Liminal Spaces:
The Double Art of Carol Shields

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By

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PREFACE

This book offers a comprehensive reassessment of the work of Carol Shields. Arguing against enduring conceptions of Shields's fiction as celebratory domestic miniaturism, the study presents her work as more expansive and equivocal than has sometimes been recognised, reading her texts as "liminal spaces" situated on a series of formal and thematic borders. Close attention is paid to Shields's stylistic experimentation, to her subversions of auto/biography and historiography, and to the significance of her critical writing, while works which have previously received very little analysis, such as her early poetry collections, are also examined. Intertextual links between Shields's work and that of a range of other writers including Phillip Larkin, Iris Murdoch, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood are identified and explored, and the study also draws extensively on manuscript materials which give an insight into Shields's working methods and extend debate about her experiments with narrative perspective and genre-mixing.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used:

Novels:

BG	*The Box Garden*
HHS	*Happenstance: The Husband's Story*
HWS	*Happenstance: The Wife's Story*
LP	*Larry's Party*
RL	*The Republic of Love*
S	*Swann*
SC	*Small Ceremonies*
SD	*The Stone Diaries*
U	*Unless*

Short Story Collections:

CS	*Collected Stories*

Poetry Collections:

O	*Others*
I	*Intersect*

Plays:

THOP	*Thirteen Hands and Other Plays*

Biography/Critical Studies/Essays:

SSVV	*Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision*
"ALSO"	"Arriving Late, Starting Over"
JA	*Jane Austen*
"NHOC"	"Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard"

Manuscript Material:

CSFI	Carol Shields Fonds, First Accession
CSFII	Carol Shields Fonds, Second Accession

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: CAROL SHIELDS - CONTEXTS AND CRITICISMS

To suggest that the work of a writer who has received an immense amount of critical and popular acclaim, whose fiction has won important literary prizes including the Pulitzer and the Governor General's Award, and who has been described as "one of the world's best-loved and most successful novelists" (Martin 2005, 8) has been under-valued clearly requires justification. The work of Carol Shields has indeed received all of these accolades. Yet it has also been, and continues to be, the subject of a significantly high degree of condescension and diminishment. Since Barbara Amiel's notorious review of Shields's second novel *The Box Garden* (1977) claimed that "[o]rdinary people will be the undoing of contemporary literature," accused Shields of creating a "smaller-than-life" narrator, and suggested that her text had mistaken "the commonplace perceptions of uninteresting people for a perception of the human condition itself" (Amiel 1977, 54-5) there remains a tendency amongst critics to either celebrate or denigrate her fiction as the conventional, conservative work of "a genial suburban miniaturist" (Morrison 2002b).[1] This perspective was summarised by Barbara Ellen in an interview with Shields conducted in 2002:

> There are still those who worry about the breadth and scope of Shields's vision. That she is too domestic, too measured and calm, too nice about everything. Not dark enough … [T]he image fastens in the mind of Shields as a Miss Reid [sic] for the home-knit generation, a fragrant lady writer in the traditional mode … For [some] she is too much the literary "Pollyanna", her faith in human nature encapsulated by the decency, fidelity and essential "ordinariness" of her characters. (Ellen 2002)

Ellen's article is itself a "defence" of Shields's fiction, which reports these criticisms not to support but rather to challenge them. Such revisionist readings of Shields's texts have become increasingly prevalent.

