore a ragged edge." However, the poems made Mary Swann, in Cruzzi's eyes, look like "a beautiful toothless witch. A glorious, gifted crone" (218).

Unlike Jimroy, who is only interested in seeking biographical proofs that confirm

his impression of the subject, Cruzzi believed that “to know someone ‘through and through’ is devouringly selfish” (177). He does not dig up Mary’s life as Jimroy does. As a matter of fact, he tries to protect Mary from such speculation. When he was interviewed by both Professor Lang and Jimroy about his meeting with Mary Swann, each of them asked Cruzzi, "Did she behave in a manner that could be described as deranged?" "Did she at any time mention her husband" (211)? To all their questions, Cruzzi made no reply. Even to the police, he made no speculations on Mary's death. To him, "Not one of these speculations, however, held much truth" (207). During the brief meeting, he was only interested in the poems that Mary brought to him for publication: when he was reading Mary's poems with the words crowded on the little pieces of paper, "the spelling surprised him by its accuracy" (215). Besides, he also pays attention to the "syntax, description or definition" of the poems so that he might "shed his long years of language and howl monosyllables of delight and outrage"(206). As soon as he came back home from the bus station where he took Mary, he was eager to work on her poems.

Unfortunately, when he found Hildē mistaking for garbage the manuscripts that Mary left for him to publish, Cruzzi, who has claimed to have "two loves: the written word and his wife, Hildē," lost his balance between his two loves in a moment of despair at seeing the manuscript damaged, even though he claimed that “the two loves are compatible but differently ordered, occupying separate berths in his brain and defying explanation or description, something that bothers him not at all” (205). In a blind rage at Hildē, he "threw her off violently with the whole force of his body, and an arm reached out, his arms, striking her at the side of her neck" (220). "The sight of her body on the floor brought Cruzzi back to himself. In an instant he was down besides her, cradling her

head on his chest." All these years later, Cruzzi bears the scars of guilt for his insanity, "his blindness and madness."

"Guilt, or perhaps a wish to make amends" for both the damage to Mary Swann's poems and the double hurt he has given to Hildē, who secretly hoped to have her own poems published by the Peregrine Press, convinced Frederic to join Hildē in "reconstructing" Mary Swann's poems. When the Peregrine Press published some unknown poets, Hildē had started to write poetry. However, Frederic thought her poems "had no edges, no hardness. The words themselves were pleasing enough, melodious and rather dreamlike, but there was also a quality in some of the lines that he identified as kittenish" (202). Facing the damaged poems of Mary Swann, Frederick could at least give Hildē an opportunity to display her gifts in poetry. Thus, they started their "conspiracy".

At the beginning, Frederick and Hildē "checked the manuscript with Mrs. Swann['s]," as practiced by an editor. As the most damaged of the poems worried them more, they started to wonder "about Mary Swann's ability to recall whole passages. Would she be able to reconstruct them line by line? They puzzled and conferred over every blot, they guessed, then invented" (222-3). Hildē "seemed to be inhabiting ... another woman's body": "supplying missing lines and even the greater part of a missing stanza...she could feel what the inside of Mary Swann's head must look like." Beyond the usual bounds of "body snatchers," they begin to feel as if they can see inside the poet's mind. In Buss's words, Hildē's act of displacing Mary Swann as both poet and body thus begins "the abduction that the others complete" (433).

Worse yet, Frederic was very happy with Hildē's talent in guessing at Mary's missing lines: "Hildē was quick to pick up Mary Swann's quirky syntax, and when she

made guesses, they seemed to Cruzzi's ear laden with logic" (*Swann* 222). Actually, Hildē found Mary Swann "tough" in technique, a judgement in "which Cruzzi partly concurred, though both he and Hildē kept their estimation to themselves for reasons they avoided mentioning even to each other" (183). Feeling justified and contented, "they were referring to Hildē's transcribed notes...as 'the manuscript'." By giving Hildē full right to overwrite Mary's poems, Frederic's guilt has thereby been lessened.

Coming to the last poem—the most severely damaged one—Frederic and Hildē have now subjected themselves "to a deliberate distortion" (192). Cruzzi, "who has a weakness for alliteration" (175), must face the choice between "Blood pronounces my name" and "Blood renounces my name"; between "Brightens the day with shame," and "Blisters the day with shame"; and between "Spends what little I own," and "Bends what little I own" (223). "Both of them, Cruzzi from his instinct for tinkering and Hildē from a vestigial talent never abused, made their alterations with, it seemed to them, a single hand." Finally, "out of [their] jumbled vision" (192), their doubtful choices of words, their own likes and dislikes, they altered or invented Mary's blood poem as follows:

Blood pronounces my name
Blisters the day with shame
Spends what little I own,
Robbing the hour, rubbing the bone. (51)

Actually, this poem could be a very different one:

Blood renounces my name
Brightens the day with shame
Bends what little I own

Robbing the hour, rubbing the bone.

The two versions are utterly different, both in idea and theme; the only thing they have in common is the formal fact that "Mary was a rhyming poet"(223).

Given their "conspiracy," they inevitably come to feel that they "owed Mrs. Swann an interpretation that would reinforce her strengths as poet." Meanwhile they are happy that they offered Mary "help and protection, what she seems never to have had," with "their alterations" that are made as if by "a single hand." As Buss points out, "Frederic Cruzzi and Hildë Cruzzi, the husband-and-wife editing and publishing team... like Pound editing Eliot, literally, remake Swann's poems" (432). In this sense, the alteration of Mary's manuscript becomes legitimized by print and its fixed "signs of stability."

Actually, it is very hard for an editor like Frederic Cruzzi, "who possess[es] 'hands that hesitate never'" (196), to remain truthful to the poems that Mary Swann left us. He sees his two hands as "the symbols, the messengers, of his whole self." While working on Mary Swann's poems, Cruzzi finds that "[i]n all of Mary Swann's poems, for instance, the word *friend* is found only once" (178). As a "man who can be said to have been lucky in friendship" (176), "he cannot imagine a life in which friendship is not the largest part" (178):

Like a cup on the shelf

That's no longer here

Like the friend of myself

Who's drowned in the mirror

The hour is murdered, the moment is lost,

And everything counted except for the cost.

However, he believes that it is likely "fear, crippling shyness, isolation, drudgery," that has "kept Mrs. Swann friendless." Or else the word *friend* is "buried in a metaphor, pointing, he believes, to a terrifying ellipsis" (178). How could Cruzzi then leave the poem without tampering with the meaning?

Frederic and Hildë nonetheless regretted "the title they chose for Mary Swann's book—*Swann's Songs*. An inexplicable lapse of sensibility. A miscalculation, an embarrassment" (203). However, *Swann's Songs* was "published under the Peregrine imprint" in the name of Mary Swann. After that, the "poems in *Swann's Songs* were passed over by most reviewers as simple, workmanlike curiosities, and the 250 copies that the press printed sold poorly, even in Nadeau Township. In the end he and Hildë gave most of them away, keeping just four copies for themselves" (228).

Unfortunately, these four copies of *Swann's Songs* brought a Christmas Eve burglar into Cruzzi's home. Feeling it to be a revenge on him for all those frauds in the publication of *Swann's Songs*, he "felt pierced with the fact of his old age, his helplessness, and the knowledge that a long-delayed act of reprisal had occurred, leaving him with nothing but his old fraudulent skin hanging loose on his bones" (228). However, it is too late for Cruzzi to tell the truth about *Swann's Songs*, since academics in the Swann industry have already produced non-publisher's discourses on Mary Swann's life based on his print-version of *Swann's Songs*. Now Frederic feels that his life is more than "abducted" by the Swann business: "He supposed he should be grateful, but instead found his face confused by tears."

The story of Cruzzi's publication of *Swann's Songs* finally shows how an editorial

discourse on Mary's poems has itself been "abducted" in the "conspiracy". Given that some, if not all, of the poems in *Swann's Songs* are from the hands of Frederic and Hildë, the "life" of Mary Swann cannot be inferred from the "work."

A Filmic Discourse: Communal Deconstruction and Reconstruction of a Dead Poet

In each of these four defined discourses, the biographical records of Mary Swann's life are abused through different means: they are either excluded by the feminist critic, devalued by the official biographer, mislabelled by the curator, or remade by the publisher. Laying bare how four "biographers" write their own lives on a blank sheet of paper, Shields then turns to a screenplay for a more communal picture of the whole process of "life writing". As the cinematic technique makes it possible to bring all the "fellow Swannians" into the field of cultural production, it becomes easier to see what is real in this form of "light writing"—a filmic version of *The Swann Symposium*. According to Stanley Cavell, the medium of film differs from linguistic images because the "medium of the movies is physical reality as such;" therefore, "[c]inema is committed to communicate only by way of what is real" (26). So what happens to "life writing" when it is translated into another medium, such as film?

Instead of demonstrating "how the past [Mary Swann] lives in the present" of the moving image (Williams, *Imagined* 193), Shields has only a photo of Mary Swann on the screen: a "full screen photograph, black and white, grainy, blurred, of MARY SWANN, a farm wife, standing on the ramshackle porch of her rural house" (231). Ironically, even though "the CAMERA concentrates on Mary's face," this photograph does not represent "reality or nature" in Mary's life (Cavell 26), in part because Mary Swann had "no social

security card, no medical records, [no] official papers" (*Swann* 257), except a library card from the Nadeau Public Library, and also, in part, because the public image is variously divided and kept privately in individuals' hands. So there is nothing real to show in this "real" life story. Given that the four "biographers" all have different versions of Mary Swann, then "the dichotomy of the film" cannot distinguish between "appearance and reality"(258). Instead, *The Swann Symposium* is meant to be a "subtext [focusing] on the more subtle thefts and acts of cannibalism that tempt and mystify the four main characters," thus deconstructing each discourse in the hope of reconstructing the "real" Mary Swann.

In the deconstructive discourse, the fraud of the four main characters is gradually unveiled through dramatic confrontation. Jimroy's "claims for Mrs. Swann's familiarity with certain works in the modern [tradition]" is challenged by another Swannian scholar, Professor Buswell, who gives the "impression of self-importance" (258). However, Jimroy redirects the question to Rose, who, in turn, "wears a mixed look of self-censure and wincing bewilderment" (259). Instead of giving proof to show that her library "provided serious nourishment to the mind of a poet like" Mary Swann, who is likened to Emily Dickinson, Rose has to confess that Swann "liked Pearl Buck real well. And Edna Ferber" (260). Buswell has already found out that "Jimroy did the same thing in his Starman book, said Starman's work had been influenced by *Moby Dick*" (272). How could "a bloody biographer" believe at all in "the idiocy of influences"?

Meanwhile, Jimroy's dream for "the love series" with Sarah—Mary—Audrey is also broken when he finds out that Sarah Maloney is "newly married" (265, 264). His sudden "antagonism" against Sarah leads him to ask her to make Mary's notebook public.

Although "there is nothing in the notebook" (276), Jimroy insists that he might discover something that would "illuminate the character of Mary Swann's special muse" (267). Jimroy also takes the notebook to be "tentative documents" (269), or biographical records shared by the public. Finally, he makes Sarah admit that she has lost the journal.

Sarah's notion of Mary Swann being a "self-generated artist" is also questioned by another Swannian scholar, who quotes Sarah: "Even those at the *fringe* of the...prevailing communal structure, are open to general patterns of cultural thought" (266). Then Rose, who truly believes that she is "powerless in her ability to hurt or destroy" (166), also confronts Jimroy with his theft of Mary Swann's photo. It is Cruzzi who, at this point, observes how "a roomful of 'scholars' tends to bring on an attack of mental indigestion" (274). Cruzzi's own "conspiracy" with his wife to publish *Swann's Songs* is not revealed, however, since there is neither a manuscript, nor first edition left for scholars to check. Even Willard Lang's notes for his unpublished Swann's love poem are stolen. There is no copy left in any public library, which gets Cruzzi to suspect "a worldwide conspiracy." In fact, Shields uses the camera and flashlight to expose the agency of a whole community in the production of culture. As the conference goes on, the last traces of Mary Swann's texts disappear: everyone's notes, every text of *Swann's Songs*, every poem is gone. Finally, the Swannian scholars are left with nothing but their memories of a dimly remembered text.

In the end, the "life" of Mary Swann is only continued in the re-collection of "her" words from oral memory, as each scholar reads a line or even a phrase in this process of communal reconstruction of the poems. Even the arrangement of the meeting room suggests that there is no privileged authority in this expression of a poet's "life":

"there is no one at the lectern and no one, seemingly, in charge. People are seated in a sort of circle, speaking out, offering up remembered lines of poetry, laboriously reassembling one of Mary Swann's poems" (310). The "real" Mary Swann appears herself to be one of those "lost things" that "have withdrawn/into themselves," like "books returning .../To paper or wood or thought" (311). Ultimately, the fixed "facts" of such books are returned to oral community, to the minds and lives of those who remember the poetry. If Mary's body has been "dismembered" by her husband, her "disremembered" poetry now has to be remembered by a group that has no sense of ownership. In other words, Shields suggests that both the poetry and the "life" are a communal possession. Life-writing has therefore to be shifted away from a focus on authority as property, and to be reformed instead in the image of the anonymous author like Homer.

What we should take from biography, in the terms of this novel, is its part in creating a communal history and a collective history. There is no solution to the "mystery" of a life, apart from the culture that chooses it to be its embodiment. Even on the issue of Mary Swann's death, there are no definite answers. If Sarah Maloney assumes that Mary had "a lover...a secret," and her husband "found out about it somehow"(279), Jimroy also "yearns to discover it—a love affair for Mary Swann. It would provide specific motivation for the murder" (280). Nonetheless, Sarah has to admit that in the notebook there is "*nothing* that points to a love affair." Cruzzi may be right in his speculations: "Probably her 'monster' of a husband was hungry and his supper was late.... Or maybe she gave him a black look. Or talked back. Or burnt the potatoes. Or ran out of salt. Or wasted three dollars on bus fare into Kingston" (279). However, "it is

his nature to be speculative" (280). As he later admits, "We'll probably never know" the truth about her mysterious death (279). However, none of the speculations is finally significant. As the film script suggests, "they can be observed talking, but what they say is drawn out" (283). The fact that they have been brought together in this form of communion with a dead poet is more important than the facts concerning the poet's death.

In fact, we may be looking for the wrong thing if we seek "aesthetic pleasure in [traditional] fiction [which] depends upon a sense of the autonomy of the art object, whereas in drama and life writing what we delight in is a sense that the subject can never be pinned down, that what we are witnessing is a performance, and that what is being imitated can never be fully expropriated or superseded by the copy" (Hinz cited in Buss 434). This is, in fact, the real achievement of *Swann*, to look beyond *A Literary Mystery* to the greater mystery of cultural performance, how the "life" of a dead poet might actually live again in our own continuing performance of "communal history".

Chapter 6: Alternate Narrators: The Communal Writing of Autobiography in

The Stone Diaries

By the time Carol Shields turns in *The Stone Diaries* (1993) to a full-fledged form of fictional autobiography, she has earned the right to say that “[b]iography, even autobiography, is full of systemic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams” (*Diaries* 196). There seems to be no solution to such “systemic error” in life writing, apart from the culture itself that allows it to signify the identity and personal autonomy of the individual. And this culture is shared by a whole society rather than belonging to any one individual. And yet *Swann* has already demonstrated that biography needs to become a communal history, or a collective history, of an individual life. If the “life” of a dead poet, Mary Swann, resides in our own continuing performance of “communal history”, Shields comes to see that it is equally possible that Daisy Goodwill Flett’s “individual” autobiography in *The Stone Diaries* should take the form of a collective history as well.

As we are told in the novel, Daisy is motherless from her birth, and is deserted by her father in her infancy. After being adopted by her neighbour, Clarentine Flett, she is orphaned at the age of eleven. Twice widowed in her life, Daisy is depressed and finally “dies”. How, then, is this lonely soul to tell her “tragic” life story? And how is autobiography, itself a sign of solitude, to escape such solitude in a form of communal writing? In other words, how can autobiography, a private possession, be made available to the telling of other persons, apart from the autobiographer herself? Although David

Williams summarizes existing criticism of *The Stone Diaries* as a “debate about multiplicity [which] turns on several axes” (“Making Stories” 10), that debate has not yet been centered systematically on the multiplicity of narrators in the novel.

As early as 1995, Williams offers a reading of *The Stone Diaries*, based on Philippe Lejeune’s grammar of self “at the lexical level”—which deals with the multiplicity of “proper names” (“Re-imagining” 131). Williams demonstrates how the “alternate voices” of the self are uttered through pronoun “shifters” such as “I”, “you” and “she,” so that the subject can look at her life both from inside and outside herself. He also raises the “question of who owns a life story, or who lives the life and how many lives can be lived at a time?” However, he does not ask how many people can coherently narrate that life in the form of an autobiography.

Ten years later, Williams offers another reading of plural identities in *The Stone Diaries*, based on Paul John Eakin’s narrative theory of identity. In this reading, Williams shows how *The Stone Diaries* “anticipates and reinforces the findings” of Eakin’s narrative theories, i.e. how as many as “five distinct selves” are developed in the autobiographical narrative of Daisy Goodwill (“Making Stories” 27). Although Williams concludes that “the work of making selves becomes at last the work of making communities,” he stops short of demonstrating “a collective narrative” in Daisy’s imaginary autobiography. This chapter will seek to remedy that lack by showing the making of Daisy’s self as a communal history. It will ask as well what difference there is between the communal writing of a dead poet in a fictional biography like *Swann* and the communal writing of the autobiography of a living woman. Does Roland Barthes’s theory of “the death of the author,” for example, have the same function in both

biography and autobiography?

In her “Autobiography as Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*,” Wendy Roy reads the novel as “meta-autobiography” (115). She thinks that “Daisy’s story is almost taken over by a multiplicity of other voices” (119). Significantly, she does see this “community of voices and stories” as being based on their relationship. Thus, the process of writing autobiography is like “first-and third-person narrators [who] talk about ‘biographical logic’” within Daisy’s relation. Along this same line, Susan E. Billingham actually reads this novel as “a fictional biography” (279). But if *The Stone Diaries* is an imagined biography of Daisy, as Hans Bak claims in his study, then why does Shields use the form of autobiography rather than biography? And how does Daisy come to pre-exist her story, and also to survive her “death” in the act of telling it?

In her *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir suggests that “autobiography is inherently the genre of memory” (11). To her, “writing an autobiography signals a drive towards remembering” where the process must also “involve forgetting” (12). While “forgetting” takes the role of selective “remembering”, fiction still seems necessary to track those memories. But how could Daisy Goodwill Flett remember “the historical past,” the past before she was born, including stories of her parents’ origins, marriage and sex life, to which she could have no access? How could she remember her own birth, one of the most dramatic, and fateful, events in her life? How could she remember all those depressing days in which her memory fails? How could she finally remember her own “death” and funeral, which have clearly not happened yet?

Obviously, Daisy's autobiography is not "the genre of memory", but a "primary act of imagination," as she warns readers (*Diaries* 76). Indeed, imagination becomes the governing power behind her life story. Although, very often, people who live an imaginary life lose connection with reality, Daisy's imagination has never disabled her, because she has never lost connection with reality. What keeps Daisy both imaginative, but at the same time sane, under such an imaginative power? Or, in other words, how does Daisy justify her imagination and still keep herself grounded in reality? How does she even make her flights of fancy believable?

The breakthrough Shields makes in autobiographical writing is to imagine witnesses to the subject's narrative, either of others' lives or her own life, so that an individual history turns into a communal history, and a self-centered form of narration turns into a plural form of multiple narrators. This is to imagine, as Philippe Lejeune puts it, "how one of your close friends would be able to tell your life's story; one takes the pen in his stead and writes down his accounts" (46). Most of the witnesses in Daisy's narrative, or the several narrators of Daisy's autobiography, are what Lejeune calls "fictitious witnesses" (47); on the one hand, they serve as "[s]imulacra, on the side of fiction" to build "fictitious authority" for Daisy's imaginary stories; on the other hand, they create a collective testimony of a private life to be shared by families, friends and communities. In most of her own narrative, Daisy turns her own autobiographical account into a biographical account, mingling her own life history with a communal history. In sharing the communal history and collective narration, multiples selves are thus created in multiple versions of an individual life.

Multiple Witnesses: A Communal History

One way Daisy makes her narratives believable is to create witnesses to share her family history and her imagined story of birth in her narrative. The beginning chapter, “Birth, 1905”, is the best case to show how Daisy pre-exists her story by including witnesses for her historical past. Interestingly, Shields makes Daisy choose a very traditional form, the first-person narration, to tell stories in which she cannot possibly be one of the witnesses. By taking the role of autobiographer, Daisy easily controls fictitious witnesses to support her narrative; so she keeps her authority as a stage director to have her witnesses appear or disappear from her life whenever she needs them. On top of that, she does not have to verify any documents about her own life since she is the one who lives that life. Thus, Daisy starts her autobiography by identifying her mother: “My mother’s name was Mercy Stone Goodwill” (Shields, *Diaries* 1). However, the claim that “Mercy, whose lineage, like the others, was entirely unknown,” makes the reader doubt the sources of her mother’s story, because what is known about her mother’s origin is the fact that Mercy was “left when only a few days old, wrapped in a flannel blanket—for the June nights could be cool—and placed in the old flour barrel that sat close by the back door of the institution” of the Stonewall Orphans Home (29). While the physical existence of the Stonewall Orphans Home in Manitoba and the photo of Bessie McGordon, Matron of the Orphans Home in the middle of the book, are both used as documentary witnesses of the place where her mother is brought up, there is no accounting for the means by which Daisy gains this information.