Margaret Atwood, for one, insists upon a recognition of what she terms the "thread of blood" in Shields's work (Atwood 2004, viii), while Hermione Lee's significantly titled review "Reading Beyond the Fridge Magnets" notes that "the tendency to celebrate Shields as a benign, tender, mild observer of ordinary, minor lives has not made for a perfect fit" (Lee 2004). This study seeks to extend and contextualise these reappraisals, and to contest the view of Shields as a life-affirming novelist whose "kindly, sympathetic view of human nature" (Werlock 2001, 12) results in a problematic "absence of darkness" (Hill 2000) and the avoidance of "major" themes in her work.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of tributes published following Shields's death in 2003 tended to reaffirm the view that the "breadth and scope" of her fiction was a fundamentally limited one. David Robinson's comment that Shields "focused her writing on the lives of ordinary middle-class people, specifically women" (Robinson 2003) and Tom Cohen's appraisal that "Shields … explored courtship, marriage, family and women's roles in society" (Cohen 2003) are representative, both emphasising, in a highly selective manner, the more traditional aspects of Shields's subject matter. Clearly one does not rely upon hastily assembled obituaries to provide an adequate summation of a thirty-year literary career. But even the first critical monograph produced on Shields's work, Adriana Trozzi's *Carol Shields' Magic Wand: Turning the Ordinary into the Extraordinary* (2001), reaffirmed these perspectives, repeatedly referring to the "simplicity" of Shields's writing and describing her characters as "average and banal" (Trozzi , 27, 319, 323). Furthermore, while offering a thorough overview of Shields's prose fiction, Trozzi's study tended more toward summary and description than exegesis.

This is certainly not to suggest that valuable, perceptive academic work has not been produced on Shields in Europe and North America. In the U.K., critics such as Coral Ann Howells and Faye Hammill have consistently offered insightful analyses of her writing, as have Hermione Lee, Blake Morrison, Penelope Fitzgerald, and reviewers such as Alex Clark and Tim Adams. Individual essays by Susan E. Billingham, Clara Thomas and Susan Grove Hall have helped to extend debate about her work, as has Abby Werlock's finely detailed book-length study of *The Stone Diaries* for Continuum Press. In France, Simone Vauthier and Marta Dvorák's language-centred readings have illuminated the linguistic and narratological play so central to her fiction. The "Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary" conference (held at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in 2003 and co-organised by Dvorák and Manina Jones) brought together scholars from Europe, the U.S. and Canada in a varied discussion of her writing.

The resulting publication offered a wide-ranging take on Shields's engagement with "the extra-ordinary," including close readings of individual novels and stories, Catherine Hobbs's insight into the Shields archival fonds, and Lorraine York's astute appraisal of Shields's status as literary celebrity.

In Canada itself, the Edward Eden and Dee Goertz-edited *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction* (2003) insightfully explored Shields's ambivalent postmodernism, with each of its essays centred around issues raised in an address given by Shields at her alma mater Hanover College, Indiana. (The address itself was reprinted as an essay, "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard," in the same volume.) Neil Besner's more anecdotal *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Lif*e (2003) drew heavily upon material previously published in the excellent *Prairie Fire* "Special Edition" (1995) dedicated to her work but also featured new contributions on her last texts, *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, *Jane Austen* and *Unless*. In addition, there has been a television documentary on her work,[2] stage versions of *Larry's Party* and *Unless*, films of *Swann* and *The Republic of Love*, and, most recently, *The Shields Stories* anthology TV series which adapted a selection of her short fiction. Clearly, then, criticism on Shields has developed substantially in recent years, and an exciting range of readings and approaches have been offered.

Much more remains to be done, however. Little has been written about her poetry, her non-fiction, the wide-ranging intertextuality of her work, or its relationship to the Canadian context. The social range of her fiction has been underestimated, as has its engagement with social issues. While her deconstruction of life-writing practices remains a popular topic of inquiry her interrelated interest in historiography has seldom been examined. The oddity and eccentricity of her characters has been overlooked in tired generalisations about their ostensible "ordinariness." Her attention to daily reality has been emphasised at the expense of her equal interest in examining human consciousness and the inner life, and the significance of her protagonists' continual recourse to fantasy, imagination, reminiscence and dream. The early novels - texts which Shields recognised had been the victims of "a certain amount of casual disparagement" (De Roo, 47) - appear to be falling into neglect, and even her most complex and expansive fiction is still frequently described as "domestic" writing. There remains a danger that her work will continue to be dismissed in the terms outlined by Aida Edemariam and Adam Begley: "books about middle-aged, middle-class women's family values," "polite, conventional fiction, capably executed" (Edemariam 2003; Begley 1996). It is the intention of this book, then, to fill at least some of these "gaps," and to present

Shields's work as less comfortable, confined and celebratory, and more challenging, various and equivocal, than is often acknowledged. The study also draws extensively on unpublished manuscript materials which give an insight into her creative processes and offer a fresh slant on her interrogation of the epistemological implications of auto/biography.