As she tells about her mother, Mercy Stone Goodwill, whom she has never seen in her life, Daisy feels “no more than an impression of breath or gesture or tint of light

which has no assigned place in memory” (191). However, by imagining herself as an ever-present witness of her mother’s life, she becomes an omniscient narrator, pretending to know every detail about her mother, from “her inability to feel love,” through “the puffiness of her bodily tissue,” to the “crying out” on the bed “muffled by the walls of the wood-framed company house where she and my father lived” (8, 7). Again, her narrative is supported by another witness, Mrs Flett next door, who “as it happens, is within easy earshot, no more than forty feet away” (8). With Mrs. Flett as witness of her mother’s story, readers tend to believe that Daisy might have heard all these things from Mrs. Flett, even though we later learn that Daisy was eleven when her stepmother died.

In Daisy’s narrative, her mother is exceptional in the orphanage in that these “flour-barrel babies, as they came to be called, were looked after by the township, given an elementary schooling, taught a trade, and sent at fourteen or fifteen into employment—except for my mother, whose housekeeping skills made her too valuable to part with” (29). So it is housekeeping skills that make her mother an excellent wife, since she makes a Malvern pudding as dessert for her husband, Cuyler Goodwill, who “never in his life [has] tasted Malvern pudding” (3). And her imagination of her mother’s excellent skills in making Malvern pudding is proved by an invented witness, their neighbour, Magnus Flett: “The sight of a Malvern pudding unmolded on a glass plate and covered with cream would distress him deeply,” presumably if he saw it, “particularly a pudding set out on what is, after all, an ordinary Monday evening in high summer in the year 1905 (the year of my birth, the day of my birth)” (9).

Daisy’s insistence on speaking in the first person about her birth on the day of her mother’s death is meant to dispel a shadow in her life. She has to invent a story to

excuse her mother's stupidity, i.e. an orphan with no mother to tell her about "a woman's life" (9). Besides, her "monthly blood has appeared only twice in her life" (5). How could Mercy then know that she is pregnant? That must be why she fails to tell her husband, who "must look upon her silence as a kind of betrayal, or even an act of hostility" (60). And so Daisy exaggerates the incomprehension of the labouring woman: "She breathes rapidly, blinking as the pain wraps a series of heavy bands around her abdomen. Down there, buried in the lapped folds of flesh, she feels herself invaded. A tidal wave, a flood" (5).

Of course, all these body changes cannot escape Mrs. Flett's eyes. She pities Mercy "for that large, soft, slow-flowing body" (8). "She would come running if she only knew of Mercy's distress; she would be there in a trice, exhorting the poor soul to be calm, begging her to lie down on the kitchen couch, bathing her broad, damp, blank face with a cool cloth, easing her clothing, pulling off the tightly laced shoes and heavy stockings." Even though Mrs. Flett does not narrate Daisy's mother's life story, her role as a witness in Daisy's narrative is enough for readers to trust Daisy's narrative.

As for her father, Daisy would not blame his ignorance of his wife's pregnancy either, as "nothing in his life has prepared him for the notion of love. Some early damage—a needle-faced father, a disheveled stick of a mother, the absence of brothers and sisters—had persuaded him he would remain all his life as a child, with a child's stunted appetite" (26). "When in 1903, he married Mercy Stone, my father knew nothing of women, the hills and valleys of their bodies or the bent of their minds, and he had no idea at all how to organize a household, where to begin, what might be expected" (33). Although her father "had no learning, knew little of history or of literature, had never

been told that men in medieval times were put to bed with a disease called lovesickness” (34), somehow, “[w]ords flew out of his mouth and melted into the warm kitchen air. She liked him better, though, for his trembling hands and the faint oniony smell of his sweat. Despite herself, she turned and offered him a strained smile” (32). While there is no clear source for Mercy’s thoughts, one can believe that Clarentine Flett, who is “faint with longing” for love (16), has told Daisy what she herself heard from the house next door: “‘I love you,’ she heard young Cuyler Goodwill say to his immense, bloated wife, Mercy. ‘Oh, how I love you and with all my heart’” (16). With this assurance, Daisy can even “know” what is in her father’s mind: “All day, at work in the quarry, breathing in clouds of mineral dust, my father thinks of his Mercy, the creases and secrets of her body, her fleshly globes and clefts, her hair, her scent, her way of turning towards him, offering herself—first bashfully, then, finding a freer ease of movement...” (34). And yet this is not something that he would have told Clarentine Flett. It is simply there, much like “the subject of a parlor picture, a watercolor done in tints of soft blues and grays” (17) when “[l]ight from the doorway fell on my mother’s broad face, giving it a look of luster. My father was leaning toward her, his hand covering hers.” With witnesses to reinforce her own view of her parents’ love, Daisy can then make herself the product of their love, someone who is “seized by happiness” (171), as Daisy, forty years later, tries to make her son, Warren, feel about himself in the chapter “Motherhood”.

Throughout the whole chapter of “Birth,” the narrative hints at the lack of evidence, or the impossible chance of Daisy knowing any of this when her mother died of childbirth and her father left her when she was an infant. Indeed, we are later reminded that “[s]he has never experienced that everyday taken-for-granted pleasure of touching

something her mother had touched. There is no diary, no wedding veil, no beautiful hand-stitched christening gown, no little keepsake of any kind” (189). Obviously, creating a historical narrative out of such emptiness has nothing to do with memory, but rather must involve a degree of fictionalization. And the fictionalizing process, as Philippe Lejeune observes, “could only be in an imaginary way, by restoring the other as a character” (46).

In Wendy Roy’s discussion of Georges Gusdorf’s argument that “autobiography was a relatively recent genre because earlier generations of men did not have the ‘conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life’ required to write personal history,” we are reminded that, “[t]hroughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others, he does not feel himself to exist outside of others” (115). But since the invention of the printing press, life writing by the self, the history of the individual, has become the norm. And yet Shields chooses, in this history of Daisy’s life, to take life writing in an opposite direction, to let her company of witnesses represent themselves within their communities rather than “to set themselves apart from their communities.”

Although Shields now and then reminds us of Daisy’s unreliability in telling her story by declaring that the “recounting of a life is a cheat” (28), no one questions Daisy’s recounting of her story through the unlikely testimony of four witnesses, three of them now lost to history: “My own birth is attended by Clarentine Flett, a woman half-crazed by menopause and loneliness.... Another witness Abram Gozhdë Skutari.... Also present at my birth is Dr. Horton Spears.... And there too is my father, Cuyler Goodwill” (37-8). Acting as an omniscient narrator, Daisy must supply each witness with a brief biography to add “true facts” to what she calls “a moment of history” (39). In an

interesting way, Daisy draws everyone's attention to herself, in the way "these witnesses turn and look at each other, and at me, the uninvited guest" (39). Meanwhile, she realizes that there must be other perspectives on her life: "The mysteries, secrets and lies of their separate selves dance like atoms across a magnetic field," where her mother "has given her child (Daisy) the last of her breath" (40). Even though, in the act of describing her birth, Daisy appears to pre-exist her story, she nonetheless seems to be a reliable autobiographical narrator in that she brings together all the key witnesses to the event. Had there been no witnesses to her birth, Daisy's loneliness could have defeated her from the moment she was born.

According to Guðmundsdóttir, writing biographies of parents is not only a quest in the usual biographical sense; it is also an autobiographical quest that marks the structure of the texts. It becomes the narrative drive, until biography becomes a part of autobiography (34). We must remember that this first chapter is an autobiographical text that necessarily concerns itself with events that happened before Daisy was born. It is not a true biography of either her father or her mother, but an attempt to understand where Daisy comes from both in terms of the family and her own history. All the witnesses are there to support her narrative, to ground her imagination in a reality that serves as a communal history of Daisy's parents and Daisy's own origins.

Multiple Biographies: A Shared Relational Space in Autobiography

Daisy's narrative tells the story of everyone but herself in "Childhood," "Marriage," "Love" and "Motherhood," making alternating use of the first and third persons, sometimes even the second person, in different situations. Williams offers a

graphic example from this part of the novel to show how a unified self is split by “the inescapable duality of the grammatical ‘person’” (“Re-imagining” 131): “Well, you might say, it was doubtless the fever that disoriented me, and it is true that I suffered strange delusions in that dark place, and that my swollen eyes in the twilight rooms invited frightening visions. The long days of isolation, of silence, the torment of boredom—all these pressed down on me, on young Daisy Goodwill, and emptied her out” (75-6). However, this passage also points to the problems of writing an autobiography from a solitary position. In fact, Daisy invites readers, as she refers to “you”, to imagine the process of writing about the self, “I”, during “the long days of isolation.” In an autobiography, if the subject is always solitary, the writing itself will become “the torment of boredom,” and finally empty the younger Daisy out. Luckily, as early as the chapter of “Childhood,” Daisy realizes that her private autobiographical space must include the public stories of others. For instance, in the chapter of “Childhood, 1916,” instead of telling the story of her own childhood, Daisy starts with the story of Barker Flett, Clarentine’s son, who is a botany professor at Wesley College when Daisy lives with him and his mother, Clarentine, who adopts her. She then continues with the story of her father, Cuyler Goodwill, who is supposed to take care of his young daughter but instead leaves her to build his Goodwill Tower, a sort of Taj Mahal commemorating his love of his young wife dead of childbirth; and she ends with the story of the death of Clarentine. So why does Daisy tell their stories rather than the story of her own childhood?

As Eakin suggests, “the space of autobiography, the space of the self, is literally occupied by the autobiography and self of the other. Yet, at the same time, the telling of the story of the others offers these oral historians a measure of self-determination, for the

other's story, the other's life, is possessed—indeed created—by the recording self" (*How Our Lives* 61). Actually, all the stories Daisy chooses to tell in the chapter "Childhood" are stories about the people in her childhood, a story of a girl who would not be left without guardianship. She does so because she lacks the close relations that she craves. Thus, casting her childhood in the form of other people's stories is, as Eakin points out, "the display of the story of the other in what is nevertheless an autobiography," thus bearing out Carolyn Steadman's assertion that "children are always episodes in someone else's narrative" (61).

Here is a comforting way for Daisy to imagine herself as the subject of Clarentine's letters to Cuyler Goodwill as well as Barker's letters to his father, Magnus Flett in this second chapter. The omission of dates of writing suggests that the letters are not documents, but figments of Daisy's imagination. Nonetheless, through these letters, Clarentine and Barker assume the role of narrators to tell the stories of both Daisy and her multiple guardians (I will elaborate the possibilities of multiple narrators of Daisy's life in later sections). In Clarentine's letters to Daisy's father, we have Daisy's childhood depicted briefly but clearly: "Daisy, as I have taken to calling her, is well looked after and in excellent health" (*Diaries* 50); "Daisy is to start her first level at school in a mere ten days" (52); "Daisy is now fully recovered from the attack of measles" (54). Even in Barker's letter to his father, Daisy is the key subject: "My actions, I assure you, proceeded from the wish to provide Daisy, who is growing into a fine young girl, with a reliable and respectable home of which she need never feel ashamed" (53). With all these stories, the reader is assured, on the one hand, that poor Daisy is looked after; on the other hand, the telling of the story of her childhood is not lonely any more, but is shared

with other narrators in her autobiography.

So far Daisy has not given a voice to her father, whom she calls Cuyler Goodwill. There are not even his letters in response to Clarentine or Barker. Daisy silences her father at this stage because she does not understand why her father deserts her. “It would be unnatural if a father did not love his child” (61), she says, although, as she admits, “years later this is clear to me—that my father’s love for my mother had been damaged, and sometimes, especially when waking from one of his vivid dreams, he wonders if he is capable of loving the child” (61). The trauma for Daisy is too much: she cannot understand why her mother “had seen fit to guard her momentous secret” (60); why Aunt Clarentine is so “firm in her refusal to return to Tyndall” (52); or why her thirty-three-year-old Uncle Barker has a “long brooding sexual stare, for that was what it was,” which she converts into an “attack of indigestion” (77). Nonetheless, Daisy is clearly aware of the fact that “if she was going to hold on to her life at all, she would have to rescue it by a primary act of imagination, supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections, conjuring the pastoral or heroic or whatever, even dreaming a limestone tower into existence” (76). Daisy has to imagine the stories of others “as a way of coping with... otherwise ‘unbearable knowledge’” (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 93).

However, Daisy reminds us of her role as an autobiographical narrator only by asking self-answered questions: “Have I said that Clarentine Flett deserted her husband Magnus in the year of 1905? Have I mentioned that she took with her the small infant who was in her charge...”(47)? Until the narrative relates the completion of her father’s Goodwill Tower, and until Cuyler gets to know that his eleven-year-old daughter is without guardianship, Daisy can only imagine her doubt about his love for her as his

doubt about Mercy's love for him: "'She didn't tell me,' he roars to the vacant sky... 'she never told me.' ... He admits to himself that his love for his dead wife has been altered by the fact of her silence" (60-1). Only when all these stories have been told through other narrators, can Daisy forgive her father's desertion and reunite with him. "On that day she liked the world" (78).

In his discussion of an unusual refusal of the first person and a use of the past tense in "Nelly's case," Eakin describes how "[i]t is initial probe into the past, into her earlier sense of self-estrangement; time and the narrator's 'unreliable memory' make Nelly, her earlier self, 'inaccessible' to her, this sense of rupture in its turn: the child who says 'I' 'severs himself from the third person in which he has thought of himself up to that point.' The use of the first person then provides no shield against self-estrangement, early and late" (*How Our Lives* 95). Daisy, who has every right to feel estranged by the circumstances of her early life, likewise approaches her childhood warily, "speaking of herself as an 'intruding stranger'" to all the people she knows well: to her father, who, most of the time, she calls Cuyler Goodwill; to her adopted mother, sometimes called Clarentine, and most of the time, Aunt Clarentine; and to Clarentine's son, Professor Barker Flett, who is most often called Uncle Flett. Daisy's refusal of the first person, as in Eakin's case of Nelly, "was her 'strange' choice of the second and third persons to portray her relation to her earlier self—these rhetorical moves mirror Nelly's psychological situation, the fissure in the fiction of continuous identity wrought by the trauma of war" (Eakin 95). For Daisy, however, it is not the trauma of war but the death of her two mothers: Mercy's death at childbirth and Clarentine's death by collision with a cyclist. Her telling of these stories in the third person is nonetheless not biographical so

much as it is the attempt to imagine a relationship with the missing person.

In the chapter “Marriage, 1927,” after another eleven years in her life, Daisy gives her father a voice by letting him become an eloquent talker. Even Daisy is shocked at “Goodwill’s open, energetic businessman’s countenance” (83): “that silver tongue—how was it acquired?” Daisy also projects her own lack of speech in childhood onto her father, wondering if “a dull childhood might indeed drive the parched intelligence to the well of language and bid it drink deep” (84). Actually, in Cuyler Goodwill’s endless talk, we learn not only that “speech came to [Cuyler] during his brief two-year marriage to Mercy Goodwill,” but also to Daisy’s life after she joins her father: “They traveled, by day, in a first class lounge car, courtesy of the Indiana Limestone Company, Cuyler Goodwill’s new employer” (87). At the same time, Cuyler’s talk helps Daisy to extend her life story to her father’s childhood: “he told the child about his boyhood in Stonewall, laying out for her the streets of that town, the site of his parents’ house by the lime kilns, the smell of burning lime on a winter morning, how sometimes he was wretched and sometimes joyous” (88). Thus, Daisy comes to know about the historical past of her father. In some way, Daisy’s father’s narrative keeps her “hopeful about the future with a parent she had never known, a parent who had surrendered her to the care of others when she was barely two months old” (90). If Daisy has no memory of her parents, she now “felt his voice filter into her veins and arteries, and spread out in her memory” (91). Cuyler feels that “he owed her a complete accounting for his years of absence. Owed her the whole of his story” (91). Perhaps what he does is to fill in “an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgeable gaps” in Daisy’s autobiographical narration (76), although, “[s]ome of this the young Daisy took in and some she didn’t” (89). All these absences in Daisy’s

knowledge about her genealogy are brought to the present by her father's narrative. In that case, Daisy realizes that "the absent are always present" (90).

Interestingly, in the chapter "Marriage," Daisy now uses a third-person narration to tell her father's stories, rather than the story of her first marriage, which does not even survive the honeymoon. Daisy quotes from her father to indicate how her life would change in the future: "think of this miraculous freestone material as the substance of your lives. You are the stone carver. The tools of intelligence are in your hand. You can make of your lives one thing or the other. You can be sweetness or bitterness, lightness, a force of energy or indolence, a fighter or a laggard. You can fail tragically or soar brilliantly" (116). Cuyler Goodwill's speech could have been empty to Daisy had she not undergone the mishap of her first short marriage to Harold A. Hoad, who is expelled from Engineering School for cheating. Hoad comes from a mysterious family. His father commits suicide for some unknown reason. However, his "father's suicide had been speedily transformed by his mother into a sacrificial act—a loving father and husband sparing his family" (110). These biographical details about the Hoad family are not included for their own sake, however, but as a part of Daisy's quest to situate her story in the lives of others, even in the unhappy story of a marriage which overshadows Daisy's unhappy beginnings.

In the majority of these chapters, Daisy exposes her own unhappiness by projecting her story onto the unhappy lives of others. But in the relative happiness of "Motherhood," she now projects her satisfaction, as well as her insecurities, onto the lives of her husband in "Supper time," and then onto "Alice," "Warren," "Joan," "Mrs. Flett's Niece," "Mrs. Flett's Aged Father," before concluding with "Mrs. Flett's Intimate

Relations with her Husband.” Daisy adopts different narrative positions to look at her relationship with each one named in the title. On the one hand, Daisy becomes the biographer of each person since she tells stories of others; on the other hand, she tells her own story in terms of her relation to those others. No matter how the sub-title changes, the subject is still Daisy, only it is Daisy in relation to others.

Although “Suppertime” depicts a general picture of Daisy’s immediate family, the multiple roles of Daisy in her family are told through a third-person narrator. The story of a mother at home with her three children waiting for her husband to come home for dinner reminds the readers of her adoptive mother, Clarentine’s loneliness, as in, “what do they imagine she does all day?” (11). Nonetheless, Daisy transfers this loneliness to her husband. Acting as a biographer of her husband, she sees him as a lonely soul: “Decades of parched solitude have made him a voyeur in his own life, and even now he watches himself critically: paterfamilias, a man greeting his family at the end of the working day, gazing into the faces of his children and beyond them to the screened porch where the supper table is set” (161).

As an outsider to the Flett family, Daisy can excuse their “genetic structure, his (Barker’s) and his father’s, [which] must be close to identical...their blood thinned down to water and their limbs diminished by idleness” (162-3). Were she to take the role of an insider in the Flett family as an autobiographer, she would not recognize the genetic problem of “solitude, silence.” This is exactly what Daisy says about Barker Flett: “A number of friends have suggested he write his autobiography, but, no, the surfaces of his life have been smoothed and polished by the years so as to be almost ungraspable; where would he begin” (163)? Barker Flett has no idea how to live a life; neither has he an idea

how to write a life. However, from her husband's life, Mrs. Flett has already glimpsed the way one has to learn "to dig a hole in her own life story" (263).

"To dig a hole" in one's own life story is to break down the solipsistic self-centeredness of an individual through a "primary act of imagination" (76) that connects her with others. Thus she is transformed and reshaped by experiences of her own and others. When Daisy sees herself through the eye of Alice, she sees a mother who must try to explain to her daughter "the secrets of procreation" (165). If her own mother's ignorance of being pregnant has been on her mind forever, Daisy means to make up for such a disabling failure of communication from mother to daughter. But if she tells this story in her own voice, Daisy might feel embarrassed when Alice tells her, "It makes me sick at my stomach" (166). Just as importantly, it would be painful for her to accuse her mother of not knowing about sexual life. And so she compensates by assuming a voice of pseudo-omniscience.

Daisy's dialogue with her son, Warren, answers his fears about a new baby by saying, "Your father and I are too old to have any more babies" (171). Writing her autobiography in a dialogue with her son seems to give Daisy a new voice; this "new voice bursts through the others, an aberration." In her son's eyes, "her real self [is] speaking." To Joan, the one "full of secrets" (172), even her mother does not know "how she can fill up an empty moment should one occur." The irony is that Daisy's secret includes knowledge of her children's own secrets. At the same time, she keeps her own secret by appearing different in each one's eyes.

In this chapter, Daisy still uses third-person narration to see herself as Mrs. Flett. But the difference from the previous chapters is that she now offers herself to be judged

by everyone in her family. By doing that, she makes it possible to see herself from different angles. In her eyes, her children are good: “Alice and Warren have been good because they made their own beds this morning without reminding” (158); “Little Joan has been good because she ate her eggs goldenrod for lunch without whining” (159). However, in the account Daisy imagines by her niece, “Mrs. Flett’s three children always seem to be quarrelling—that’s the impression she has anyway. It breaks her heart” (173).

In “Mrs Flett’s Aged Father,” Daisy tells how Cuyler Goodwill is going to bury the ring that he removed from his wife before burial, instead of passing it on “to his dear child, making a ceremony of it, a moment of illumination in which he would for once join the separate threads of his life and declare the richness of his blessings” (182-3). He feels it will be “far less troubling to bury this treasure beneath a weight of stone—his pyramid, dense, heavy, complex, full of secrets, a sort of machine” (183). In the third person, Daisy recalls how, “Once, years ago, her father had mentioned a wedding ring that would one day be hers, but he has not spoken of it since. Perhaps he has given it to his wife, Maria” (189). In keeping this distance between them in the third person, Daisy manages to protect herself from deep disappointment.

Ironically, still in a third-person voice, Daisy’s loneliness is revealed under the sub-title of “Mrs. Flett’s Intimate Relations with her Husband” (185): “unaware of her tears wetting the blanket binding and the depth of her loneliness this September night, he will lie down on top of her” (191). After all these years of married life, Daisy feels that the “debris of her married life rains down around her.” She even doubts her love for Barker: “Isn’t this what love’s amending script has promised her? Isn’t this what created

and now sustains her love for Barker” (192)? Unable to find an answer to this pressing question, she is endlessly in search of other perspectives.

Multiple Narrators: A Collective Writing of One’s Life

In *Swann*, Shields has divided the biographical writing of a “dead poet” into four distinct versions to show how the biographical subject is tainted by the personal motivations of each writer. Although Shields does not offer a solution to the “systemic error” in biographical writing, she does suggest that biography requires a communal history in our own continuing performance of culture. Therefore, collective writing might be necessary for the biography of Mary Swann, the dead poet, who lacks enough available data for biographers to enlarge into a life story.

Similarly with *The Stone Diaries*, Shields demonstrates the necessity of a collective writing of autobiography to show how Daisy’s “lived life” is transformed and reshaped by multiple narrators of her own life. Why then does *The Stone Diaries* take the form of an autobiography rather than a biography of “alternate versions”? Because all these biographical elements and forms are cradled in Daisy’s imagined narrative of her life, she can assert her own independence and critical view of her life. By locating each biography or mini-autobiography somewhere between the story of the *I* and the collective, she points to their mutual discrepancy, enabling Daisy to revise events and perspectives in ways that allow her to gain an impossible omniscience. In contrast to Mary Swann who has no real control of her “life”—either the lived or the written one—Daisy directs the collective writing of her life in the direction she wants to take it. As a result, Daisy’s life is not only shared by multiple narrators in the act of telling, but also is improved in the

process of writing, or in Daisy's case, in the process of "thinking her autobiography."

While Daisy might not be able to foresee the outcome of this collective writing of her individual life, she does realize the necessity of recruiting witnesses in order to escape her role as a narrator in critical moments, such as depression, or illness, or impending death. In these outside accounts, she finds a way each time to escape the limitations that threaten to silence her voice once and for all. By temporarily renouncing her own voice, she then preserves her "life" by speaking in the manner of a ventriloquist through "others" who reveal the "real" Daisy by indirection.

The documentary witnesses of letters, for example, "speak for Daisy as much as they speak to her" (Williams, "Re-imagining" 134). The chapter entitled "Work, 1955-1964", which provides readers with fragments of Daisy's life after Barker Flett dies, consists of a series of sixty-two letters from her husband, children, friends, clients, and editors. While none of them is from Daisy, the lack of Daisy's direct word does not hinder us from knowing about her. Instead, we get a composite idea of her communal self. These letters all decode her life from different vantage points and offer a fair judgment of her communal past in the family and community. In the face of the apparent "death" of the author, "The reader is asked to either accept the truth of what is being said as no less than a fact of writing, or to turn back nostalgically upon a humanism no longer tenable within this age of theory. And such indeed has been the general pattern of responses to the annunciation of the author's death" (Burke 17).

In her husband's last letter to Daisy, shortly before his death, realizing that "time is short" (197), Barker writes, wondering "whether you perhaps viewed our marriage in a similar way, as a trap from which there was no easy exit. Between us we have almost

never mentioned the word love. I have sometimes wondered whether it was the disparity of our ages that made the word seem foolish, or else something stiff and shy in our natures that forbade its utterance” (198-9). We do not hear from Daisy herself what this marriage to a much older man has done to her self-image: “Daisy Goodwill’s own thoughts on her marriage are not recorded, for she has given up the practice of keeping a private journal” (156). But Barker’s regret at his inability to express his love towards Daisy reminds us of the sad story of his father, Magnus Flett, who also lacks demonstrative love towards his wife, Clarentine: “Several times in the years after she left home he took the train into Winnipeg and skulked like a common criminal near the corner of Simcoe Street and Aberdeen Road, catching glimpses of her figure coming and going, and working in that garden of hers with her back bent over double like the Galician women did” (99). However, “I love you” (101), a phrase that Daisy’s imagined Magnus clearly would have loved to whisper into his wife’s waiting ear, turns into a broken cry after his wife’s death: “Clarentine, come home, come home, my darling one, my only, only love.” Similarly, “I loved you terribly” is what Baker has really felt, but never expressed to poor Daisy. When he realizes the need to express his love towards Daisy, it is too late. That is why one of Daisy’s children suggests: “She could have divorced Dad” (352). “But no such choices are available to her at [that] time in her life” (147). Nonetheless, this choice of multiple narrators offers her new possibilities: “a person can split off [her] life in one direction or the other, the choice is open.”

Fraidy Hoyt, one of Daisy’s close friends, who has also been widowed, seems to be the one who understands Daisy best: “I know how down-and-out rotten you must be feeling these days. Well, no, I don’t exactly know—how could I?—I can imagine what a

misery it is to find yourself alone after all the time you and Baker have been together” (201). Although Fraidy appears to contradict herself in terms of understanding Daisy’s feelings, these are the sort of contradictory feelings that Daisy herself has after Barker’s death. As we learn in the later chapter “Sorrow”, on one occasion Daisy “remembers her dear sweet Barker fondly” (230); but on another occasion, she wonders, “does she actually pine for this dead partner of hers? ...How much of her available time bends backwards into the knot of their joined lives, those twenty connubial years?” As Daisy admits, “To be honest, very little. There, I’ve said it.” And so Fraidy’s posture of relieved independence expresses a truth in Daisy’s private, unexpressed life: “Personally, I’m finding that being fifty isn’t half as bad as it’s cracked up to be—the old visage may be a bit pouchy and cross-hatched, but ‘everything that matters’ is still in good working order, and no damn getting the curse either” (202). Fraidy also encourages Daisy in ways that evidently speak for Daisy’s own view of things: “So don’t climb into your widow’s weeds and wither away just yet.”

It is hard for Daisy to tell anyone else how she feels about her second widowhood. But what is said in letters from her editor, readers, clients and her family members speaks louder than Daisy’s own voice. Among the sixty-two letters, fifteen are from the editor of the *Recorder*, an Ottawa newspaper for which Barker wrote a weekly column on gardening. His narrative tells how Daisy continues her late husband’s writing of the column “Mr. Green Thumb,” and how she establishes a reputation as “Mrs. Green Thumb” between the years of 1955 and 1964. The way in which his salutations change speaks volumes: “Dear Mrs. Flett”(199), “Dear Mrs. F.” (216), “Dear Dee” and “Dearest Dee” (225). Similarly, his forms of closure bespeak their changing relations: “Yours in

sympathy, Jay W. Dudley, Editor” (200); “Affectionately; J.” (217); “Your J.” Here is more than a trace of a love story between these two lonely souls: a man who lost his wife three years ago and a woman who has just lost her husband.

Speaking from professional experience, Jay tells Mrs. Flett, “I believe occupation to be the most effective means of dealing with bereavement” (207). While he encourages Mrs. Flett to contribute to the *Recorder*, she does not reply in her own voice. Instead, we follow the action by implication in letters from readers of her column: “Your tribute to geraniums touched the middle of my heart” (220); “Really enjoyed your dramatic struggle with the ant colony. And also your words of enlightenment on the European leaf beetle. You’ve got a real gift for making a story out of things” (222). Even her daughter Alice compliments her mother on her achievement: “I suppose ‘Mrs. Green Thumb’ is getting more famous everyday” (209). What Daisy has achieved as a gardening columnist also validates Jay’s judgment of her: “you are a famous gardener in your own right” (203). Daisy, who in her mother-in-law’s words, “had the benefit of a college education, and...acquired a certain range of familiarity in the liberal arts,” really does become “the career gal” (206).

If Daisy is entirely absent from “Work” in propria persona, she is ever-present in the witness narratives. In three letters from Pinky Fulham, a full-time staffer on the journal, we are told that he takes over Daisy’s job as a garden columnist because he is “sick of writing about local elections and school board hassles” and he wants “a change” (227). This might be one of the reasons why Jay is regretful about his relationship with Daisy. In his letter of February 20, 1964, Jay writes:

Dear Dee,

I am so *terribly* sorry about all this, and I do agree the policy of the paper is ridiculous, but it's a policy that has been in force since the time of my predecessor. None of this has anything to do with your competence as a contributor, you know better than that. The issue is that Pinky, as a full-timer, has a prior claim to that regular column as long as he can demonstrate capability in the area. I can't tell you how *much* I regret all this, but I'm afraid my hands are tied.

Please let's get together soon and talk of other things. You are, if I may say, taking this *far* too personally.

Your

J. (227)

Obviously, Daisy is not happy with this decision. She must have complained about this ridiculous policy. From Pinky's letter, we also know that Daisy tries to persuade him to change his mind. To that request, Pinky replies, "I am not at this time willing to change my mind" (227). Following this, only two correspondences, one from Fraidy and another from Alice, imply what is happening to Daisy: "Beans and I are just wondering if you've broken your wrist. Neither of us has heard from you in ages" (228), writes Fraidy. Alice also expresses her concern: "I'm a little worried. There hasn't been a letter from you for weeks. Is anything wrong?"

Of course, there will be no letter from Daisy. As the whole chapter is structured, Daisy is absent from all these letters, and yet, as the addressee, her "life" remains centre-stage, as both the theme and occasion of all those other people's communications. In another way, however, this structural silence prepares us for a more literal silence that

overtakes her in the chapter “Sorrow.” When she loses her identity as “Mrs. Green Thumb,” she succumbs to a whole sense of losses she has suffered in the death of her husband, the death of her stepmother, the death of her mother, not to mention her fundamental condition of being an orphan in the world. Literally, Daisy has run out of ideas of how to continue in this state of depression and loss. And yet, in the course of this pivotal chapter, she learns how to “dig a hole in her own life story” (263). To escape the trap of solipsism, she begins to relive her life by having multiple narrators offer theories about her social withdrawal. Behind the screen of these theories, Daisy directs each narrator in turn to supply an image, or a reason, for Daisy’s absence from her “life”. Thus, we have her family members, relatives, close friends, colleagues, clients and people who have come in contact with Daisy to tell their own stories in relation to her; but we also have narrators who have no direct relations with Daisy, who offer impossible assumptions about her life, pointing at last to the way in which Daisy has likely imagined each of her interpreters.

In the form of an omniscient monologue, a third-person speaks about the necessity of others’ replacement of Mrs. Flett: “Surely no one would expect Mrs. Flett to come up with a theory about her own suffering—the poor thing’s so emptied out and lost in her mind she can’t summon sufficient energy to brush her hair, let alone organize a theory” (261). At the same time, the third-person voice gradually gives way to a first-person voice: “Already, right this minute, I feel a part of her wanting to go back to the things she used to like, the feel of a new toothbrush against her gums, for instance” (263). The immediacy of this revelation, and its direct experience of interiority, make it clear that Daisy has been speaking from behind a series of social and narrative masks. Under

the subtitles of nine people's theories, we have multiple analyses of Daisy's depression, and multiple perspectives on her life. In this way, the author pools the ideas and wisdom of a whole community of concerned people.

In "Alice's Theory", Daisy's eldest daughter not only supplies a version of her mother's life but also a version of her own life; both "lives" are "alterable" (233). As she confesses, "I had grown up a mean, bossy little kid. I was selfish. I liked to hurt people's feelings" (234). But "my memories of myself are more like a ruffed-up lake, battering against the person I became. A nice person. A thoughtful person" (235). And how does she see her mother's life? In Alice's eyes, "that age-gap became her hobby and profession, being a young wife to an older husband—it kept her girlish, made her a kind of tenant in the tower of girlhood" (235-6). "A mere two months after my father's funeral, our mother took over the horticultural column at the *Recorder*, becoming Mrs. Green Thumb. She was suddenly a different person, a person who worked. Who worked 'outside the home'" (237). Although we have already heard the story of Mrs. Green Thumb from the editor, Jay Dudley, Alice's telling further confirms that an individual history is shared and can be told collectively, but from different points of view. For Alice, it is more important for her mother to slip off "her old self". So it must be the pain from Daisy's loss of her job that causes the collapse: "She was Mrs. Green Thumb, that well-known local personage, and now she's back to being Mrs. Flett" (240).

After Alice's autobiography within Daisy's autobiography, Fraidy Hoyt, a sixty-year-old single woman, Daisy's close friend, gives a brief biography of Alice. Fraidy's immediate contradiction of "Alice's Theory," however, points to the unlikely possibility that the friend, who lives in Indiana, knows what the daughter, who lives in England, has

said about Daisy: “You don’t expect Alice Flett Downing to believe in her mother’s real existence, do you” (240)? Fraidy, in fact, insists that Alice “hasn’t known her mother long enough, hasn’t known her the way I’ve known her” (240-1). But she also contradicts Alice’s theory that “[w]ork and self cannot be separated” (242), since Fraidy must express her own view of identity. The “forfeiting of her ‘job’ was only a trigger,” Fraidy says of Daisy, “that released a terrible yearning she’s been suppressing all her life” (244). Fraidy, a woman whose “‘phantom’ fifty-fourth lover was encountered just weeks ago” (246), offers the view of a woman of “a certain age”: “Sex is what I’m referring to, what else” (245)? Fraidy’s theory finds some immediate support in “Jay Dudley’s Theory”: “We had our moments, one in particular on that funny old-fashioned bed of hers with the padded headboard, like something out of a thirties movie. Well, that was fine, more than fine, but I could see she had a more permanent arrangement in mind, not that she ever said anything, not in a direct way” (253-4). In Fraidy’s terms, however, the “self is curved like space,” and “the sexual spasm, despite its hideous embarrassments and inconvenience, is the way we enter the realm of ecstatic” (247). Fraidy’s theory might be too compulsively erotic, as she acknowledges: “I’ve been on the side of noise, nerve and movement” with fifty-four lovers. However, she proves that she can think beyond the bounds of self-interest when she concludes, “once in a while a family has to surrender itself to an outsider’s account. A family can get buried in its own fairy dust, and this leads straight...to the unpacking of lies and fictions from its piddly shared scraps of inbred history” (244).

Daisy’s niece, Beverly, has a “theory” that stems from her position as both an outsider and insider in the family: “I think it’s the kids who’ve got her down. Being a

widow, she feels extra responsible, I can understand that” (250). Beverly, a divorced woman, who kicked out her drunken husband, and got pregnant by a married man, had been taken into the family by Aunt Daisy. She has lived with Aunt Daisy and her three kids, and brought up her daughter, Victoria, who had nearly been put up for adoption. Beverly reveals the problems of each child that Aunt Daisy worries about: Alice who “has this way of coming on strong” (250); Warren “had this real bad acne growing up and that made him kind of shy and drippy;” Joanie is “smoking dope.... She says she’s selling jewelry down there in New Mexico, but I bet my bottom dollar she’s selling more than that.” We would probably never know these stories of Daisy’s children had Beverly not told us. For Daisy’s motherly instinct has been to give each of them, “a reward for having been good” in one way or the other (158).

Warren is surprised by his mother’s evident intelligence after he discovers that she once wrote a “clear and bright” essay on the Italian national hero, Camillo Cavour (251): “When I think about my mother’s essay on Camillo Cavour, I can’t help feeling cheated, as if there’s some wily subversion going on, a glittering joke locked in a box and buried underground. And then I think: if I feel cheated, how much more cheated she must feel. She must be in mourning for the squandering of herself” (252). Daisy might never realize that she should “land somewhere near the middle of the world. Instead she’s over there at the edge.”

The third child, Joan, brings us back to the immediate occasion of her mother’s depression by suggestion that Daisy is “relishing all this, the pure and beautiful force of her hatred for Pinky Fulham, the ecstasy of being wronged” (253). Given the way Daisy “funnels into her hatred for Pinky Fulham” (252), she would “let her rage on”(253).

“There’s a certain majesty in it. Nothing in her life has delivered her to such a pitch of intensity—why wouldn’t she love it, this exquisite wounding, the salt of perfect pain” (253). To Joan, it is the self-righteous rage of the victim that fills her mother’s silence with purpose and clarity.

Various people offer different rationales for Daisy’s depression according to their unique experiences. Some of the “fictitious witnesses”, however, have little or no connection with Daisy Goodwill. For instance, Labina Anthony Greene Dukes’ theory has nothing to say about Daisy’s depression. But her disappointment about her own marriage might help to explain Daisy’s marriage with Barker as “a thousand little disappointments raining down on top of each other” (254).

Some of the “witnesses” are so remote from Daisy, as Williams first noticed (“Re-imagining” 136), that it is impossible to credit their testimony, let alone their “theory.” Cora-Mae Milltown was Cuyler’s housekeeper in Bloomington, Indiana, when she acted as a caregiver to Daisy. But Daisy now lives in another city in another country, where Core-Mae has no access to her. Assuming herself to be “all the mama she’s ever going to get” (257), Cora-Mae reminds the readers that “this poor child is motherless, and there’s not one thing worse in this world than being motherless” (256). But Core-Mae is a voice from the past, who cannot speak for Daisy’s present circumstances.

Another unlikely witness is Skoot Skutari, the grandson of the Jewish peddler who had attended at Daisy’s birth and her mother’s death. However, that event had occurred half a continent away and more than half a century before. There has been no contact between the two families ever since. And so Skoot’s theory of “infant loneliness” is derived from “the sort of loneliness” that his grandfather had “suffered since leaving

home at eighteen” (260). In fact, “Skoot Skutari’s Theory” is more like a biography of his grandfather than a biographical account of Daisy. If there is anything that his grandfather could have had in common with Daisy, “it was loneliness of an extreme and incurable variety, the sort of loneliness he himself had suffered since leaving home at eighteen.” But Skoot Skutari’s “account” is the invention of the autobiographer who alone knows the story of her childhood, and so projects her earliest feelings onto an imagined figure who is just “like” her.

Later in her autobiography, Daisy does acknowledge that she “enlarges on the available material, extends, shrinks, reshapes what’s offered; this mixed potion is her life” (282). Having viewed her life through the “eyes” of those both near to, and far from her, Daisy seems to have moved away from her depression: “In a sense I see her as one of life’s fortunates, a woman born with a voice that lacks a tragic register. Someone who’s learned to dig a hole in her own life story” (263). In speaking of herself as both subject (“I”), and object (“her”), Daisy digs her way out of darkness, escaping the Cartesian bottle of solipsism to transform an empty and lonely life into a richly imaginative one that has been made possible by her identification with multiple narrators.

Roland Barthes’ theory of “The Death of the Author” (1968) allows for another possibility in the collective action of producing a life story: “once a fact is *recounted*—for intransitive purposes, and no longer to act directly upon reality, i.e., exclusive of any function except that exercise of the symbol itself—this gap appears, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (49). According to Barthes, the author-centered role is necessarily undermined by language itself which “speaks” the subject more than the subject speaks it. That is why, accordingly to Barthes, “a text

consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue, into parody, into contestation, but there is a site where this multiplicity is collected, and this site is not the author, as has hitherto been claimed, but the reader; the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination” (“Death” 54). In a very literal way, Shields dramatizes this fundamental condition of writing in the final chapter “Death”, where Daisy seems to have disappeared into a series of scattered lists and remnants whose final destination is her heirs and successors who, as her readers, are the final “destination” that unifies her “text”.

“Daisy (Goodwill) Flett peacefully, on -, in the month of – in the year 199- at Canary Palms Rest Home, Sarasota, Florida, after a long illness patiently borne” (343). This is the obituary that opens “Death”, the final, dateless, chapter of *The Stone Diaries*. At first sight, readers might be surprised: if the autobiographer died, how could she survive her story? A careful reading allows one to see the literary trick: the obituary has no certain date of Daisy’s demise, which implies that her death has not yet happened. As a matter of fact, this is a way in which Shields puts the “author” to “death” to offer a wider space for her children to look at Daisy’s past, “so that not a single thing gets lost” in her life story. Daisy would not want to “die,” since, as she reminds the reader, “I’m still here, inside the (powdery, splintery) bones” (352). In fact, this is her own death as imagined by her. So why does Daisy have to imagine her death? And what is the significance of “the death of the author” in *The Stone Diaries*?