By far the most hostile critique of Shields's writing has been made by the Canadian novelist and critic Stephen Henighan in his Governor General's Award-short-listed study *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing* (2002). In a relatively brief analysis of *The Stone Diaries*, Henighan achieves the not inconsiderable feat of repeating all of the most problematic assumptions about Shields's work, and also adding some new ones, while supplementing his criticisms with references to Shields's "puritanical upper-middle-class Wasp sensibility," an "attitude" which, he claims, is displayed throughout her "prim and proper" fiction (Henighan 2002, 182-3). Arguing that the "domestic vision" of her work deserves "ridicule," and dismissing its increasing stylistic experimentation as "a glib pseudo-postmodern veneer," Henighan constructs Shields as a reactionary writer whose "contentedly family-values vision of existence, cut by the sting of a certain school-marmish reproval, has altered little since she began publishing fiction in Ottawa in the 1970s" (181).[3]

This analysis involves making a series of questionable suppositions and mis-readings, the implications of which merit detailed examination. The typical Shields reader, Henighan informs us, is a "conservative upper-middle-class woman" who responds to Shields's work because it "reinforces her bedrock family values" (183). This rather startling hypothesis precedes his description of *The Stone Diaries*' protagonist Daisy Goodwill Flett as "a full-scale apostle for family values," and his dismissal of the novel itself as "a hymn to the pleasures of sheltered upper-middle-class existence" (183). Moreover, alongside what he figures as the novel's nostalgic and sentimental tendencies, Henighan also discerns a "cruel, disparaging voice" in the text: "at the same time as she praises Daisy's simplicity, Shields sneers at it … Praised for its celebration of ordinary lives, *The Stone Diaries* owes much of its success to its denigration of its protagonist's ordinariness" (183-4).

It may be appropriate at this stage to establish my own position as a critic who fails to fulfil Henighan's definition of the archetypal Shields reader on the grounds of both gender and class. However, the unsustainability of the claims being made here must surely be recognised by any attentive reader of Shields's texts. How an alienated protagonist who "hears voices, which may just be the sound of her own soul

thrashing," who suffers "the disease [of] orphanhood" and "the recognition that she belongs to no one" (*SD* 262, 281) might be considered "a full-scale apostle for family values" is a paradox that Henighan does not explain. Nor does his analysis attempt to address the intricacies of a text which, like all of Shields's work, frequently constructs "family" as an awkward and disabling contrivance - "a randomly assigned circle of others" (*JA* 8) - and in which scenes of apparently blissful domesticity are continually, cuttingly subverted: "How blessed the members of the Flett family are, never mind their disparate ages, their hidden thoughts, and the fact that they have little in common" (*SD* 164).

Henighan's allegations of "Wasp prudery" (182) in Shields's texts are new, though hardly tenable when one considers the frank and funny treatment of modern sexual mores in the *Happenstance* novels, *The Republic of Love*, the "Larry's Penis" chapter of *Larry's Party*, and stories such as "Eros," as well as Shields's avowed enthusiasm for the sex scenes of John Irving's fiction and her admiration for a work such as Nicholson Baker's *Vox* (Shields 1998, D16). An exploration of male and female sexuality has never been outside of her range. Indeed, in contrast to Henighan's claim that the gaps and ellipses in *The Stone Diaries* represent its author's "puritanical upper-middle-class Wasp sensibility clamp[ing] down on what can be decently told about a woman's life" (182), Hans Bak, in a sensitive analysis, notes "the dominant presence of the female body" in the text and "the profusion of references to [the body's] physiological and cultural-political functionings." As Bak observes: "the experience of menstruation, intercourse, pregnancy, parturition, menopause and bodily decay are central realities … in this novel" (Bak 1995, 13).