Obviously, the chapter “Death” shows that autobiography is more than a self-contained text of a life. Symbolically, the autobiographer extends her own life beyond

death. Significantly, Daisy needs to find “voices with which to speak, but is simultaneously spoken by others” (Slethaug 59). She needs to imagine how others will look at her past self, in order to have a future monument to her life. No doubt Daisy is building her autobiography “out of the scraps of what she knows and what she imagines” (Joan Thomas, “The Golden Book” 58). She has imagined her birth, reflected upon childhood, gone through all the memories of marriage, love, and motherhood and work to sorrow, ease, illness and decline. All of these are plausible and familiar periods in a woman’s life. However, Daisy “doesn’t find herself” and feels herself still “voiceless and powerless” (60) in her lived experience. But she can compensate in imagination by surviving her own “death,” letting her children become the narrators of her life story: “Flett, Daisy (née Goodwill), who due to historical accident, due to carelessness, due to ignorance, due to lack of opportunity and courage, never once in her many years of life experienced the excitement and challenge of oil painting, skiing, sailing, nude bathing” (344). Through her children, she admits that she has lacked so many things in her life. Through them, she also admits that she has never heard the words, “I love you Daisy.” Only “during the long, thin, uneventful sleep that preceded her death did she have the wit (and pleasure) to ponder the injustice of this” (345). Only when Daisy is put to “death”, do the children open their hearts and talk about their mother’s life without reservation, because no child wants to throw a parent’s regrets in her face.

Shopping lists, recipes and catalogues of illnesses and books Daisy has read seem to involve the historical approach of biography; but these documents prove rather that there is always some surplus element that is left out of autobiography, some extra fact that would mar the narrative unity of a self-authored “life”. What Daisy does, instead, is

to imagine her “readers” having to join the “facts” of her life, to reassemble her life into a new writing—in effect to imagine her from the clues she leaves, much as she was left to imagine her dead mother before her: “What I can’t figure out,” she has one of her children say, “is why she never told us about this first marriage of hers” (350). The failure to tell something so fundamental thus becomes a spur to further imagining, as Mercy’s failure to tell Cuyler she was pregnant becomes a spur to Daisy’s invention of motives for her parents which absolves them of blame and redeems their mistakes (Williams, “Making” 16-19).

Though the fragmentary narrative of “death” is not directly chronological or systematic, it tells of a platitudinous life of the mother and reflects knowledge that Daisy herself cannot realistically offer:

Daisy Daisy
give me your answer true

Day’s eye, day’s eye

The face in the mirror is you. (344)

The name, “Daisy, as I have taken to calling her,” is what her foster mother, Clarentine Flett, supposedly writes in a letter to her father, Cuyler Goodwill, who left the baby to Clarentine after Mercy’s death. Clarentine has given her this name because “these deep blue asters, or Michaelmas daisies as they were frequently called,” could each be sold “for ten cents, earning enough to hire a cab to take her and the child to the rooming house on Simcoe Street where her son, Baker, lived” (49). In the minds of her children, at least as Daisy imagines them, the name functions as a mirror to reflect the “shadow of solitude

and silence which she came to equate with her own life” (344). They wish their mother could see her own image in the mirror and realize her lonely life. Having associated "Daisy" with “day’s eye”, the children then begin to search for examples in their mother’s life that might lift her out of banality and anonymity: “This little velvet box” should have contained “emerald jewellery”; however, their mother used it for “fingernail clippings” (344). Likewise, their mother “never once in her many years of life experienced the excitement and challenge of oil painting, skiing, sailing, nude bathing...” (345). By offering her children the space to talk about her life, Daisy redeems her lonely soul in this dialogical frame. In this sense, the “injustice” of her life is balanced by the “justice” of her children’s sympathies.

In the context of the bridal lingerie of Daisy Goodwill Hoad, Daisy overhears her children talk about her first short marriage. They seem to understand why their mother sometimes felt depressed, and would lie down on her bed in the middle of the day, looking at the ceiling without sleeping. Her life has been shadowed by a sense of losses from which she has never really recovered. How do her children think of her marriage with their father? To her surprise, the children do not think of her second marriage as a happy one, either. “She could have divorced Dad” is their attitude toward the marriage (352).

Daisy’s fantastic imagination does work wonders, however. By imagining her death, she allows her children to say what they could never say to her face. As one of them puts it, “She had this crazy kind of adjustable intelligence. She could hoist it into view when she wanted” (345). Ironically, “this crazy kind of adjustable intelligence” is what enables her to avoid narcissism in “writing” her own life. As Lejeune says about

“fictitious dialogue”, “we fictitiously reenact a trial, setting the scene and making the roles of prosecution and defense enter into dialogue where things indeed go in favour of the autobiographer who little by little makes his true image triumph” (48). And so words of praise for Daisy need not be spoken in her own voice: “The nurses were always saying how good-natured she was, a smile for everyone” (350).

The recipes, the invitation to a garden club luncheon in 1951, her reading list, her reminders of “must do’s”, and her list of residences are not systematically arranged; yet they offer fragments of a life that “She just let...happen to her” (356):

After Prolonged Reflection

After Torment

With Misgivings With Difficulty With Apologies with

Determination

To lie Alone in Death (347)

Even on the point of death, the “dead” author “keeps [her] emotion well in hand” (cited in Burke 45). “I am still here, inside the (powdery, splintery) bones, ankles, the sockets of my eyes, shoulder, hip, teeth, I am still here, oh, oh” (352). However, the return of the “author” suddenly reminds the reader of her continued existence. This is “a voice that cannot be kept silent in death” (Burke 7). “She needs a quiet place in which to think about this immensity. And she needs someone – anyone – to listen” (*Diaries* 340). Daisy’s final (unspoken) words, “I am not at peace” (361), seem to be a “disembodied voice, a voice that speaks strangely to us” (Burke 7). However, it implies that she has realized “her torment”. “With determination,” she will “go on and on tuned in to the daily music of food and work and weather and speech right up to the last minute” (*Diaries* 342).

It is only such multi-vocality from the author and readers alike that makes it seem that “the author can be at once both dead and alive” (Burke 33).

Daisy occasionally appears as the one who speaks, but most of the time she is the one who is spoken about. Throughout much of the book, she lets herself be absent from letters, photos and dialogue frames. But in this final chapter, Daisy is like a successful impresario, conducting the performance behind the stage: sometimes in a monologue, sometimes in a dialogue, and sometimes in ventriloquy. But all the documents and voices belong ultimately to Daisy herself.

Why, then, does Daisy make the voices and narrative belong to someone else? As she emphasizes, “Our own memory is altogether too cherishing, which is the kindest thing I can say for it. Other accounts are required, other perspectives, but even so our most important ceremonies—birth, love, and death—are secured by whomever and whatever is available” (*Diaries* 37). The real breakthrough in the form of this fictional autobiography is that Daisy makes her autobiography accessible to anyone who wants to offer a version of Daisy’s story in the form of biography. Her use of fictitious witnesses to tell stories about her allows her to escape from the loneliness that has shadowed her life at every turn. Her autobiographical space is fully occupied by her friends, family members, children and clients, emphasizing a relational form of identity to each. The “real” Daisy is as multiple, then, as her circle of relations.

If this kind of telling is familiar from autobiographies like that of Benjamin Franklin, who uses the correspondence of others to speak for his good qualities, Daisy has little use for the Franklinesque myth of autonomy or “the cosy cherishing of self” which also offended Frederic Cruzzi in *Swann*. The novel of Daisy’s life may seem to

scatter into a series of letters, photos, family trees etc., but the truth of these documents is not given, and Daisy tells us through “alternate versions” how complex and variable the “truth” may be.

In the contemporary world, people increasingly construct their sense of self out of pieces that come from many different environments or backgrounds. Autobiography, as a self-representational practice, is complexly situated within the society, the culture and the community in which the self lives. As Lejeune says: “One could not write an autobiography without elaborating and communicating a point of view on the self. This point of view may include some gaps between the perspective of the narrator and that of the protagonist” (45). By having multiple narrators of her life, Daisy breaks down the solipsistic self-centeredness of an individual to mingle her perceptions and imaginings with those of her social circle. Thus she is transformed and reshaped by experiences of her own and others. Though sometimes she is “blinded, throttled, erased from the record of her own existence” (*Diaries* 76), her life story becomes the text in which she ultimately directs the performance of her life. As Michel Foucault remarks in “What is an Author?”, the reader “is primarily concerned with the creating of an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears” (116). “If we want to know the writer of today, it will be through the singularity of his absence and his link to death” (117). Daisy’s withdrawal from the scene, her absence in photos and letters, and even her imagined death not only provide readers with a collective narration but also with the freedom to narrate that life from new perspectives.

Multiple Versions: Multiple Selves

If third-person narration always keeps a distance from the subject, it is still Daisy who tells her life story. To have others share the telling of her life, Daisy invites as many people as she can think of to share in the telling, as she does with the fictitious witnesses of her birth: “She understands this, and thinks of it as one of the tricks of consciousness; there is something almost luscious about it. The narrative maze opens and permits her to pass through. She may be crowded out of her own life—she knows this for a fact and has always known it—but she possesses, as a compensatory gift, the startling ability to draft alternate versions” (190). And “alternate versions” allow the possibility of a whole community of narrators to create a communal history of the self.

Daisy may assume her multiple identities, but she does not show her own face in the twenty-six photographs that are placed at the centre of the book. The absence of Daisy in these photos enacts “the role of the dead man in the game of writing” (Burke 6), because once the “mark of the writer” is revealed, then the game is over, the “absent” character does not need to be imagined. As Barthes notes in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, “the photographic image is full, crammed: no room, nothing can be added to it” (89). Daisy’s daughter, Alice, also suggests that the “self is not a thing carved on entablature” (*Dairies* 231). To display a photo of Daisy is to “assign an Author to a text” and so “to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing” (Barthes, “The Death of the Author” 53). Therefore, the absence of Daisy’s picture is the same as the absence of an author who “haunts this work filled to the brim” with letters, journals, diaries, and descriptions from family members, friends and acquaintances (Slethaug 63).

In miscellaneous letters, we get the story of Daisy's various selves during the years between 1955 and 1964: from a stay-at-home mother to a horticultural columnist. By inviting multiple narrators to comment on her depression in 1965, we get different analyses of her synchronic selves: from a job-hungry self, sexually-repressed self, child-worried self, to a solitary, fearful self. Even for the same event at the same moment, Daisy always has "alterable" selves that appear in the eyes of different people. For instance, at the moment of her marriage to Barker Flett, Daisy has various people remark on her wedding in the section entitled "The Things People Had to Say About the Flett-Goodwill Liaison" (*Diaries* 155). Daisy is seen as one of the managers of the nation by the notable bachelor Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of the Dominion, because "[m]arriage is the highest calling, and after that is parenthood and after that the management of the nation." In the eyes of those who know Barker well, Daisy seems to be unlucky, as the Minister of Agriculture thinks "the bloke (Barker) was queer as a bent kipper"; and Mrs Donaldson, Barker Flett's housekeeper decries Daisy's marriage as "[o]ut of the frying pan, into the fire" (*Diaries* 155). To Fraidy Hoyt, Daisy is more emotional than rational: "She's lost her head, not her heart. I thought she had more sense. A young wife, an old husband—a prescription for disaster, if you believe in the wisdom of folktales." Daisy's father feels sorry for his poor daughter: "He's almost as old as I am.... My poor Daisy" (156). And to Mrs Arthur Hoad, this marriage is even worse: "Disgusting. Incestuous. Obscene" (155). No matter how many versions the story may have, Daisy has to be the author, since who else could know what her father said "to himself" (156), or what Fraidy said "to herself" (155). However, "Daisy's own thoughts on her marriage are not recorded for she has given up the practice of keeping a private

journal” (156). By letting herself be viewed by others, Daisy actually puts “the self [in] a social dialogue which reflects and refracts concrete social interaction” (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 65), so that Daisy can adjust her self to changing company.

The self is thus never fixed at any moment in Daisy’s imagination. The multiple versions of herself come from the same person at each new moment. After Daisy marries Barker and becomes a mother of three children, Fraidy Hoyt comes from Indiana to visit Daisy in Ottawa. We are given two completely different versions of Fraidy’s Daisy. In one version, Daisy is lucky: “Daisy Goodwill with a distinguished husband and a large well-managed house and three beautiful children. Daisy’s got all that any of us ever wanted” (*Diaries* 184). In another version, her children are said to be “crazy, whining and sneaking around all day, then dressing up like little puppets for the return of the great man at the end of the day...your husband is always going off to ‘meetings’ in Toronto or Montreal and I wonder if you have any notion of what happens to him in those places” (184-5). Although Fraidy Hoyt never reveals what she really thinks of Daisy’s life, what Daisy does is to attempt to imagine how Fraidy Hoyt would think of her. In this way, Daisy allows for multiple selves in others, as well as in herself. Having Fraidy produce two different versions of herself responding to her marriage to Barker, Daisy is able to allow for such doubleness in herself as well, to be simultaneously two people in her marriage to this older man.

In *The Stone Diaries*, stories about each character are repeated in different chapters, sometimes by different narrators. But there are no similar accounts of any character as a unified self. In Daisy’s narrative about the old Jew, he seems to be a very disgusting figure: “His arrival is everywhere dreaded.... His tongue is thick and sour, his

eyes bewildered” (20). He is liked by no one: “He reaches forth a black hand and pats young children on the head, catching them before they can run away, discomfiting their mothers and fathers” (21); he also accosts Clarentine Flett, who is “made queasy by the roughness of his hand on her wrist” (22). His business is no more than a peddler; he sells filth to young men, and carries “a selection of pills and lotions, pocket knives and small toys, tobacco and hard candy, all poison” (20-1). He does not even have a name to define him. However, in “Skoot Skutari’s Theory”, the grandson’s mini-biography of his grandfather, the “old Jew”, “Abram Gozhë Skutari was his full name, a self-made man, a millionaire, founder and owner of a nationwide chain of retail outlets” (258). After he witnesses Daisy’s birth, he starts up “his own business, selling work clothes, safety equipment , fire-fighting outfits, drilling supplies, everything in fact, that Eaton’s left out of their catalogue back in 1905” (258). In his grandson’s eyes, the “old Jew” is not only a successful business man, but also a caring and a sympathetic person who is electrified by Daisy’s birth: “He ran to the other end of the village where the doctor lived.... And it was my grandfather, Abram Skutari, the old Jew, who received her final glance—a roomful of people had gathered, but he was the one she fixed her eye upon” (259-260). Supposedly, he possessed “an ancient coin from the old country. He placed that coin on the baby’s forehead” (260), blessing Daisy, this lonely soul. Meanwhile, “the infant’s loneliness” inspired him all his life: “He lived a long life and made a million dollars and loved his wife and was a decent father to his sons” (261). How could the “old Jew” be two such contradictory persons? Daisy and Skoot Skutari are two different individuals in relation to this man. The image of any person is evidently constructed from many different sources.

Daisy never offers a self-judgment of her relation with others; but she allows others to do that for her. In her letter to Daisy, Fan Flett, who was married to Barker's brother, Andrew, complains about Daisy's unkindness to her daughter, Beverly: "I have to tell you her feelings were hurt just terribly by the way she was treated at your home, not asked to stay for supper or offered a bed for the night" (179). But in the account of "Mrs. Flett's Niece," the story of Beverly's visit to Daisy's house is told from another perspective: "She's arrived unannounced, just marched down their street and rang their doorbell and said: here I am. But in no time at all—an hour or two—she was gone" (177). Again there is no date in this "Letter Folded in Mrs. Flett's Dresser Drawer" (178). Actually, what Shields does is to establish a sense of multiplicity in social relations which are never reducible to a single point of view.

From Beverly's letters to Aunt Daisy, we can picture her as a loving person even if she does not know how to express love in her own married life. Beverly's husband's "drinking problem and general laziness" (201) bring her marriage to an end. Now an unwed mother, she asks Daisy for "room and board" at "forty dollars a month" (206). How Daisy replied is unknown, but her "loads of love" to others and Beverly's opinion of Aunt Daisy is implicit in her letter to Daisy: "I can't thank you enough for sending the train ticket" (207). Daisy's caring for others is not underrepresented by the absence of any letter from her; rather, it is uniquely expressed by Beverly: "I've got this funny feeling in the pit of my stomach of my life starting all over again" (207). More deeds, less words—that is the way in which Daisy's complex identity is represented in her own narrative.

If Daisy's multiple selves exist in multiple versions of Daisy's stories from the collective witnesses, then multiple selves of biographical subjects are also embedded in Daisy's biographical accounts of her two fathers: her biological father, Cuyler Goodwill, and her father-in-law, Magnus Flett. Both fathers are born lacking in words of love. Magnus is a man "who wasted no words" (14); "'Shall we marry then?' These were the words of his marriage proposal delivered" to his wife. As for Cuyler, "Nothing in his life has prepared him for the notion of love" (26). However, as Daisy repeats the stories of her two fathers, Magnus, who is deserted by his wife, starts to read all the books Clarentine read and memorizes lines from her favourite book, *Jane Eyre*: "he pronounced them aloud to himself and committed them to memory, so that if by chance his wife should decide to come home and take up her place once more, he would be ready" (100). And finally, he becomes "famous [for] his ability, that is, to recite the whole of *Jane Eyre* by heart, chapter by chapter, every sentence, every word" (296). Although Daisy's story of Magnus is a sad one, he is nonetheless "redeemed" by Daisy's imagination; he is allowed another, more romantic self, even though there is not one shred of evidence that the Magnus Flett she meets in the Orkneys is the Magnus Flett who once lived in Canada (Williams, "Re-imagining" 136-7).

As for the story of her father, Daisy offers a text-book illustration of this "multiplicity of selves" ("Making" 25): "Cuyler Goodwill, to supply an example, traveled in his long life from one incarnation to the next. In his twenties he was a captive of Eros, in his thirties he belonged to God, and still later, to Art. Now in his fifties, he champions Commerce" (*Diaries* 91-2). Although Cuyler is aware of this "multiplicity of selves," "he is oddly unapologetic about his several metamorphoses, rarely looking back, and never

for a minute giving in to the waste and foolishness of nostalgia. ‘People change,’ he’s been heard to say, or ‘Such-and-such was a only a chapter in my life’” (92). Obviously each chapter of one’s life is different, and thus, the construction of the self is alterable. Perhaps it is for this reason that the story of Daisy’s life is divided into distinctly different epochs, almost as if she were a different person in each chapter, with a new “relational” identity.

In Daisy’s fictional autobiography, one’s own multiple versions of history more logically belong to a whole community. The convention of a single narrator is mingled with multiple narrators; and the self is fragmented and split into multiple selves in alternative versions so that the sense of an individual life does not become anyone’s private property in the telling of it.

Chapter 7: *Unless*: Alternate Versions of Reality in the Writing of a Life

While, structurally, *The Stone Diaries* offers alternate versions of a multiple self through plural imagined narrators of Daisy Goodwill's life, Shields's last novel, *Unless* (2002), turns to alternate versions of reality in a highly sophisticated exploration of the various lives of its narrator, Reta Winters, in her several roles as a mother and wife and writer and translator. Making use of a reflexive and self-critical form of autobiography, *Unless* moves even further to imply alternate versions of Shields's own life as a mother and wife and writer and biographer. Interestingly, Shields provides a coda to her own writing career by returning to the theme of "alternate versions" through a thorough study of the functions of words like unless, and similar adverbs or prepositions such as "*therefore, else, other, also, thereof, theretofore, instead, otherwise, despite, already and not yet*" (Shields, *Unless* 313). Shields is finally able to conjure alternate versions of reality out of such small and limited words as "*abstractions of location or relative positions.*" The question is why would she feel it necessary to devote another whole book to "an alternative discourse" at the end of her writing career?

In contradistinction to Wendy Roy's feminist interpretation of *Unless* as multiple versions of "women's silencing in contemporary culture" (124), this chapter explores Shields's metafictional summation of the power of the word to speak of multiple planes of existence beyond any silences that may be imposed by culture. In several ways, Reta Winters' autobiography, rather like her work as a translator, shows why Shields felt there was more to be said about alternate versions of reality, whether private or public. In a

dramatic way, *Unless* offers a telling conclusion to a writing life that, from its very beginning, had oscillated quietly between the “small ceremonies” of personal and domestic life and more imposing, though no more important, questions of political and metaphysical significance.

Unless: Alternate Versions of Life and Life Writing

In some respects, *Unless* presents an alternate version of Shields's second novel, *The Box Garden*, a novel which she had regretted, given its formal and melodramatic flaws. This time, she transposes the confessions of a mother whose boy is kidnapped into the autobiography of a mother of a missing girl who has left her family, has dropped out of university, and now sits on a Toronto street corner with "a cardboard sign on her chest: a single word printed in black marker—GOODNESS" (12). Shields returns to this potentially melodramatic plot to introduce a moment of radical change in the autobiographer's life which, in Aristotelian fashion, moves from happiness to unhappiness, but also to peer through more than one lens into “a moment in history” (*Unless* 309). For instance, in the case of "the nature of a behavioural interlude” of the missing girl (214), several reasons are projected for her actions. The theory of Reta Winters, the mother of the missing girl, is that "Norah had become aware of an accretion of discouragement, that she had awakened in her twentieth year to her solitary state of non-belonging, understanding at last how little she would be allowed to say" (309-10), and that to sit at a Toronto street corner might be a way for her to overcome her social invisibility by wearing the sign of “Goodness”. Norah's father suspects rather that “the cause of her distress" is her broken relationship with her boyfriend, or perhaps her

conflicts with a literature professor. Danielle Westerman, whose memoirs Reta has been translating from French into English, "believes that Norah has simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power" (104). Ultimately, the narrative moves toward another proposition: "[P]erhaps because there [is] no other way she could register her existence," then Norah might don "the banner of goodness—goodness, not greatness" (310). By providing these multiple versions of Norah's defection, the narrative opens itself to various possibilities in the understanding and writing of a life.

Reta concludes as much about the new novel she is planning to write: "This will be a book about lost children, about goodness, and going home and being happy and trying to keep the poison of the printed page in perspective" (16). In contrast to *The Box Garden* where Charleen Forrest is shaken out of her social and psychological isolation through the hackneyed device of a plot about kidnapping, Reta Winters stands outside the plot of her missing child in her alternative existence as a writer. Shields is thus able to rewrite a plot about which she has always felt badly, since it was constructed "very flimsily" (M. Anderson 62), by returning to formal questions about the living and the writing of a life. In other words (both literally and figuratively), she converts the teller's act into a more subtle means of complicating and resolving that simple plot. Ultimately, *Unless* redeems the failures of *The Box Garden* by means of its metaphysical reflections on the nature of reality and its quantum-like conjectures about the observer's role in determining that reality.

Aside from the plot, there are similarities in the psychological isolation of the two autobiographical subjects. Charleen Forrest, a poet and a mother who does not want to change her married name even twelve years after her divorce, tries to cope with an

uncertain life after a failed marriage by burying herself in "writing the greater part of [her] pain and humiliation" in a naïve confession of personal failure (*Box Garden* 152). As a result, she retreats into a "box garden" of social isolation, suffering from "the most debilitating disease"—the disease of subjectivity. Having failed in finding her way out of solipsism by writing poetry, Charleen has to learn that self-expression is not enough to change the course of her life, not if her expression is limited to a simple restatement of that life. Through the process of finding her kidnapped boy, Charleen will come to learn that it is only through developing a more relational identity that she can make kindness a doorway out of the "box garden".

To a certain extent, *Unless* repeats this story of a writing mother who also wants to preserve her isolated self by writing a tragic fiction in "her box room" (*Unless* 106). In a much more sophisticated way than Charleen is able to explore other dimensions of selfhood, however, Reta plays with her multiple identities. Besides her maiden name, Reta Ruth Summers, and her married name, Reta Winters, she also signs her correspondence with pseudonyms like Xeda d'Orange, Reta Orange d'Ville, and Reta Hayworth (221, 249, 274). She even switches roles in her writing, taking the part of both a translator and a writer. Having translated Danielle Westerman's memoirs for some time, Reta finds herself locked into a solipsistic world with Danielle. Like Danielle, "she feels the pangs of existential loneliness" (15). Thus, she decides "to pursue [her] own writing rather than translate Dr. Westerman's work" (30).

In marked contrast to Danielle, who "has no partner" or "child, or any surviving blood connections" (15), Reta Winters, "the doctor's wife (that fine man!), the mother of three daughters, the writer" (43), who used to be such a "sunny woman," is no longer so

sure that “she has an instinct for missing the call of grief” (42, 107), since “something happened when her back was turned” (42). Her “good, little obedient girl” goes off the track “in pursuit of goodness” at a corner of a Toronto street. Now all her “living perfume [is] washed off” (107), and she feels empty because “[n]othing has prepared her for the wide, grey simplicity of sadness, and for the knowledge that this is what the rest of her life will be like” (66). Finding no way to cope with her emotional pain, Reta turns to the creation of fiction for tricking “the neural synapses into a grand avoidance of [her] own sorrow” (107), a move which might help her get “through a period of great unhappiness and loss” (1). As she envisions it, “my sorrow will eventually become material for my writing,” “a very small poultice to hold up against my damaged self” (2).

While Reta plans to write a sad novel about love and marriage to meet her “need for retreat” to her “box room” (45), her characters Alicia and Roman will not follow her diktat, not even when they “clamour and romp and cling to the island that is their life’s predicament—they long for love, but selfishly strive for self-preservation” (13). They leave Reta, in fact, to deal with her problem of being an estranged mother: Norah is “on the path to goodness. At that moment, I, her mother, was more absent from myself than she” (12). However, Reta still does not know how to be “serious about this business of being good” both as a mother and a writer (106).

If *Unless* dramatizes “goodness” by placing the “banner of goodness” around the neck of the missing girl, Reta has yet to learn that it is actually goodness, and “not greatness” (310), for which Norah is searching. As Reta notes, “Goodness is respect that has been rarified and taken to a higher level. It has emptied itself of vengeance, which has no voice at all.” However, as a writer, Reta still has to find a voice for goodness at “a

higher level” so that she can stop people like her daughter from taking painful detours in their life journey. She has to discover that shutting herself in a “box room” and writing her own sorrow into a novel is not goodness either: “Novels help us turn down the volume of our own interior ‘discourse,’ but unless they can provide an alternative, hopeful course, they’re so much narrative crumble” (224). What we need instead are novels which provide a “lever that finally shifts reality into a new perspective” (225), a philosophy which is finally articulated from the perspective of “unless”, and its awareness of other dimensions to experience. “*Unless* provides you with a trapdoor, a tunnel into the light, the reverse side of not enough. *Unless* keeps you from drowning in the presiding arrangements” (224-5). At this point, Reta comes to realize that goodness from the perspective of a writer means to provide readers with a new perspective on crucial moments in their life history.

As it turns out, Reta’s philosophy of a redemptive uncertainty comes from her own experience. At the beginning of the novel, she is still “attempting to ‘count [her] blessings” (1): she is a mother of three “intelligent and lively and attractive and loving” daughters, a translator who has done three volumes of Danielle’s memoirs, and a writer who has already published several short stories, who has just started a novel of her own, *My Thyme Is Up*—a remarkably insouciant play on words by Shields herself who was suffering at the time from terminal cancer. All of Reta’s life, so far, has been full of happiness and she has yet to taste real unhappiness. As she recalls, “All my life I’ve heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I’ve never understood what they meant.” Then her happiness is smashed in an instant by her daughter who goes missing from her own life. Reta does not have any clue as to why

an "intelligent and beautiful girl from a loving family" like Norah can go off the track (13); she wonders if she can ever put her daughter back on the track; worse still, she wonders if there is ever anything "natural about her efflorescence of goodness." As a writer, Reta finds herself unable to employ the story of her loss, because "it [does not] rise out of the ordinary plot lines of a life story" (13).

However, reconsidering her own motives for writing novels, Reta begins to see the light. By nature, she assumes, people search for joy and happiness in their lives; but real life is often less than satisfactory; or it may look very dark and hopeless. Then, people may turn to novels for their enjoyment and satisfaction. And if novels fail to offer consolation, or to provide "an alternative hopeful course" (224), they are not really worth anything. In other words, unless writers can find something meaningful and hopeful in existence, there is no goodness in their writing. Returning to her own writing, Reta then drops her plans to write a tragic novel and decides to turn her "great unhappiness and loss" into a comic fiction, which may provide "a transfiguration of some kind" (320). Now, she adopts a new starting point in *My Thyme Is Up*, focusing upon Alicia's unhappiness and loss of her love for Roman, whose "real love, of course, is Sylvia" (285). Reta even remarks ironically how "Alicia was not as happy as she deserved to be" (15). But, instead of seeking catharsis for her own sorrow and loss through her subject Alicia, Reta seeks an alternate version of her predicament in her own darker moments. Thus, she ends her novel with Alicia's new perspective on her decision to give up her marriage with Roman, which might turn into a tragedy: "Alicia triumphs, but in her own slightly capricious way" (318). In so doing, Reta is able to preserve the "novel's architecture, the lovely slope of predicament, the tendrils of surface detail, the calculated curving upward

into inevitability” (13). In terms of her moral vision, however, she has also taken goodness to a higher level, which “has emptied itself of vengeance” and of “unhappiness and loss” in her own life (300). In this sense, *My Thyme Is Up* becomes an alternate version of Reta’s life.

If *My Thyme Is Up* presents an alternate version of reality and imagination concerning Reta’s life, *Unless* likewise offers an alternate version of reality in Shields’s own life. In her study of *Unless*, Wendy Roy has already noted that both the first sentence in Reta’s novel, *My Thyme Is Up*, and that of Shields’s novel, refer to Shields’s own life: “She has told several interviewers that she translated her unhappiness about her experience with breast cancer into Reta’s sorrow about her daughter (which Reta in turn translates into Alicia’s unhappiness regarding her relationship)” (130). At a superficial level, Shields appears to invent an alternate pain of loss, which is emotionally greater than the death she is approaching, so that she does not have to confront her real pain, which may be more crippling physically. Thus, she writes, “To lose. To have lost. I believed these visitations of darkness lasted only a few minutes or hours and that these saddened people, in between bouts, were occupied, as we all were, with the useful monotony of happiness. But happiness is not what I thought. Happiness is the lucky pane of glass you carry in your head. It takes all your cunning just to hang on to it, and once it’s smashed you have to move into a different sort of life” (1).

Like Reta, Shields had not experienced real unhappiness before now. Then, suddenly, she realizes that her life is about to change: “In my new life—the summer of the year 2000—I am attempting to ‘count my blessings.’ Everyone I know advises me to take up this repellent strategy.” Although Shields as the scriptor of Reta’s narration is

obviously indulging in sarcasm, what she cannot conceal is the genuine unexpectedness of change in her life. Whether in her disgust at “a filthy object,” a “MASTECTOMY BRA” (307), or at the “cancer [that] had advanced, that it had metastasized to her lungs, and the remaining time would be, just a week or so” (302), we sense a note of personal tragedy in Shields’s life at the time of writing *Unless*, a note which echoes the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, in that “the incidents are unexpected and yet one is a consequence of the other” (39). And yet Shields turns resolutely away from tragedy in order to transform her sorrow into a new perspective on life.

In the chapter entitled, “Whence,” Reta writes to Peter Harding, who had already died of cancer, “I was sorry to read [from the obituary] that you have struggled so long with your cancer, but ‘bravely,’ as the report says, all the way to the end. What an interesting life you’ve led” (270). This is very much the alternative version of reality that Shields has imagined with respect to her own death. As Reta says about herself in writing, “She had always claimed she had little imagination, that she wrote out of the material of her own life, but that she was forever on the lookout for what she called putty. By this she meant the arbitrary, the odd, the ordinary, the mucilage of daily life that cements our genuine moments of being” (96). By imagining her character writing a letter to somebody after that person’s death, Shields enlarges on the possibilities of writing a life. In effect, these imagined alternate versions of reality are “able to reinforce the thin tissue of predictable fiction and bend it into unlikely shapes” through the catalytic conversion of life writing (271). At one remove, the writer’s expression of goodness allows her to bind her own stories together with the stories of others, to make the best of an untenable world so that people can overcome the difficulties in their lives.

Manifestly, we human beings are natural organisms doomed to personal extinction; even our tissues are filled with unpredictable scripts. So, “[u]nless you’re lucky, unless you’re healthy, fertile, unless you’re loved and fed, unless you’re clear about your sexual direction, unless you’re offered what others are offered, you go down into the darkness, down to despair. *Unless* [if Reta refers to the particle of grammar, Shields may also refer to the title of her novel] provides you with a trapdoor, a tunnel into the light, the reverse side of not enough” (224). In other words, to be fully prepared for any difficult moment in our life journey, we need a new perspective, a hopeful course through which we might still accommodate changes in our lives.

Whether the change is from happiness to unhappiness, or the change is in reverse, the quality of response is all. As Reta tells us, “Two years ago I inhabited another kind of life in which I scarcely registered my notion of heartbreak. Hurt feelings, minor slights, minimal losses, small treacheries, even bad reviews—that’s what I thought sadness was made of: tragedy was someone not liking my book” (79). Clearly, the changes in her life have brought a change in her understanding of tragedy. Two years ago, she inhabited another kind of life; it was a sunny life, and a happy life. It was a life in which she did not understand the meaning of tragedy. Now she finds herself in a darkness she had not known before, had not believed it even existed. By turning her loss into a comic fiction, however, Reta offers “an alternative, hopeful course” (224) not only for herself, but for her implied author.

As Roy suggests, “In *Unless*, life itself is represented as narrative” (131). Change is an inevitable topic in life writing, as Reta learns from her great sorrow. A theorist of life writing, like Paul John Eakin, also reminds us that the “body changes, consciousness

changes, memories change, and identity changes too whether we like it or not” (*How Our Lives* 93). As a writer, Reta is forced to confront change from both sides of the coin, not only from sorrow to joy, but also from joy to sorrow. In effect, life is a constant dialogue, where happiness always negotiates with unhappiness. Thus, life itself is composed of a dialogue. However, the problem for the moment with Reta’s daughter Norah is the “unrelenting monologue” in her head (144-5). She does not know how to get herself out of this monologue and thus cannot cope with change in her life. Most dangerously, as Reta warns us, “You will be killed because of your ignorance. It could happen at any moment” (143). Also, as Reta admits, “This is why I read novels: so I can escape my own unrelenting monologue” (145). From the narrative point of view, as well, Eakin “has identified autobiographical writing as a way of coping with the otherwise ‘unbearable’ knowledge” (*How Our Lives* 93) of death and change. Therefore, autobiographical fiction offers an alternate reality, which may be different from the reality in which we live, but is not just escapism or a distraction from real life; rather, it is a coping mechanism, or better yet, an evolutionary strategy of adaptation to changes in the environment.

That Shields is adapting to changes in her own life is also evident from the change in strategies that we find in the alternate versions of a “fraught relationship between mothers and daughters” (Roy, “Unless” 127) found in *Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*. In those first two novels, both of the autobiographical narrators, Judith Gill and Charleen Forrest, see a lack of narrative in their lives as their mother’s fault. Because they are starved for narrative as children, they become writers in their adult lives to meet their narrative hunger. But in a late novel like *Unless*, Shields starts to write the dichotomy of the mother-daughter relationship from the point of view of both the

daughter and the mother. As a daughter, Reta Summers has always appreciated both her parents who gave her bilingual skills: “My mother always spoke to me in French and my father in English, and I was allowed to reply in either language. This was part of a pact the two of them had made before my birth, that any child of theirs would grow up in two languages, and they would share responsibilities for this plan” (146). Rita also thinks fondly of how her mother nurtured her in restless moments of her childhood. As she recalls: “I was the inept child searching for those moments of calm when I would find adult validation or at least respite from my endless uncertainty” (148). Unlike Judith Gill and her sister Charleen, Reta has no childhood complaints about her mother. “Every day her [mother’s] image rises up in one form or another, brushing against me with a word or gesture” (108).

However, as a mother who writes, Reta Winters feels guilty about her “gaps of comprehension” with respect to her own children: “A child is suspended in a locked closet of unknowing, within the body’s borders, that darker place” (144). Now Reta believes that Norah “has temporarily been lost” (152), because she has lost connection with her family, with her friends, and even with her own past and future. Unless someone leads her out of “that darker place,” she will be lost forever. Reta remembers that during her own childhood, she was always bothered by whimsical questions such as: “Why was the sky blue if you looked up but not when you looked at it sideways? What if the moon fell down into our garden or worse, onto the roof? These questions, more like miracles in their phenomenological shapes, gathered around me and formed the oxygen I breathed, and what they whispered to me was: You will very possibly be killed because of your ignorance. It could happen at any moment” (143). Reta also recalls an assault that

occurred in her garden when she was a child, an act “which might ultimately lead to death” (144). However, her “mother took this assault with remarkable good humour, as though she didn’t know the real danger [Reta] was in.” Therefore, Reta has survived one of the “darker moments” in her childhood with her mother’s help.

In retrospect, Reta begins to blame herself for not having prepared her children for the randomness and uncertainty of life: “She’s got my disease, only worse.” When Norah was very young, she was particularly troubled by the threat of non-communication, of mutual incomprehensibility in the world. Hearing an airplane overhead, she seemed sad about her own invisibility: “‘The pilot doesn’t know I’m eating an egg.’ She seemed shocked at this perception of loneliness, but was willing to register the shock calmly so as not to alarm me” (89). In this respect, Norah retrospectively “embodies invisibility and goodness” (12). Out of her guilt, Reta decides to buy “a beautiful and serious scarf” for Norah’s coming birthday (88). Reta realizes that two years ago, Norah “would be grateful for any scarf I brought her, pleased I had taken the time, but for once I wanted, and had an opportunity to procure, a scarf that would delight her heart” (89). However, the “thought of myself as a careful and deliberate shopper brought me a bolt of happiness” (88). Now, the “scarf became an idea” for happiness (89). It will not only bring happiness to Reta, but it will also bring happiness to Norah’s future: “Norah’s future happiness now balanced not on acceptance at McGill or the acquisition of a handsome new boyfriend but on the simple ownership of a particular article of apparel, which only I could supply” (90). Therefore, the red scarf enables a relational self to extend mutually between mother and daughter.

As Roy’s study suggests, “In the same way that Shields wrote companion books

to her first and [second] novels, Reta writes a sequel, working carefully to retain the style of narration and details about characters that she established in the first book” (130). She alters Alicia, the main character in her new novel, by embracing her extended self “as a way of rewriting the modernist tradition” (Roy, “Unless” 127), a tradition which “has set the individual, the conflicted self, up against the world” (Shields, *Unless* 121). At the same time, Reta begins to write into her own autobiography the roles of “parents (loving or negligent)” and “siblings (weak, envious, self-destructive)” (121-2). Her “clever perspective has caused a part of [her] mind to fly up to the box room skylight” (319). So, goodness for Reta, in another sense, is also to write about the “family dynamics” (Roy 127) in overcoming the “crisis” (*Unless* 214), a kind of crisis which is hard to predict in life. As Reta puts it, all of us “fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang” (270). Nonetheless, facing Norah’s abnormal behaviour, nobody blames her. Instead, everyone tries to accompany Norah in her loneliness: Tom, the father stays with Norah every Saturday morning; the two sisters give up their volleyball time to stay with Norah. “Everyone held out hopes that she would return to being the Norah we knew and loved, that she would recover from whatever delusion has seized her, that we were doing everything we could for her” (234).

Physically, what Norah has done seems to be insane; however, “she has chosen [vagrancy]” to overcome her mental crisis, which, in turn, has brought another kind of crisis to her parents’ lives—unpredictable uncertainty in their mid-life. Thus, *Unless* becomes an alternate version of Jack and Brenda’s mid-life crises in the *Happenstance*

novels. However, unlike Jack's loss of faith in history and Brenda's loss of love for her husband and her doubt about reality, the crisis Reta meets with is a far more serious change, a sense of overwhelming unpredictability in life. This change might happen to anyone at any moment in life. In dealing with uncertainty, the grammatical logic of "[u]nless keeps you from drowning in the prevailing arrangement" (224).

Even in its narrative structure, *Unless* is an alternate version of *Small Ceremonies*. The earlier novel evidently created a meta-narrative of life writing that demonstrates how the biography of Susanne Moodie is necessarily a form of autobiography of Judith Gill, a "translation" of her subject's life into another form of the writer's life, carrying inevitable traces of fiction in both lives. In contrast, *Unless* is a meta-fiction of life writing that shows how the autobiographical version of Reta's life influences both her translation of Danielle's life and her fictional version of Alicia's life, where an alternate version of reality seems to be inevitable in either form of life writing. Like *Small Ceremonies*, however, *Unless* covers nine months of the writing process, an obvious analogy for gestation. But what is "born" in the later novel is qualitatively different from the concept of translation in the earlier novel. In contrast to Judith, Reta notes that, "March is a dreary month in our part of the world, with its blackened snow and random melts" (59). The larger implication, however, is that birth is necessarily preceded by a death.

***Unless*: Alternate Versions of What is Called Reality**

For a novel, the very title suggests the uncertain possibilities of life: "Unless you're lucky, unless you're healthy, fertile, unless you're loved and fed, unless you're clear about your sexual direction, unless you're offered what others are offered, you go

down into the darkness, down to despair” (224). From this overarching, general condition of uncertainty, we proceed to the specific recognition Reta achieves upon hearing of her husband’s complaint that “his mother was a lousy housekeeper” (232): “Unless you had a mother like that, you wouldn’t understand. And unless you had been given an alternative glimpse of orderliness, you wouldn’t mind.” Facing so many endless possibilities of dissatisfaction, disappointment, darkness, and despair, Reta nonetheless raises questions for other storytellers as well. What does a writer do with these “unless” situations?

“Novelists,” Shields warns aspiring writers, are always in danger “of indulging in the artifice of coincidence” (314). However, if novels fail to “provide an alternative, hopeful course, they’re just so much narrative crumble” (224). Obviously, Shields points out that the ultimate responsibility of the novelist is to offer alternate versions of reality which are like “a tunnel into the light” and “the lever that finally shifts reality into a new perspective” (224-5). Throughout this whole novel, she therefore elaborates a metaphysical and philosophical concept of alternate versions of reality at various levels.

At the linguistic level, Shields sees *unless* and several other adverbs and prepositions as “little chips of grammar” that “form a coherent narrative, but they are hard to define since they are abstractions of location or relative positions” (313). However, connotatively, she sees *unless* as “a miracle of language and perception” (225): “The conjugation and (sometimes) adverb *unless*, with its elegiac undertones, is a term used in logic, a word breathed by the hopeful or by writers of fiction wanting to prise open the crusted world and reveal another plane of being, which is similar in its geographical particulars and peopled by those who resemble themselves” (314). Obviously, the very word *unless* suggests another possibility. However, unless is also

“the worry word of the English language. It flies like a moth around the ear, you hardly hear it and yet everything depends on its breathy presence” (224). Although the word *unless* appears in every English speaker’s vocabulary, it is rarely used in writing. Its absence in writing is the mark of a monological discourse, the sign of a one-sided perspective. However, “if you add a capital *s* to *unless*, you get *Sunless*”, meaning it offers no light in the tunnel. The very existence of such words as *unless* is a linguistic admission of uncertainty, of a certain doubt about the capacity of language to register all of existence.