Exactly what is to be inferred from Henighan's reference to "bedrock family values" remains unclear. But if his accusation is the familiar one that Shields's work "swarms with marital compromise (in the minor key), monogamous males … and … 'happy endings'" (Ellen 2002) then this too is an inadequate assessment which is not supported by close attention to her texts. Like Anne Tyler's, Shields's fiction eschews the more sensational aspects (in particular, revelations of incest or sexual abuse) that have characterised the representation of familial interactions in much contemporary fiction, and this may indeed make her work appear to construct a "contentedly family-values vision of existence" to readers and critics who now view such elements as endemic. Nonetheless, her fiction continually presents widowed or abandoned partners (*The Box Garden*, *Swann*, *The Stone Diaries*, *Larry's Party*, "Hazel," "Collision," "Dying for Love"), fatherless or motherless children (*Happenstance*, *The Stone*

Diaries, *The Republic of Love*, "Soup du Jour"), the isolated, alienated and lonely. ("[T]he ubiquity of loneliness" (*U* 72), and its persistence within marriage, is a constant preoccupation of her work.) The parentage of many of her characters is a significant blank: Tom Avery's father in *The Republic of Love* is simply "a misplaced sperm on a misplaced night" (*RL* 142), and the protagonist's eventual decision not "to spend an ounce of his human energy on father-quest crap" (142) is presented as an affirmative resolution in the text. Indeed, while the disturbing implications of "orphanhood" are explored through the characters of both Daisy and Mercy in *The Stone Diaries* (and Henighan's analysis carefully elides any mention of the trauma of Daisy's birth and the feelings of unbelonging that it engenders) absent parents are often a cause of very little concern to Shields's protagonists. Victoria Louise in *The Stone Diaries* "doesn't give one golden fuck who her father is" (269), while in *Happenstance: The Wife's Story* Brenda responds to the comment that "[i]t must have been tough, not having a father" with the reply "I don't think I missed much" (*HWS* 40). Again such sanguinity is presented as a healthy response to the allegedly disabling fact of paternal absence.

Accordingly, "non-traditional" family structures become increasingly central to Shields's work. *The Stone Diaries* sympathetically depicts the makeshift alliance between Clarentine, Barker and Daisy in the "Childhood" chapter, while *Larry's Party* celebrates Dorrie's successful single-mothering and ends with Beth pregnant by anonymous sperm donation. Moreover, as chapter two of this study argues, those texts which do present characters in more conventional family arrangements do so with a marked absence of sentimentality and an emphasis upon miscommunication and underlying tensions. In *Happenstance: The Husband's Story*, the waning of Jack Bowman's momentary desire to kill his teenage son Rob with a kitchen knife does not negate the disturbing nature of the impulse: "So this was how it happened, kitchen murders, blood on the floor, bodies falling" (*HHS* 59). In *Swann*, this kind of "kitchen murder" is not merely fantasised but carried out. It is difficult to discern how these elements constitute a "contentedly family-values vision of existence," for ambivalence about family life, and an awareness of the suppressed hostility that may underpin it, pervades even the earliest of Shields's texts.

Henighan's suggestion that Shields's writing focuses exclusively upon "sheltered upper-middle-class" characters is similarly problematic. Discussing the social range of her fiction in interview, Shields acknowledged that she had "tended … to stay with the WASP culture I was born into," relating this to a desire "to get things right": "I certainly

don't fret much about universal inclusion. The little piece of territory I can cover seems … more than enough" (Krolik Hollenberg, 350). But while it is impossible to argue that the social scope of her work is particularly wide-ranging, it is more ample than these comments suggest. The inclusion of protagonists such as the French-Moroccan Frederic Cruzzi in *Swann* and the Jewish peddler Abram Skutari in *The Stone Diaries* should not be overlooked, and both of these novels engage with issues of prejudice and racism. Howells persuasively argues that Shields's "scrutiny of the process of identity formation based on family background and inheritance, class, education and profession, age, and above all … gender identity" means that her texts also effectively "*deconstruct* … whiteness as a category" (Howells 2003, 81; emphasis added).

Furthermore, as Shields recognised, her white characters "frequently make a class leap" (Krolik Hollenberg, 350). Eugene in *The Box Garden* is the son of a farmer, Brenda and Jack in the *Happenstance* novels are the children of a sales-clerk and a post-office sorter respectively, while Larry and Dorrie in *Larry's Party* are both from blue-collar families. One of the unacknowledged strengths of her work is to depict what *Swann* terms "upward mobility and the miracle of the one-generation leap" (*S* 90), and to examine the anxieties that such a class shift engenders. (Chapter four of this study explores these complexities and relates them specifically to Shields's use of dialogue.) There are seldom any assumptions made about money in her novels, and the financial and spiritual necessity of work (in all its varieties) for her characters is always a primary concern. *Larry's Party* offers a scathing appraisal of the "ignorance" of the protagonist's affluent customers who "know nothing of the authentic scent of dust and dowdiness" and "breathe the dead air of … family privilege" (*LP* 146-7). It is also difficult to see how Henighan's rather vague concept of "shelter" can be applied to texts which continually emphasise "the fragility of human arrangements" (*RL* 331) and the profusion of "casualties everywhere" (*HWS* 113). The most apparently innocuous everyday items (belts, harps, runner beans) prove "treasonous" (*LP* 53) in Shields's work, and suicides, violent accidents and the threat of destruction pervade her fiction as it stresses the vulnerability of all human structures, from hedge mazes to manuscripts to the body itself. If moments of resolve, equilibrium and "happiness" resonate in her texts it is precisely because of the overriding sense of uncertainty, ambivalence and fragility that infuses them. In *Swann*, Sarah Maloney deconstructs the expression "safe as houses": "What a miracle that he [Stephen] utterly trusts this sloping roof. There's no real reason why he should" (*S* 65). Such aspects suggest that Tanïa Tuhkunen's definition of Shields's "universe" as "non-nihilistic"

(2007, 105) may require modification, for the view expressed in *Larry's Party* that "darkness surrounds and threatens every glimmer of common happiness" (167) is at least partially upheld in all of her work. The "twin shadows" of "grief and depression" (*LP* 108) which plague her characters are never more than temporarily kept at bay. While her fiction seldom succumbs to easy pessimism neither does it yield to "Pollyanna-ism"; her writing can be cynical and acerbic, expressing what Vickers terms a latent "savagery" (*Open Book* 2003) and a decidedly anarchic strand. These qualities co-exist with its comedic, celebratory and sympathetic elements; none should be over-looked in any serious, comprehensive reading.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its aggressively personal tone, overt race and class prejudices and frankly bizarre generalisations about women writers and readers,[4] Henighan's analysis is valuable because it offers some clues as to how such distorted perceptions of Shields's work have arisen. With its emphasis placed firmly upon a selective version of author biography, the critic's comments are not very far removed from the headline which greeted the publication of Shields's first novel *Small Ceremonies* (1976) in an Ottawa newspaper: "Housewife Writes Novel."[5] It is apparent from these statements that some commentators have tended to read Shields's work through the prism of her biography, identifying what she described as her "conventional" suburban childhood and her "long and happy marriage" as elements which must be directly displayed in all of her fiction.[6] (This tendency is particularly ironic since much of Shields's work is dedicated to an exploration of the inadequacy of autobiographical readings of fictional texts.) The implication of such assessments is that a middle-class housewife who published her first novel at the age of forty can have little of serious value or importance to communicate in her work; moreover, she certainly has no business "dabbling" in postmodernism. The result of this kind of biographical focus has been a series of superficial readings which have over-emphasised the benignity of Shields's portrayals of the quotidian and suggested that both her characters and their domestic arrangements are presented in a conventional and - in Henighan's pet phrase - "neo-conservative" manner.