At a more writerly level, however, *unless* is an admission of something less doubtful in the writer’s need for expression. As Reta puts it, “I am focusing on the stirrings of the writerly impulse, or the ‘long littleness,’ to use Frances Cornford’s phrase, of a life spent affixing small words to large, empty pages. We may pretend otherwise, but to many writers this is the richest territory we can imagine. There are novelists who go to the trouble of cloaking their heroes in loose crossover garments, turning them into painters, or architects, but no one’s fooled. This matters, the remaking of an untenable world through the nib of a pen; it matters so much I can’t stop doing it” (208).

Obviously Shields makes every effort in this novel to use the “small words” as much as possible. Each of the thirty-seven chapters of *Unless* has an unusual title such as “Here’s,” “Nearly,” “Once,” “Wherein,” ... “Already,” “Hereto,” and “Not Yet.” They are the smallest bits and pieces of language, and yet they are able to smooth out the writing, or to link fragments of events in a life that is “full of isolated events, but these events, if they are to form a coherent narrative, require odd pieces of language to cement them together” (313). However, once these “little chips of grammar” are used in specific

contexts, their meanings and functions are clearly represented. For instance, in the earlier chapter “Once”, Reta comments upon the charm she used to have: “A woman’s charm is with her for life” (28). *Once* something happens unexpectedly, however, she has to revise some of her common stock of truths: “I have led a reflective life, a life of thought [which for] a writer, a translator is about to change.” Thus, she ends the chapter with “The charming Mrs. Winters slips on her comfortable beige raincoat....” (35). In another chapter, “Already,” Reta describes how Norah has already recovered from the deconstruction of her self: “She smiled faintly in my direction, then reached over and covered my wrist with her roughened hand. ‘Norah,’ I said again quickly. ‘You’re awake.’ Her mouth made the shape of a word, ‘Yes’” (305). Even at the level of chapter titles, alternate versions of reality are already embedded in the plot. Actually, all the “isolated events” in each chapter are linked by these words such as “once”, and “already”. They really make “a coherent narrative” out of the events of Reta’s life, Danielle’s life and Alicia’s life. “Through the nib of a pen,” Shields remakes an “untenable world” to render it more manageable in fiction.

Etymologically, the word, *untenable*, is from the French word, *tenure*, which means to hold on to. An untenable world thus means a world that one cannot hold on to. And mostly the world is untenable because we cannot manage it; neither can we master it. But then what are we to do with it? We can only make it tenable by offering a new perspective on it through novels or fictions. Ideally, fictions offer a model on the other side of an untenable world, by which we can apprehend the real world, and see it in a new light. Here, Shields is not far from Eakin’s sense of the value of narrative subjectivity: “When it comes to autobiography, *narrative* and *identity* are so intimately

linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other. Thus, narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience” (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 100). Indeed, the only way we can make sense of our identity, or more properly, fashion an identity, is to narrate a story; the only way we can change reality is to remake it in our own image through narrative; the only way we can cope with our life is to make a story out of it. While Eakin offers the example of a little girl who chants the words, *Oleander, Jacaranda*, to hold onto the world, Reta holds onto her world by telling Alicia’s story. As Reta tells us, “The only efficient way I had to palliate my worry about Norah was to melt into an alternative reality, to hie myself downtown to Wychood City” (256). In the created world, it is really “the comfort of it, the natural curvature to which we cling” (257). Only in this way can we move about in the conceptual models of a life that we would like to build.

Paradoxically, Reta, who once preferred to “pursue [her] own writing rather than translate Dr. Westerman’s work,” now seems to understand better her role as a translator as she experiences the depth of the word, *unless*: “Ironically, *unless*, the lever that finally shifts reality into a new perspective, cannot be expressed in French. *À moins que* doesn’t quite have the heft; *sauf* is crude” (225). *À moins que* is the closest parallel in French to *unless*; *sauf* really means “except”. But neither of them comes close to the connotation of the word, *unless*. At this point, Reta finally realizes that it is necessary for her to write both in English and French, because they supplement and re-interpret each other. In this sense, translation is not just a creative act or supplement in language, but ultimately another way of seeing things. When a concept or an event is translated into another language, it is not really the same concept or event in different languages because

something in both the concept and the event is not translatable in the other language or culture. Reta's belated insight is actually anticipated from the very beginning of the novel, when she admits, "I am a little uneasy about claiming *Isolation* as my own writing, but Dr. Westerman, doing one of her hurrying, over-the-head gestures, insisted that translation, especially of poetry, is a creative act. Writing and translating are convivial, she said, not oppositional, and not at all hierarchical" (3). The translation of Danielle's *Isolation* from French to English is not just a translation, i.e. putting the same thing into a different language system. It is really a creative act; it is another kind of new communication; it shifts one perspective into another. Ultimately, what Reta does in translation, then, is to seek another possibility, another meaning, in the second experience of the event.

At a sub-conscious level, Reta also notices that dreams are alternative versions of life: "I resist the theory of insufficient love. I understand dreams to be an alternate language and one we don't necessarily need to learn" (84). Dreams provide alternative versions to our ordinary everyday reality. In Reta's daily life, the sense of not having enough food stored in the fridge comes to her mind during the "more than twenty years I've been responsible for producing three meals a day for the several individuals I live with" (84). However, "my empty-fridge dream, I like to think, points only to the abrupt cessation, or interruption, of daily obligation." Then, she goes on to explain how she in fact lives another version of life in her dreams: "Away from home liberated from my responsibility for meals, unexpected calculations steal into my dreams like engine run-on and leave me blithering with this diminished store of nurture and the fact of my unpreparedness. Such a small dream crisis, but I always wake with a sense of terror" (85).

Even though she does not put much faith in dreams, Reta sees them as more than pedantic, as something other than ordinary. As a matter of fact, a dream is a whole new version of reality.

At the political level as well, in a far more overtly political way than one can detect in any of her other works, Shields portrays Canada herself as an “alternate version” of national being. The novelist and translator functions as a bilingual citizen to demonstrate how Canada may benefit from both French and English. For, in much the same way that Reta writes novels in English and translates poetry in French, Canada mandates its very existence, as it pre-scribes its constitution, in both English and French. In a quiet fashion, we learn why Reta and Danielle have both agreed to change the title of her translation of Danielle’s poetry from its French connotation of *L’Île*: “We agreed to change the title to *Isolation*. The direct translation, *Island*, didn’t quite capture the sense Danielle had at that time in her life of being the only feminist in the world” (102). In terms of the political analogy, what the translated title suggests is that no nation is really an island; nor, like the book itself, can it really be one thing.

Reta’s translation of Danielle’s memoirs is likewise fraught with a larger significance:

Traduction she insists on calling this process, even though she’s lived in an English-speaking milieu for forty years now. When am I going to be finished with the *traduction* of chapter two, she wants to know. This is the chapter in which she takes a long back view and deals with her ex-husband’s insane jealousy following the publication of her first book of poetry, which came out to ravishing reviews in

France in 1949. It was titled *L'Île*, and published in Paris by Éditions Grandmont.

(101)

These differing one-word titles connote very different things: *L'Île* refers to a physical island, while *isolation* implies a psychological island, or psychological isolation. So the two different language systems do not express exactly the same thing. Reta can now sum up this whole question of *traduction* in semantic terms: “Oddly, the epic confusion of my early years was not caused but rather mitigated by immersion in two languages” (146). Cherishing her “immersion in two languages,” Reta maintains that her “doubleness clarified the world” (146). Such a definition of *traduction* might help to clarify the value of doubleness to anyone who detects an element of solipsism in Romantic notions of singularity.

At this political level of a dual-language system, Reta is more than a public representative of Canada’s two official languages. Speaking French to her mother in private and to her father in English, her private life is made a miniature model of the pluralism of the country: “My mother, a *pure laine* Marteau from Montreal, spoke a musical French, and my father a crisp Edinburghian English, only slightly eroded by his years in Canada” (146). Happily for Reta, her doubleness is productive, since this “doubleness clarified the world; *la chaise*, chair; *le rideau*, curtain; *être*, to be; *le chien*, dog. Every object, every action, had an echo, an explanation. Meaning had two feet, two dependable etymological stems. I swam in English, a relaxed backstroke, but stood up to my hips in French. The French-English dictionary with its thready blue cover was our family bible, since we were a family unattached to formal religious practice” (146-7).

Bilingualism in the family may differ from official bilingualism, of course,

because the family voluntarily negotiates its doubleness in culture and identity. But is a trope of the nation-as-family necessarily different? Or are differences in culture, in language, in past experience, and even in sexual history, not well suited to suggest the various sorts of difference that remain to be negotiated in a nation founded in difference? Canada continues to be one of the few countries in the world which is not only officially bilingual, but is officially committed to plural versions of its identity as a “multicultural” nation. In this sense, it appears that Shields may have been building throughout her writing career to this ultimate expression of the relation between the multiple self and the politically plural community. It does not defy belief to see Shields expanding the notion of alternate versions from a version of the multiple self in *The Stone Diaries* to these alternate versions of language, and of political multiphrenia in *Unless*. In the novel’s own terms, to speak these two languages is to stand on two feet, to be able to ground oneself in two cultures. But this, of course, is to have alternate versions of the nation; neither is sufficient, or even healthy, in its own right.

Aside from cultural and political doubleness, Shields shows how the two thousand-year-old history of Christianity may also be informed by a metaphysics of doubleness: “My old friend Gemma Walsh, who has just been appointed to a Chair in Theology (hello there, Chair) tells me that the Christian faith is balanced on the words *already* and *not yet*. Christ has *already* come, but he has *not yet* come. If you [happen to be] a stereoscopic viewer, [much in the way that] traditional Christians bring together the Father, Son and Holy Ghost of the Trinity, then you will have understood something about the power and metaphysicality of these unsorted yet related words” (313). Reta thus comes to regard theology in terms of two time frames, *already* and *not yet*: Christ

was born as a man, lived and died, and was supposed to come again as resurrected in power and glory; at the same time, he has *not* come *yet*. Both stories are true because they are alternate versions of the same story. More significantly, Shields uses these adverbs to bracket Christian history with the idea that the Christian story only finds its coherence in non-historical truth. Thus, Shields does far more than merely talk about the grammar of adverbs such as *already* and *not yet*; she raises narrative coherence in this novel to the level of theological coherence.

On a personal level, *already* and *not yet* are words which are intimately related to Reta's life. At the beginning of her autobiography, she *already* has a happy family with "a husband, Tom, who loves me and is faithful to me," with three "intelligent and lively and attractive and loving daughters" (1-2). Listing the achievements of her writing in a variety of genres—translation, essays, poetry, short stories, the novel—she is *already* an accomplished professional. Then, suddenly, her eldest daughter goes off the track, begging at a street corner in Toronto. Even so, with this binary system in mind—*already* and *not yet*—she will come to believe that her real happiness has *not yet* arrived. Ultimately, she hopes to be maturely happy because "intelligence will see her through this crisis" (214): "It is bliss to see, though Tom and I have *not yet* permitted ourselves wild rejoicing" (320).

In retrospect, such a binary principle seems to have informed Shields's whole writing career. Like Reta, Shields had begun by writing poetry and short stories. After publishing a few poems and stories, and defending her MA thesis, Shields found she wanted to write novels. As she told Eleanor Wachtel in an earlier interview: "I always loved to read novels so of course I wanted to try and write one, especially about the kind

of women that I believed existed, that I never seemed to find any books about” (28). Thus, she decided, “I’m going to be a novelist all my life” (28). However, when she sent out to publishers her first novel, *Small Ceremonies*, she received nine rejection letters. “They all sent it back and I was fairly discouraged.” *Already* and *not yet* can fairly describe Shields’s own situation at that time: “I was a happier poet than I was a fiction writer” (29). She was *already* happy with the ‘wonderful sense of satisfaction [that] arrives most often with poetry.’ She was *not yet* happy with her fiction. However, after two decades of persistent writing, she became a successful novelist with nine novels to her credit, most notably the Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Stone Diaries*. Even as she was still learning to accept her lionization as a writer, the breast cancer (discovered in 1998) was already beginning to deprive her of her happiness. And yet the existence of all those books continues to extend Shields’s life as a writer. As her daughter, Anne Giardini, says about her mother’s double happiness, “She has lived somewhat longer than her doctors predicted, no doubt assisted by the ‘bibliotherapy.... My mother’s life will not be as long as we wish, but the books she has read and written have expanded her life incalculably and have provided her with the surest route to double happiness” (21).

Even on the point of her own death, Shields could speculate, in Christian fashion though not herself a believer, whether death might be the last word, *unless* there is another world to come; *unless* there is another life to come. In that sense, Shields uses the concept of death quite hopefully: this plane of being might be the only one there is, unless we go on somewhere else. By combining Christian metaphysics with “those little chips” of grammar, Shields thus implies an enormous possibility of *unless* at the end of her life. In other words, unless we are materially mistaken to say that we only exist bodily,

we might be fated to continue in another dimension. This is both true to Shields's life and her fiction, if one recalls how Daisy Goodwill finally "sees herself, her living cells replaced by the insentience of mineral deposition" (*Diaries* 358). However, readers can still hear "Daisy Goodwill's final (unspoken) words—"I am not at peace"—uttered by "her stone self" (361, 359). In real life, this would be utterly bizarre; nonetheless, in fiction, the story of life-after-death might well open up another whole plane of being.

Even material reality, of course, is not a given, as Reta learns when, to her astonishment, "Alicia triumphs, but in her own slightly capricious way—and the book will be published in early fall. Everything is neatly wrapped up at the end, since tidy conclusions are a convention of comic fiction, as we all know. I have bundled up each of the loose narrative strands, but what does such fastidiousness mean? It does not mean that all will be well for ever and ever, amen; it means that for five minutes a balance has been achieved at the margin of the novel's thin textual plane; make that five seconds; make that the millionth part of a nanosecond. The uncertainty principle; did anyone ever believe otherwise" (318)? Obviously, Shields is finally willing to gesture toward Heisenberg and quantum mechanics for material proof of the notion that physical measurement in three dimensions of matter cannot explain all of physical reality. Indeed, the advent of "string theory" at the end of Shields's life, and the possibility of five, or seven, or eleven dimensions of matter, reminds us of the steady erosion of positivist theories over the last century of scientific discovery.

Shields even resorts in *Unless* to Einstein's theory of relativity, "a key concept of the twentieth century" that she uses as a figure for Reta's "ongoing life" (21, 22). Soon after she displays Reta's happiness and unhappiness in her life and writing, she brings

relativity theory into play: "Relativity is a piece of knowledge I've always longed to understand, a big piece" (17). Of course, both Shields and Reta are familiar with Einstein's famous equation, even if they do not understand it: " $E=mc^2$. Energy equals mass times the speed of light, squared" (18). However, the "tidiness of the equation raised my immediate suspicion. How can mass—this solid oak dining table, for instance—have any connections with how fast light travels?" "What did the theory of relativity really matter to [Reta's] ongoing life" (21)?

Much as the speed of light is the only constant in Einstein's relativity theory, and time and space have differing measurements as determined from the standpoint of differing uniformly moving systems, so life is the only constant in Reta's final vision of things, and terms like happiness and unhappiness are relative to the viewpoints of differing observers. At first, Reta may be rather flippant about the significance for most people about relativity theory: "In the face of life's uncertainties, relativity's weight could be assumed and then set aside, part of the package of consciousness" (21). But the experience of uncertainty in the loss of her daughter's reason makes her see how profoundly mistaken she has been in her disregard of such matters as relativity. Even her daughter's crazy search for goodness no longer seems like the tragic event that Reta first made it out to be; it is no more, but also no less, than a refusal to accept a purely determined world, where the law of entropy governs all. Reta's allusion to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle thus propels her at last in another direction. "The uncertainty principle; did anyone ever believe otherwise" (318)?

This particular expression of the uncertainty principle in *Unless* tells us that we must even learn to live with alternate versions of material reality. By repeatedly referring

to quantum physics, Shields appeals to science as a justification for rethinking our usual perspectives on the nature of physical life. By nature, people seem to be searching for goodness and happiness, but the outcome is just as uncertain as the means. Furthermore, neither goodness nor happiness is capable of an absolute determination, or an accurate measurement; each is not only beyond our control, but, like a quantum particle, might well be affected by our very attempt to see or measure it. In the end, what we come to realize with Reta is that we are still responsible for the world we seek to understand, that our views and our perspectives have a determining influence on what we come to see. The writing of a life is thus, in some sense, a force which necessarily acts on that life. All we can know for sure is that our vision is not absolute; and the reality we “see” may well be a function of our sight. In such terms, we have no option but to regard the “alternate versions” of fiction as a way of shaping whatever reality we think we see.

At the level, then, of meta-narrative, Norah’s story of a crazed search for goodness becomes a turning point in which Reta comes to see her own life and her daughter’s life from a new perspective: “I’m frightened that I’m missing something, that Norah is missing something” (273). In the absence of other explanations, or alternate versions of reality, Reta cannot “hold up against [her] damaged self” (2) in spite of the fact that she tries to keep herself in her “box room.” Neither can Norah find goodness in her lonely journey even though she offers to martyr herself. Reta understands that she and Norah both are seeking to unravel the mysteries of the self: “Identity is the dominant mystery of our lives, the numinous matter of self, and it can’t help but surrender to its own ironic destiny. Which is this: the self can never be known. This is the calamity of our lives” (279). Of course, to “surrender to its own ironic destiny” is not to wait to be defeated by

the calamity; instead, Reta has to come to accept the uncertainty that life holds and to see how to turn her sorrow into new possibilities for life and happiness alike: “If the lung sacs of Norah’s body hadn’t filled with fluids, if a volunteer at the Promise Hostel hadn’t reported a night of coughing to Frances Quinn, and if Frances hadn’t called an ambulance, we would never have found Norah at the Toronto General” (314).

Realizing that life is full of so many “ifs”, Reta sees the real gift that an awareness of uncertainty brings to her as a writer: “Unless. Novelists are always being accused of indulging in the artifice of coincidence, and so I must ask myself whether it was a coincidence that Norah was standing on the corner where Honest Ed’s is situated when a young Muslim woman (or so it would appear from her dress), in the month of April, in the year 2000, stepped forward on the pavement, poured gasoline over her veil and gown, and set herself alight.” Because this moment of history is captured by Honest Ed’s exterior security video, Reta comes to see her daughter’s quest in a new light: taking on another person’s sorrow as one’s own means to do something about that which oppresses us, even if it means writing (and acting) a single word, “Goodness.”

In her own her writing of Alicia’s love for Roman, Reta has already imagined several alternate versions of the two lovers, who “are getting nowhere” (258), before she comes to understand the human possibilities that writing can offer. She finally sees why the last chapter of her book is critical: “What is a novelist to do? Provide closure for the reader? Or open the narrative to the ether” (277)? Reta decides to bring her novel to “a whimsical conclusion” (318): “It doesn’t mean that all will be well for ever and ever, amen; it means that for five minutes a balance has been achieved at the margin of the novel’s thin textual plane; make that five seconds; makes that the millionth part of a

nanosecond.”

Ultimately, this ending brings us back to Danielle Westerman, Reta’s model for her own dual identities as a mother and a writer: “The two identities she never reconciled—daughter, writer—are coming together. Translation is keeping her mind sharp, she says, like doing a crossword puzzle” (319). Danielle Westerman also goes deeper in her own autobiography, writing about her concealed childhood, writing about her treasured relationship with her mother. And finally, she is able to bring together her two identities—daughter and writer—using *unless* and *not yet*, these particles of grammar as bits of glue to unify her plural, but still differing, identities.

Like Danielle, Reta also brings together her “front stories” and her “back stories” to make a coherent narrative out of her life: “My office is what I call this space, or else my cubby—or, most often, the box room. My life as a writer and translator is my back story, as they say in the movie business; my front story is that I live in this house on a hill with Tom and our girls and our seven-year-old golden retriever, Pet” (50). The front story is her domestic life, her family life; the back story is her professional life. But her writing life is every bit as real a life as her family life. Front and back, they are really two versions of the same life seen from differing perspectives. This finally gives Reta the truth of her life: inside and outside are simply two differing standpoints from which to view her “box room.” Only now does Reta begin to value the doubleness of her life as a superior mode of existence. Much as Judith Gill had to learn to translate the life of fiction into her own life, Reta has to learn to transmute the life of her very real sorrow and loss into something more hopeful. And amazingly, the observer transforms what she observes;

her front and back stories both arrive at a new perspective on the value of uncertainty. In reality, fiction is all.

To conclude her fiction writing, Shields would ultimately develop the theme of alternate versions of life writing beyond the conflict of fact and fiction in *Small Ceremonies*, the conflict of fiction and history in the *Happenstance novels*, the conflict between multiple versions of the self in *Swann* and in *The Stone Diaries*, to arrive in the end at a vision of alternate versions of reality in *Unless*. In this sense, all her major fictions would turn out to be alternate versions of the life she lived by writing the path she followed. Fiction would finally teach her how to create her reality.