At the same time, Shields's readily acknowledged interest in the "idea of everydayness, in what we mean when we speak of ordinary life" (De Roo, 47) *is* closely connected to her concern to rehabilitate the notion of domesticity in literary art. Defining her early fiction as an attempt to challenge the notion that "serious literature" must deal with "war or race relations or … idealistic quests" (CSFI, Box 63, f.10, 15) she stated her concern

> to bring forward a quality of realism that I found missing in so much "realist" fiction … I had been puzzled by the fact that people in novels rarely sat down to read a book. Or to tell each other stories. Nor did they seem to have friends. Or birthdays. Or any semblance of a domestic life, no beds, brooms, wallpaper, cereal bowls, cousins, buses, local elections, newspapers, head colds, cramps, or moments when their heads were empty, at ease, happy even. Why had domesticity, that shaggy beast that eats up ninety per cent of our lives, been shoved aside by fiction writers? ("ALSO" 246-7)

Here Shields posits a direct link between "the inclusion of domestic detail" and the "quality of realism" attainable in fiction. This issue is explored throughout her critical writing: her 1993 essay "The Same Ticking Clock" proclaims that "[t]]he news is out: we all, male and female alike, possess a domestic life [and] the texture of the quotidian is rich with meaning" (1993, 89), while her 2003 piece "About Writing" introduced a greater sense of equivocation into this perspective while ultimately continuing to affirm the significance of the domestic: "I … worry about my chosen subject of home and family, always imagining it might be read as a retreat from real issues. Nevertheless, I have convinced myself - on good days at least - that we all possess a domestic space, and that it is mainly within this domestic arc that we express the greater part of our consciousness … I want, above all else, to be allowed to stare at [this] question seriously" (Besner 2003, 262).

The prejudices underpinning criticisms of such statements have a long and particular cultural provenance, and not only in the literary sphere. In *At Home: The Domestic Interior in Art*, Frances Borzello identifies the "hierarchy of subject matter" that traditionally deemed domestic scenes inferior to history painting and that led to the domestic interior being marginalised and "ignored in the literature of art" (Borzello, 19-20). "The artist-lecturers [at the Royal Academy from its foundation in 1768] were concerned with passing on a history of the greatest artists of the past," Borzello notes, "and the depiction of ordinary people going about their … everyday activities had little importance in this scheme" (19). Borzello traces this scepticism about the domestic into the 20th century, recognising "the conventional wisdom that domesticity was the enemy of the avant garde …, a subject that stood for all the avant garde was not - bourgeois, familiar, acceptable" (Borzello 2006, 163). Similarly, in *Disclosure of the Everyday*, his study of representations of dailiness in narrative film, Andrew Klevan notes that

> the impulses of scholarship sometimes encourage a dissatisfaction with

> everyday existence. Perhaps because, at first sight, it seems too "obvious" (and … not sufficiently technical or specialised); perhaps it is because the mundane does not declare its social importance in more directly *objective* public language (as political or ideological discourse aims to do); or perhaps matters of the everyday are simply too close to home. The everyday is avoided … because we find it difficult to establish the distance, the separateness, which would enable us to acknowledge it in significant or rewarding ways. (Klevan, 4-5)

Such comments offer a further explanation for some of the hostile (or simply condescending) responses to Shields's work, since an automatic association of the domestic with the conventional, the trivial or the miniature is a correlation which her fiction consistently seeks to reassess. Indeed, her work reads as a sustained attempt to restore familial context and a sense of the domestic *to* the avant garde, and to bring postmodernist-influenced representational techniques to bear on the experiences of groups who have been marginalised or simply caricatured within postmodernist discourse: suburbanites, the middle-class, housewives, the elderly. The perceived conflict between subject matter and style in her work is encapsulated by Henighan's remarks about the "calculation" of *The Stone Diaries* which, in his view, cynically "plays to two mutually hostile constituencies … the 'just folks' market [and] the avant-garde critics" (181). I would argue that a tension between "tradition" on the one hand and "experimentation" on the other is just one of the many interesting and *productive* tensions which characterise Shields's work, and which serve to grant it a great deal of subversive potential for challenging precisely the hierarchical categorisations upon which Henighan's own analysis is founded, not least his intriguing distinction between the "folksy readers" [sic] who demand "a full, fleshed-out story" and the "academics" who don't (181).