Chapter 8: Biography as Autobiography: *Jane Austen* as an Alternate

Version of the Life of Carol Shields

Having dramatized repeatedly several issues of life writing, especially of biography in *Small Ceremonies*, the *Happenstance* novels and *Swann*, Shields finally came to write an actual biography of Jane Austen late in her career (2001). Like Judith Gill in *Small Ceremonies*, Shields claims to write “a real biography” about “writers written by writers” (cited in Eden 147). Like Judith Gill, who has a passion for her biographical subject, Shields has been all her life a fan of Jane Austen. In an interview with Marjorie Anderson, she clearly states that she feels “a particular affinity with early 19th-century writers such as Jane Austen” (cited in Eden 169). Shields’s daughter, Anne Giardini, also recalls that her mother has read “all of Jane Austen” (“Double Happiness” 18). Shields’s interest in Jane Austen even extends to her friend, Maggie Dwyer, who is grateful for her love of Jane Austen: “I hold her responsible for my interest in Jane Austen” (25). As a member of the Jane Austen Society, she would regularly attend Austen scholarly conferences. Moreover, her research on Jane Austen started long before she began the biography.

As early as 1991, Shields published an essay, “Jane Austen’s Images of the Body: No Fingers, No Toes” in *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North American*. In that essay, she “notes the scarcity of references to the body in Austen’s novels...concluding that Austen believed the body to be without consequence unless yoked to reason” (Hammill 290). In some respects, the “bodiless ‘thinking substance’ of

the Cartesian subject" (Eakin, *How Our Lives* 8) is the "true" self in an Austen novel. In her "Prologue" to *Jane Austen*, Shields also tells the story of delivering another paper on Austen that she and her daughter, Anne Giardini, co-authored for the conference in 1996, the topic of which is the "politics of the glance" in Austen's novels (*Jane Austen* 2). All of these indicate that Shields is more interested in Austen's imagination than in "Austen's short life [which] may have been lived in relative privacy" (4). She celebrates the idea that "her novels show her to be a citizen, and certainly a spectator, of a far wider world."

Not surprisingly, Shields then emphasizes the privilege of novels, "the genuine arc of a human life" that "can perhaps be presented more authentically in fiction than in the genre of biography" (10-11). Since she clearly understands how "[b]iography is subject to warps and gaps of admiration or condemnation, but fiction respects the human trajectory" (11), why would she then attempt yet another biography of Jane Austen? What purpose could her own biography serve? How much of this biography is based on scholarly research, and how much of it is disguised autobiography by a novelist who exhibits many similarities to the eighteenth-century novelist?

In the final pages of *Jane Austen*—"A Few Words About Sources"—there is no attempt to cite archival research or to document the findings of other biographers, beyond the fact that in 1997 alone there were three new biographies of Jane Austen published. Shields herself was not a professional biographer; nor was she a literary critic; she calls herself one of the "rank amateurs" (1). So why does she write this literary biography? In the end, Shields confesses, "My debt to Jane Austen herself is incalculable" (185). In some sense, what she reveals is her own literary tastes and values, her own literary development through the mask of Jane Austen's work and life.

Beginning with the working premise that this biography adds nothing new to our understanding of Jane Austen, we can conclude that this literary biography adds considerable detail to our understanding of Carol Shields as a novelist, with respect to her tastes and literary values, as well as her literary development. If this is a disguised literary autobiography, is it ethical for Shields to impose her own life on that of Jane Austen? Or is she guilty of privileging a bourgeois ideology of writing, much as Dr. Johnson has privileged a monarchist ideology of writing in his *Lives of the English Poets*? If so, is she more neoclassical than postmodern in her views of the writer's life? Or is there an "alternate possibility" in auto/biographical writing, much as her fictions of life writing are themselves informed by "alternate versions"?

This chapter aims to answer all of the above questions by looking at both the life Shields has written and her own writing life. In doing so, I will demonstrate how Shields identifies herself with Jane Austen whom she takes as "a literary foremother" (Eden 147), how she projects her own life onto Jane Austen's life, and how she instructs her readers to understand her novels as well as her life. The most telling example of autobiographical projection is that Shields seems to affiliate her own fate with that of Austen: "Suffering from what was *most likely* cancer; she rallied for a few days and even dictated a number of comic verses, which have been preserved" (173, my emphasis). As is known, Shields was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998 when she received a request from James Atlas to write a life of Jane Austen as one of a series of biographies. Working on the biography, encouraged by her biographical subject, who was still writing in her last days, Shields writes in March 2000:

I thought for a while that a serious illness had interrupted my chaptered

life, but no, it is a chapter on its own. Living with illness required new balance skills. It changes everything, and I need to listen to it, attend to it and bring to it a stern new sense of housekeeping.

But I have time for this last exercise. All the time in the world.

(Dropped Threads 347)

Even though Shields mentions that “Austen was believed to have suffered from Addison’s disease, tuberculosis of the adrenal glands” (*Jane Austen* 173), she subsequently evades this fact by saying that “*it is impossible to say for certain* what the nature of her illness was” (my emphasis). Suffering from breast cancer herself, Shields conjectures that “[b]reast cancer *seems* a very likely cause, especially since Jane Austen’s Aunt Philadelphia, and Philadelphia’s daughter, Eliza, *probably* died from that disease” (173-4, my emphasis). This is an astonishing claim because of the clear conjecture in words such as “most likely,” “it is impossible to say for certain,” and “probably.” By using such phrases, Shields admits that she has no medical evidence, apart from her own experience: “Breast cancer does appear in exactly such family clusters” (174).

Shields started writing this biography in 2000 soon after she received chemotherapy for her breast cancer. Even though there is no hard biographical evidence for a fate shared with Jane Austen, it is clear that the biographer wishes to share her fate with her biographical subject. In her “Enchantment and the Biographical Passion”, Dona Munker calls this transference “the biographical impulse” (377), which “the psychoanalyst points to as an example of transference, the newly mesmerized biographer experiences as the seductive bewitchment exerted by somebody else’s life.” Obviously, Shields’s passion for Jane Austen is so deep that she even wants to devote the last days of

her life to the writing of Jane Austen. “Passion, for a biographer, means falling in love with another person's story,” concludes Munker. According to this analysis, we should not be surprised at Shields’s affiliation with Jane Austen, modulating a real biography into an autobiographical novel.

If we read the “novel” carefully, we discover that there are few quotations and no scholarly citations whatsoever for the life. The source on which she most depends is Jane Austen’s nephew’s 1870 memoir, the words of James Edward Austen-Leigh, despite the fact that he “got a number of things wrong in his aunt’s biography” (*Jane Austen* 141). And yet, as Shields reveals, “for all its strange, obstinate gaps, [it] is still the place to begin. (He was a favorite nephew—handsome, gifted—and his piece is illuminated with an affection that his aunt returned)” (183). This “affection” is evidently a guarantee for Shields of the “biographical passion” in more recent writing, as well, such as Lord David Cecil’s “A Portrait of Jane Austen” (1978), which is also affectionate, as though he too were a favored nephew.” Like Austen-Leigh and Lord David Cecil, Shields shares a “biographical impulse” to express her love for her biographical subject.

This “love” is clearly opposed to the resentment of the professional biographer whom Shields criticizes in *Swann*, Morton Jimroy: “Writing biography, as Jimroy perfectly well knows, is the hardest work in the world and it can, just as easily as not, be an act of contempt” (83). Jimroy “detests the popular fallacy that biographers fall in love with their subjects,” whereas Shields falls in love with her biographical subject to the extent that she cites only those biographies which express a similar love of the subject. Throughout this biography, Shields quotes very few letters of Jane Austen and her relatives; only a few quotations are offered in evidence from Austen’s novels. The point

here is not to criticize Shields for being unprofessional, but rather to illustrate what her working method is in writing the biography, how much she learns from her subject, and how she interprets Jane Austen in her own terms. In this sense, what Shields says about *Pride and Prejudice* can just as readily be applied to her own life of *Jane Austen*, that the book “can be seen as a palimpsest with” the author’s “real life engraved roughly, enigmatically, beneath its surface” (69).

Of course, Shields is not the first biographer in Canadian letters to write a covert autobiography in the guise of a biography. In Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man*, the fictional Demeter Proudfoot writes his own life all over his biography of Hazard Lepage. As Demeter comments with some justice, “While a biographer must naturally record, he must also, of necessity, be interpretive upon occasion” (21). But his “interpretive” gestures turn into a parody of the biographical subject, not least when he finally lets the cat out of the bag: “Why is the truth never where it should be? Is the truth of the man in the man or in his biography? Is the truth of the beast in the flesh and confusion or in the few skilfully arranged lines” (145)? But Shields, unlike Kroetsch’s comic biographer, is not seeking to expose the inherent confusions of biography with autobiography; she is merely setting out to confess her affinity for Jane Austen, an affinity which is nonetheless revealed as a palimpsest.

Adrienne Harris’s “Analyst as Auto/biographer” uses psychoanalytic theory to support more generally the covert autobiography in biographical writing. In her study of Roy Schafer’s psychoanalytic theory in *Retelling a Life* (1992), she argues that the biographical narrative “conceives of analytic work as story telling, building a coherent line of experience and self-understanding in the course of analytic praxis and talk” (261).

According to this analysis, Shields's biography of Jane Austen is not likely to be an objective account of Austen's life since her biographical narrative is very much like her own understanding of Jane Austen, which tells us more about the way in which she reads Jane Austen than the way Austen wrote in her own right.

There are other signs in *Jane Austen* that Shields's defence of a "domestic" novelist like the British writer is also a defence of her own writerly concerns: "We've heard this often: How could a novelist who writes astutely about her own immediate society fail to have mentioned the Napoleonic wars" (3)? Shields justifies herself when she reacts against those who say that "Jane Austen is trivial and narrow;" "she is domestic and does not have a wide view of the world." On the one hand, Shields speaks for female writers in general when she asserts that, "The modeling of war is mostly male." On the other hand, she insists that, "Jane Austen covers all these matters, if not with the directness, and particularity our Napoleon man might have liked."

Like her subject, Shields is not interested in telling stories of war. In an interview with Marjorie Anderson, she says, "I would never write a war story. I mean the war story, as it were, is entirely a male-modelled genre, and I have no interest in it at all. I think it doesn't involve much reflection" (63). On the other hand, she finds it necessary to defend Austen from the charge of being trivial or ordinary. In his "Introduction" to *Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*, Edward Eden points out that "writers emphasize Shields's focus on the lives of ordinary women, on the realities of work, and on the intricacies of daily rituals" (10). If we look at Shields's oeuvre, we do not find themes like the Homeric ethos of war, or the quest for public glory. Instead, she chooses the private and domestic world as her field of battle. As she tells Anderson, "I never thought

for a minute that the domestic life wasn't important to write about" (60). In fact, she sees herself as representing a vital, but ignored, tradition of writing in the modern world:

Domesticity has not flourished in contemporary fiction, either. A thousand years from now, readers will look back on the novels of the twentieth century and wonder whether or not we possessed a domestic life at all. A bed, a roof over our heads, toothbrushes, forks and knives, alarm clocks, birth control devices—these accoutrements have been curiously erased except in so-called 'marginal fiction,' often women's fiction. ("Narrative Hunger" 32)

Domesticity is the theme of almost all of Shields's novels, as it is of Jane Austen's novels. Finding her own work marginalized as "domestic novels," she says, "I do seem to have these life themes" and "now even men admit that they have a domestic life" (Denoon 9). As she continues, "I was still paying attention to the same kind of things." Maggie Dwyer recalls how Shields says about her writing, "We began with the domestic, the family, with ourselves as women and mothers, and with the impositions that those roles imply" (24). But Shields's focus is "on the interior, the hidden, the unsaid, the unknown" (Giardini, "Reading my Mother" 9). William Neville also claims that, "In her novels she [Shields] demonstrates insight, sympathy and the capacity to see in others what they do not often see themselves—or, just as often, things they notice but do not see until a Shields narrator or character sees it for them" (36). Another review on the front page of Flamingo's edition of Shields's *Happenstance* novels claims that Shields's "great strength is her ability to capture small moments and make them important.... Shields displays in her careful delineation of her characters tenderness for the ordinary which

shines through the sheer cleverness of her work.” Needless to say, Shields shares these same characteristics with Jane Austen.

Given her overt response to dismissive criticism, Shields more covertly teaches her readers how to see her works in the way she asks them to read Austen’s fiction: “By indirection, by assumption, by reading what is implicit, we can find behind Austen’s novels a steady, intelligent witness to a world that was rapidly reinventing itself” (*Austen* 4). In so doing, Shields promises to give us her implicit reading of Jane Austen’s works to reveal what is hidden behind the politics and economics of the age. For example, she insists that, “[h]er novels, each of them, can be seen as wide-ranging *glances*—that ‘g’ word again, with its tune of deliberation—across the material of the world she inhabited, and that material includes an implied commentary on the political, economic, and social forces of her day” (3-4). If Jane Austen is to be read as a social critic commenting on the politics, economics and social forces of everyday life, one has to be able to catch the indirection of her novels.

However, Shields soon moves away from an implicit reading of politics and economics in Jane Austen’s novels to the sources of her writing: “Out of her young, questioning self came the grave certainty that the family was the source of art” (8-9). Obviously, the family is not the source of art for contemporary writing; but it was a source for the novel as a historical form long before and well after Jane Austen’s time. In her own novels, Shields makes family the source of art, a bourgeois ideology that she never questions. As a matter of fact, Shields favours this bourgeois ideology because the “lives of middle-class girls in my era were highly predictable” (Wachtel 13). What

Shields does here is to privilege her own scale of values behind a mask of general and universal literary phenomena.

Through her comments on contemporary biographical practices, Shields also affirms her own values: “Biography zaps the enchantment of the writing itself by throwing a profile of theory against a text—that crisp and useful word—that had no immediate acquaintance with literary theory” (10). Shields identifies herself with Jane Austen, who never read literary criticism or theory, but produced wonderful stories out of her imagination. As a matter of fact, Shields does not entirely dismiss literary theory, admitting that “ungainly or overweight stories fall out of the narrative record [snip]. They are too bulgy for theory, too untidy for analysis” (“Narrative Hunger” 28). She even admits that biography requires a profile of theory to read the text: “All of us in recent years have been inhaling the pollen of contemporary literary theory. It tends to alter our thinking about which stories are admissible to our culture; it catches in the throat, and in the layers of the brain where the drifted texts and discourses and deliberate misreadings and discontinuities are privileged over the linear, the didactic, the epiphanic” (28-9). For Shields, words and narrative design still trump theory, since “both real events and their accompanying narratives are conveyed by words, and words alone” (23). And narratives are the ways in which stories are told. Besides, to Shields, narratives “depend on the culture you live in, the era into which you were born, and the width or narrowness of your aesthetic or moral responses” (26).

By the time she drafts an actual biography, Shields has already written six novels on contentious aspects of life writing. She has come to admit that “biography, even autobiography, is full of systemic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground

streams” (*Stone Diaries* 196). And so her awareness of problems in life writing is of some significance to the theorist. As Chiara Briganti points out, “Shields’s pursuit of some of the questions that have sparked the debate of theorists of biography and autobiography for the last two decades have been at times playful and self-mocking” (176). Although Shields does not rely on any system of theory, she has “succeeded in making the epistemological implications of life writing a solid and serious concern of her fiction.” She is responding to the postmodern environment in her novels, only she does so at the level of structure more than of descriptive statements. More by indirection than by explicit commentary, she comments on her own social world.

Like Jane Austen, Shields is also interested in the tenuous relationship between fact and fancy, between the way things are and the way they might be, if only they are seen from another angle. As Shields observes, “Her [Austen’s] novels are set in contemporary England, but her characters and their adventures are of the imagination” (71). “Her fictional expression can be imagined as a smooth flow of narrative deriving from her combined reality, but a flow that is interrupted by jets of alternate possibility, the moment observed and then repositioned and recharged” (14). At this stage of her writing career, Shields has already begun to be intrigued by postmodern notions of “a multitude of selves” in each and every subject (De Roo 50). It then becomes necessary for her to show how Jane Austen also wrote alternate versions of her own life in her novels. Jane Austen, who was disappointed all her life and never married or had children, writes incessantly about marriage. However, in many ways, all these fictions are an alternate version of her own life: choosing not to marry and refusing one offer of marriage. Writing about marriage, Jane Austen keeps her freedom and her independence

by remaining single. At the same time, she writes alternate versions of herself in all these domestic novels. As Melissa Pope Eden observes, Shields's "interest clearly lies in the fictions of Austen's life: both the numerous fictitious Austens other critics, readers, and biographers have created, and the fictitious selves Austen herself created or experienced in her life and in her novels" (149). I would add that Shields sees Jane Austen compensating for a lack in her life by imagining what she desires—"A married woman [who achieves] a home of her own" (*Jane Austen* 85). Everywhere in Shields's fictional auto/biographies and her biography of Jane Austen, we are given alternate versions of possibilities. However, "[w]e rely on Jane Austen to show us attitudes toward marriage in her society, the search for a life partner, the developing notion of a marriage of friendship," Shields admits in explaining why she herself likes to write a happy marriage ("Narrative Hunger" 32-33). Implicitly, Shields confesses what she has learnt of importance from Jane Austen's life.

Shields also learns from Austen's writing how to use imagination to create "alternate possibilities". In her major fictions, Shields's characters always have rich imaginations. Much of the autobiography of Daisy Goodwill Flett in *The Stone Diaries* is imagined by the fictional autobiographer herself. The most significant part of Daisy's autobiography is her power of imagination to redeem a lonely life through collective telling of a narrative that "flows from a bag of cultural references, both private and shared" (24). As for truth-telling, Shields quotes T.S. Eliot: "Humankind cannot bear very much reality" (cited in "Narrative Hunger" 27). So how is one to take the "truth of a life" in such biographical narrative? Shields quotes the biographer Richard Holmes in answer to this question: "Fiction married fact without benefit of clergy" (25).

Interestingly, Shields insists on the importance of fiction in life writing. Asked about the function of fiction in life writing, she replies, “it attempts to be an account of all that cannot be documented but is, nevertheless, true” (M. Anderson 71). And fiction depends on imagination, which necessarily produces alternate versions of reality.

Even in a “real” biography, Shields turns to Austen’s novels to write about Jane Austen’s life, citing the novelist George Gissing who said that, “[t]he only good biographies are to be found in novels” (*Jane Austen* 10). It may be true that, “Today Jane Austen belongs to the nearly unreachable past. She kept no diary that we know of. There is no voice recording such as we possess of Virginia Woolf, and no photograph like the one that George Eliot denied she had had taken—but which remains in the record, proclaiming her an indisputably unhandsome woman” (5). But Shields cares little for what Austen’s biographers “have nailed together [from] the established facts of her life—her birth, her travels, her enthusiasm, her death” (11).

How, then, does one recount the “truth of a life” when there is little “truth” to document? And how is the biographer “to proceed without sounding like Jane Austen” (10). Shields would not like “searching, prying into the small seams” of Jane Austen’s life as Judith Gill does with Susanna Moodie’s life because Shields has refused, since her first novel, to invade “an area of existence where [she has] no real rights” (*Small Ceremonies* 34). Respecting the “relative privacy” in which “Austen’s short life may have been lived” (*Jane Austen* 4), Shields “invents” a plausible biography through reading Jane Austen’s novels. At the same time, she wants to find a “connection between the words and the person who makes them up” (cited in Eden’s “Subjective” 150).

Shields's method in her literary biography is not so different from that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), where Coleridge offers a mixture of his own autobiography and literary criticism—the former to defend himself; the latter to justify his literary principles. The only difference between Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and Shields's biography of *Jane Austen* is that the former tries to distinguish himself from his biographical subject, William Wordsworth, while Shields seeks to identify herself with her biographical subject. In this sense, Shields is true to the principle of Oscar Wilde, who says that criticism “is the only civilized form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life” (144). Therefore, this biography is both an imitation of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and an application of what the fictional Judith Gill does with her subject—to write a self-reflexive text in which the biographer expresses her own value and tastes in her history of another's life.

Another way of reading Shields's biographical project is to take her at her word that “the true subject of serious fiction is not ‘current events,’ ongoing wars or political issues, but the search of an individual for his or her true home” (*Jane Austen* 13). In what sense does Shields find a home in the works of Jane Austen? For one thing, marriage displaced the college girl who was born and brought up in the United States, but lived in Canada after her marriage in 1957 to Canadian engineer, Donald Hugh Shields, when she was only twenty-two. After that, the couple moved to Vancouver, Toronto, and then to Ottawa. The family also lived in England, the UK and France. In 1980, when she came to Winnipeg with her husband, who took up an appointment in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Manitoba, Shields finally found her true home, just as Jane Austen “had found a true home at last” in Chawton. Winnipeg is the site of writing for the

majority of her novels, as she wrote her way into belonging in both Canada and Winnipeg. As Shields would say, “I couldn’t imagine writing a novel set in the States; I don’t understand how it works now or how American society thinks” (cited in Neville 33). But how does Shields both live and write this theme of searching for home?

Starting from her two novels, *Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*, and continuing through *Swann* to *Unless*, Shields sets most of her novels in Canada. *The Republic of Love* (1992), *The Stone Diaries*, and *Larry’s Party*, are set wholly, or partly, in Winnipeg or at least Manitoba. In an essay entitled, “Carol Shields and Winnipeg: Finding Home,” William Neville recalls what Shields liked to say about Winnipeg: “It had become my home in the truest sense. I felt like a Winnipegger and Manitoban” (32). As Neville suggests, “It was not that she become a ‘Winnipeg writer’ but that she was a writer who became a Winnipegger” (33).

The sense of home, to Shields, included a community and a social network for writers: “I love...and am most at home in a society that values its writers, and where a society of writers feel embraced” (35). It was Jane Austen’s “bad luck...that she was enclosed all her life by obscurity” (*Jane Austen* 141). Understanding this difference in her life from that of Austen, Shields is not speaking about the British writer at all when she says in the Austen biography that “writers are hugely dependent on the shared experiences of other writers. Why otherwise do we have such an empire of writers’ colonies, writers’ unions, writers’ congresses, writers’ guilds” (141)? Obviously, Jane Austen enjoyed none of these benefits of a writerly community. But Shields was doubly blessed to have both—the company of fellow writers in Winnipeg, and the imaginative company of Jane Austen in her books.

Finding Jane Austen to be “only a sojourner in a strange land” (132), Shields is doubly happy about being settled herself in Winnipeg: “I discovered lots of very interesting people, made great women friends and realized that I was rediscovering the networks I grew up with” (Neville 32). If Jane Austen “had found a true home at last” in Chawton (*Jane Austen* 132), a place where she finished most of her novels, then, Winnipeg is “a perfectly wonderful place to write and all of my best writing was done there” (Neville 32). More than that, Winnipeg has also provided her with “the opportunities and responsibilities that were the marks of citizenship”: professionally, she became a full professor at the University of Manitoba; with great honour, she was elected Chancellor of the University of Winnipeg; socially, she served on several boards and committees such as the Public Library Board, the Canada Council, the Manitoba Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee and the Manitoba Writer’s Guild (34-35). Therefore, the theme of finding a home does not refer to the home as a family in its literal sense, but more to a communal sense of belonging. In this respect, Shields reveals something very deep about herself, as well as her biographical subject: “Jane Austen also longed for a home; all her novels concern themselves with this longing” (*Jane Austen* 107). Obviously, Shields reads Austen’s writing as a search for home like her own experience of searching for a home through writing. Both literally and symbolically, Shields achieves what her biographical subject lacks.

As Judith Gills comes to understand herself better through writing about Susanna Moodie, Shields also comes to see what she lacks when she was young through writing about Jane Austen: “There is a sense in which Jane Austen wrote not so much about marriage as about the tension between parents and children, the inevitable rupture

between generations and the destruction that carelessness and inattention to these bonds can bring about. We are led inevitably back to the question of her own parents, and the glazed cleverness, and perhaps care, with which she covered the Austen biographical tracks” (57). Between the lines of this biography, we might see the “tracks” of Shields’s own relationship with her mother or her broken bonds with Chicago; however, she never reveals the details of these tensions.

Marriage, for Jane Austen, as perhaps for Shields, is the only “chance to escape the dominion of her parents and establish her own home. A home of one’s own—we find this phrase, or a parallel expression, everywhere in Austen’s work” (85). On the one hand, Shields admits the impoverished life of her biographical subject: “She was poor. She was isolated. She was banished from the home she loved” (176). On the other hand, Shields praises Jane Austen as “the stern moralist” for covering her autobiographical tracks: “Jane Austen was not, on the whole, an autobiographical novelist” (111). But how else can we interpret Jane Austen’s life when Shields writes, “Her [Jane Austen’s] heroines claimed their lives through ideal marriage, while she found her own sense of arrival through her novels” (176)?

As a biographer, Shields protects the privacy of her subject. She honoured Jane Austen for not having spoken directly about her family, for having covered her biographical tracks. Shields also covers, as much as possible, the “tracks” of her own childhood. Asked by Joan Thomas in an epistolary interview about her childhood, Shields uses the word “prudent” to describe her life in Oak Park, Illinois: “Prudent parents, careful, conventional. A prudent school system, too” (“Epistolary Interview” 75). Although she “writes mostly about the rigidity and conventionality of her childhood”

(Eden 4), Shields refuses to comment on any difficult time she had with her parents. In responding to Joan Thomas's belief that "people are made into artists by a difficult childhood, that they create to exorcise the past, or they were moved out of the mainstream somehow by their childhood into observers" (125), Shields does admit that she, like Judith Gill, is a "watcher of others' lives" (M. Anderson 61). Still, she is "not convinced that we write to complete something in us that is not complete or to amend the unbearable; writing seems to me much more an act of 'making'" (126). The real question, then, is what is the source of this "act of making"?

For both Jane Austen and herself, Shields maintains that "family was the source of art." In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, she says, "My father managed a candy company. I've written a poem about my father, he just sort of disappeared downtown every day to work. For a long time, I didn't know what he did" (6). Shields's mother was a school teacher who loved *Anne of Green Gables*. While she did spend time with her children, she did not meet Shields's narrative hunger in her childhood. As she remembers, "We never bought books in our family.... I was never given books" (10). She lacked the opportunity to read good books because, "My mother read us *The Bobbsey Twins*; I don't know why she didn't read us better books" (11). Thus, she says, "I just didn't know much about the world and how it worked; I had a somewhat narrow upbringing" (Denoon 8). Again, she admits: "I do remember sort of waking up at the age of ten. This made so much sense to me and I didn't wake up until much later. I had a very prolonged girlhood" (17). As a result, Shields produced two companion novels to redress the "narrative hunger" of the childhood lives of Judith in *Small Ceremonies* and Charleen in *The Box Garden*.

In fact, when Shields comments about her upbringing, she uses what Judith Gill says about her life as a child, which is an insufferable void that she cannot wait to get away from, to leave behind a life where nothing ever happened. As she told Wachtel, “I had no idea what the outside world was like” (12). Going to Exeter University in England was “a great surprise, it was wonderful to get away from the sorority house.... Yes, here I was, in a totally different environment where we were not spoon-fed in the way that we had been at the little college [Hanover]” (15). And there she got to know Don Shields, married him and came to Canada. Arriving in Canada may have opened up wider horizons, but it was only in her writing about it that she made herself a new home.

Although Shields denied being “an autobiographical novelist”, her daughter Anne Giardini has said, “I recently re-read all of my mother’s novels, more or less in order, I found her in these books precisely as I know her in life” (“Reading My Mother” 7). Giardini makes some observations that are worth quoting at length:

Judith and Martin Gill are not my parents, but are made up of much of the same stuff. Their experiences are fictional, but appropriately, given that this is not one of the books’ themes, the fictional details and circumstances are most inevitably drawn from life. My parents spent time in England in borrowed premises as did the Gills. Like Judith, my mother has written about the pioneer Susanna Moodie. Also like Judith, my mother is married to an academic. Like Furlong, she is completely a Canadian writer (whatever that means) who was born and raised in the US (although, unlike Furlong, she does not try to keep this a secret). (9)

Even Shields herself admits, “Judith Gill in *Small Ceremonies* talks about

narrative hunger: why do we need stories? Her conclusion—and mine—is that our own lives are never quite enough for us” (M. Anderson 71). The autobiographical elements in her novels thus conform to Eakin’s claim that it is just as important to understand that “all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical” (*Fictions* 10).

Shields reminds us of her own ethical concerns when she comments on Austen’s protection of family and friends in her fiction: “She may, like many novelists who preceded and followed her, have been anxious to avoid injuring or embarrassing others by borrowing the material of other lives” (*Jane Austen* 71). Austen sounds a good deal like Judith Gill who hates confessional literature, especially direct confession, which has the potential to embarrass others. Seeing herself as one of the many novelists who followed Jane Austen, Shields confesses something indirectly here about herself: she does not want to injure or borrow the material of others’ lives. Nonetheless, her own life will be recorded in a palimpsest, beneath the surface of the text, in much the same way that she finds Austen’s life beneath the surface of her fiction.

As a literary biographer, Shields thinks that “the point of literary biography is to throw light on a writer’s works” (175). Nonetheless, she cannot avoid the notion that Austen’s works somehow reflect her life: “Elizabeth Bennet, like Jane Austen, is in her early twenties and has an older sister, Jane, whom she adores. Jane and Elizabeth’s parents share a problem with the Austen parents” (69-70). Shields finds a palimpsest of Austen’s life in the novel exactly as Judith Gill does in Susanna Moodie’s fiction. At the same time, “Undoubtedly, like her contemporary novelists, she also saw novel making as an excursion to an invented world, rather than a meditation on her own” (72). Shields

thus reveals herself by indirection: “But it is not every novelist’s tactic to draw *directly* on personal narrative, and Jane Austen, clearly, is not a writer who touches close to the autobiographical core” (70).

In much the same way, Shields does not write directly about her own life, but lets her biography of Jane Austen stand as a palimpsest of her own life. Writing about the disappointment of Jane Austen waiting for a response from a publisher, she relates her to novelists in general: “Novelists do not write into a void. They require an answering response, an audience of readers outside their family circle, and they also need the approval professional publication brings” (110). For Shields, “writing is like a conversation you might have with someone” (M. Anderson 64). And she loves “to talk over [her] writing projects with friends, soliciting ideas and impressions, getting their experiences” (J. Thomas, “Epistolary Interview” 78). She always hopes to get a good response from the readers. Blanche Howard recalls, in “Collaborating with Carol”, how conscientiously Shields reworked their novel, *A Celibate Season*: “The first third, Carol wrote to me after spending a July weekend on it, was perhaps too slow, the second third really crackles, and the final third was perhaps too amiable” (53). Even after *The Box Garden* was published, she wished she could rewrite the kidnapping plot: “It is one book I would recall if I could” (M. Anderson 63).

In some sense, Shields is writing a modern version of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* in her one work of “overt” biography. Only where the former chose to write about Brutus and Dion as republican opponents of tyranny, the latter has chosen to write about two women, from differing countries and differing centuries, who likewise believe in decency, kindness and communal values, and who share a similar outlook on writing as a means of

transforming lives. At the same time, Shields acknowledges a debt to Virginia Woolf when she says, “Like many writers I’ve written in the kitchen, in the corners of bedrooms, in cafés, on trains, at a quiet library table, but for many years, starting in 1970, I had a room of my own to work in. In our household, it was always referred to as my office” (J. Thomas, “Epistolary Interview” 77). She appreciates the privacy of her own space in writing. At the same time, she imagines Jane Austen’s plight in a world that had not yet received *A Room of One’s Own*: “She may have chafed at her lack of solitude, but a life of social engagement was what she knew and what in the end nourished her fiction” (*Jane Austen* 121). Clearly, the phrase “may have chafed” is not justified by the concluding independent clause, “a life of social engagement was what she knew.” So she evidently interprets Austen’s social life in terms of her own social engagement, as when she tells Wachtel, “My time in England had made a socialist of me and when I came back I joined the NDP and was somewhat active in our local party” (16-17). She needs both solitude and social engagement in her writing life, a conundrum which she professes to share with her biographical subject.

Shields also shares a sense of writerly triumph with Jane Austen: “A sense of jubilation accompanies this piece of information, and there is the sense, too, that she is trying with all her might to keep a cap on her satisfaction by sprinkling her letters with other more mundane references: deaths, babies, the weather, the scarcity of apples, her mother’s headaches. Her efforts don’t quite succeed. Her joy of publication keeps breaking through” (*Jane Austen* 147). Masking her private joy in public is somehow what Shields is reported to have done, too. Maggie Dwyer recalls that, “I asked about the writing life. I thought being a writer seemed an impossibly remote goal. Carol replied that

she did not always identify herself publicly as a writer” (23). But Dwyer reads the joy behind the mask: “It is this characteristic modesty—and her genuine interest in people and their lives—that draws them to her.” By keeping masked, Shields tries not to hurt people who have not achieved such success. All this shows a great deal of Shields’s caring about others, as much as it demonstrates the tension that Austen must have felt in her own life between her private and public selves: “Nonetheless, publication meant having a public self after a life that had been austere private. Her scale of values, her opinions were now being read by a wide public, and not just received by the family circle. The two selves, public and private, were in danger of flying apart” (*Jane Austen* 148).

In this portrait of Austen, Shields confesses to her personal predicament: suddenly “a housewife” has a public audience, to whom her opinions matter. Particularly after the Pulitzer Prize, when journalists came to her and sought her opinions, she had to develop another self. As Joan Thomas comments on her first interview with Shields, “this was shortly after her nomination for the Booker Prize. She had just come back from Europe, from several weeks of being constantly interviewed, and she told me that she was struggling not to repeat herself, not to develop the routines that writers fall back on in self-defense” (“Epistolary Interview” 73). This extraordinary transformation from a very private self into a very public self is thus mediated by her projection onto Jane Austen of a narrative of self-doubt and self-concern: “Novelists, though, tend to be solipsistic, especially in the fragile days immediately following publication. Austen decided on the somewhat humiliating idea of collecting the opinions of family and friends and copying these into a notebook titled ‘Opinions of Mansfield Park’” (*Jane Austen* 157).

In the words of a contemporary reader of Austen, Shields hears an echo of her

own situation: “The novel, he said, was ‘extremely interesting.’” As she has commented on male responses to her novels:

Men review books in this country, and a lot of men were reviewing my books.

For example, my books were reviewed by William French who always damned me with faint praise, thinking I would be a fine writer if I ever found a subject worthy of my thinking abilities. That was how he put it, meaning he thought I should stop writing about women in domestic situations. (M. Anderson 60)

Even in 1993, soon after *The Stone Diaries* won the Governor General’s Award and was short-listed for the Booker Prize, Shields was still considered to be “an unjustly neglected writer” (Denoon 9). When asked, “How many novels do you have to write before they stop calling you promising?” Shields has her own answer: “you finish one, and before that’s published, you’re in another, so it looks like it’s all continuous. And the unjustly neglected...oh, I’ve heard that for years! I’m still hearing it.”

If Shields is under-read and under-appreciated, it is likely for the same reason that she thinks Jane Austen is under-appreciated: “In this novel, more than any of the others, readers tend to focus on the single most important character rather than on the architecture of the novel—always a problem with Jane Austen criticism” (*Jane Austen* 159). By giving such an important clue to how to read Austen’s works, Shields gives a huge clue to the importance of structure in her own novels. Her MA thesis supervisor, Lorraine McMullen has said bluntly, “I think her special interest [is] in form and narrative technique” (43-44). By focusing on the architecture of Austen’s novels, Shields reminds us that the characters may be interesting; but the author’s vision is embedded in the telling—in narrative perspective, in emplotment, and in narrative closure. At the same

time, she quotes the great Walter Scott to say of Jane Austen's novels, "That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I have ever met with" (166). To Shields, "his praise is still called up today to demonstrate how Austen was valued in her own time."

Of course, Shields is well aware of how she is "valued in her own time" by the quality of criticism on her work: "Shields displays in her careful delineation of her characters a tenderness for the ordinary which shines through the sheer cleverness of her work" (*Literary Review* for *The Happenstance* novels); "*The Stone Diaries* is imbued with wisdom and poignancy at the difficulty of simple everyday life" (Sunday Express UK on the cover of *The Stone Diaries*). Unlike Shields, however, Austen remained unknown while she was still alive, and did not live long enough to enjoy fame. When Shields says, then, that "[t]here is every indication that Jane Austen enjoyed her new fame" (*Jane Austen* 164), she says far more about herself than about her biographical subject. For she was recognized internationally for her novels; several honorary doctorates were conferred on her by universities in Canada; she was also appointed to the Order of Canada and became a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Even so, it was Shields's illness, more than her public fame, which firmly bound her to the life of Austen: "It is possible that Jane Austen's health had already begun to fail at the time of writing *Persuasion*. Just as she was finding her greatest strength as a writer, she may have experienced intimations of an early death" (170). Auxiliary verbs such as "may" and "might" suggest the ambiguities of the biographical facts about Jane Austen, but they also speak of the certainty of Shields's fear that her life would end just when she found "her greatest strength as a writer."

Finally, however, it is clear that Shields sees Austen as a writer made in her own image, who even shares the same views as some of Shields's fictional characters. "A letter, even to an intimate, brings another self forward" (43), Shields remarks of Austen, much in the same way that Sarah Maloney in *Swann* concludes: "Pick up a pen, and second self squirms out" (24). The point seems to be that the written self is always different from the writing self. It is writing, in fact, that creates alternate selves; and it is writing that multiplies the existence of the self, expanding that existence. As Giardini suggests, "the books she [Shields] has read and written have expanded her life incalculably and have provided her with the surest route to double happiness" ("Double Happiness" 21).

The overlap in her biography of Jane Austen with Shields's own fiction may then tell us a good deal about the author of both types of writing. And *Jane Austen* takes us back to the old question about the "fraudulent nature of factual biography" in her very first novel, *Small Ceremonies*: is it a history, or is it, in some sense, an autobiography? Does Shields write over the life of Jane Austen? Or does she preserve the "truth of the life"? There is obviously something true to Jane Austen's life in this biography. And yet we have a Jane Austen who comes closer to contemporary tastes and values than to a life lived nearly two centuries ago. Evidently, Shields imagines a Jane Austen who is very close to herself. The biography thus enters into dialogue with Shields's fiction; but it also becomes a dialogue between two selves: the self of the biographer who writes and a biographical self that is written implicitly in the palimpsest of another life. The two are in a dialogic relationship, or there are at least relational identities between them.

In her study of this singular biography, Melissa Pope Eden observes that, “Shields points out the speculative nature of fiction, and that she flushes out what amounts to the covert fictions other biographers create by contrasting them with more speculations of her own” (167). What Shields does instead is to establish a relational identity between the biographer and biographee, in which the one reveals and comments on the other. We do not receive a pure Jane Austen; neither do we get a pure Carol Shields. Instead, we discover a sense of affinity between them. And in case we have misread it, Shields gives us a fairly clear picture of her working method, and her value system. She anticipates her own critical reception by adopting the biographical form to create an effect, “the effect of bringing forward what might be called the speculative mode of one’s self or others, a world of dreams and possibilities and parallel realities” (cited in Eden 168).

Ultimately, in writing this biography, Shields gives her own writing life a definitive ending that is nonetheless another beginning. She hopes that her audience will read her works as she reads those of Jane Austen. She evidently writes to the future by looking back to the past. In this way, she makes an implicit claim to her future place in the literary canon. Just as Jane Austen became one of the most important British novelists, Shields has become one of the most important Canadian writers.

Conclusion

The duplicities inherent in life writing refer not only to doubleness but also to constructedness. There are alternate versions of the self, of reality, of history and fiction, of media discourse, of narrator and narrative. Since life writing is constituted by more than one version, a life lived is always different from the life written in auto/biography. Shields's novels have provided paradigms for these alternate versions of life writing and the differences between a life lived and the life written. This conclusion then summarizes how Shields's novels respond to notions of the self, concerns and conflicts in life writing, and how she overcomes these conflicts and points towards future forms of life writing.

Firstly, chronologically, identity changes as technological modes of communication vary: from a very loosely-associated group identity in oral culture, to an essentially self-contained identity in printing culture, and finally to a fragmented and decentred multiple self in digital culture. Synchronically, theorists of culture, philosophy, linguistics and narrative have offered different models for self identity in their own fields. *The Stone Diaries* becomes the showcase for various self identities and representations in both biographical and autobiographical forms.

Secondly, biographical facts and autobiographical fictions are usually the main concerns of life writers and life readers. *Small Ceremonies* has demonstrated that biography is necessarily a form of autobiography, a "translation" of one's life to another form, which inevitably carries traces of fiction. Moral questions such as violation of privacy and revelation of secrecy of the subjects are overcome by the very nature of the narrative itself as a translation from a lived experience into a literary form.

Thirdly, historical “truth” has always been coloured either by the writer or the recording medium, and so, too, is the “truth” in one’s life history. Moreover, when a life is represented in a literary form, it becomes a kind of art. If it is an art, it should not be destroyed by truth. As Shields herself comments on the function of fiction in life writing, “it attempts to be an account of what cannot be documented but is, nevertheless, true” (M. Anderson 70). History and fiction are counterposed to blur the boundaries between these two disciplines. The *Happenstance* novels, which are biographies about a historian and an artist, have shown how the borderline between history and fiction may be blurred. The novel *Unless* has further proved the need for “an alternative, hopeful course” for reality because the hopeful writing of a life may become a force which necessarily acts on that life. *The Box Garden* displays how the “most debilitating disease—that of subjectivity” (109), affects the life writer’s life, and suggests that life writers have to develop a relational self in the process of writing. However, life writers also project their own life onto the subject, thus, producing a “life” of the biographer as something more or other than a life of the biographical subject. *Swann* has exposed various possibilities for “untruthfulness” in discourses such as feminist, biographical, editorial, filmic and archival discourses.

Lastly but most importantly, by going beyond the conventional and traditional approaches of life writing and following the trend of modern technology, Shields anticipates future directions of life writing—sharing a communal history and collective narrations of one’s life history, so that life writing tends to be more fictional and communal in a postmodern era. Thus, Shields’s literary biography of Jane Austen creates another form of “alternate possibility” in life writing—biography as autobiography.

All in all, these duplicities of life writing are constructive. Alternate versions of fictions are the reality of life writing; alternate versions of the self are the core in life writing, and alternate versions of media, narrators and narrative are the means by which life writing expands and perfects life experiences.

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