Like the paintings discussed by Borzello and the films analysed by Klevan, then, Shields's texts attempt to "show us how the everyday may be recognised and experienced" (Klevan, 5). (Interestingly, in the light of Shields's commitment to examining the dynamics of long-standing relationships, Klevan views marriage as "crucially connected to any discussion of the everyday because it entails the decision to live with one person every day of one's life" (Klevan, 23).) By so doing, however, her work engages with a multiplicity of other issues. Drying an egg beater with her mother at the kitchen sink, for example, Charleen in *The Box Garden* intuits her mother's sense of mortality, her awareness of "life's thinned reversal, of the finite nature of husbands and egg beaters and even of oneself" (*BG* 114). In its move from "husbands" to "egg beaters" to the

self, the passage possesses a subtle expansiveness which is characteristic of Shields's writing. Similarly, in a passage which exemplifies the facility with which her work "goes global," *Larry's Party* imaginatively traces the progress of an alstroemeria seed from the Colombian soil to "the hands of a young Canadian male in an ordinary mid-continental florist establishment" (*LP* 76). Elsewhere in her fiction, a scene in which a character addresses Christmas cards evolves into a discussion of the complexities of friendship and reciprocity (*SC* 64-5), and a scene in which a character makes toast offers an inquiry into loneliness and dependency (*RL* 8-9). Even at its most overtly "domestic," then, her work gestures outward to broader themes and issues, utilizing the platform of the domestic novel for existential inquiry and metaphysical investigation. Seeking to draw the "macrocosm" from the "microcosm" - to, in Shields's phrase, "enclose the large world in the small one" (Cumming 1997, 12) - her texts express her belief that "large narratives can occupy small spaces" (Krolik Hollenberg, 346). As she suggests in her speculative comments about reader response to Jane Austen's work:

> Here on the page were living, reflective men and women facing real predicaments, and expressing genuine desire. Here, in fact, was all that was immediately knowable: families, love affairs, birth and death, boredom and passion, the texture of the quotidian set side by side with the extremities of the human spirit. (*JA* 22-3)

For Shields, then, it is from intimate, essentially "domestic" detail that a larger picture of the human cycle of birth, work and death can evolve: "That's the novel I'm interested in writing: the arc of the human life" (Bolick 1999). As this study seeks to illustrate, her abiding interest in challenging the exclusions of auto/biography and historiography, along with her interrelated commitment to experimenting with genre and form, can not be viewed as a "minor" endeavour, for underpinning it is a philosophical inquiry of a decidedly expansive nature: "how do we value a human life? It is a question that has always interested me; my life theme, you might say, and my most passionate concern" (Thomas 1995, 130).

As chapter five suggests, key to Shields's exploration of this theme is an entirely secular notion of "redemption," a belief that one of the obligations of literary art is to offer access to lives and voices excluded from the discourses of auto/biography and historiography. "I write," she claimed in 1997, "about people I have an urge to redeem, to hold still in the flow of history … It doesn't come from the Methodist Sunday School idea of redemption … Everyone needs recognition. That's why I write" (Cumming 1997, 12). It is in this broad context, then, that her examinations

of ordinariness and dailiness must be interpreted, for her work undertakes a radical reassessment of those lives and actions deemed worthy of exploration and celebration, as well as a subversion of the events traditionally deemed "significant" within an individual life: "I am interested in [the question] 'what is important?' … I want to jiggle [the] scale a little bit, and say, 'Look, this isn't important. *This* is important'" (Anderson 1995, 144). Thus in *The Stone Diaries* the "natural marvel" of Niagara Falls disappoints while the briefest exchange with a stranger cheers (*SD* 133-4), and the writing of a gardening column assumes greater significance than the "drama" of an ostensible "honeymoon tragedy" (*SD* 123). Such a subversive stance further refutes Henighan's literal-minded claim that the structure of *The Stone Diaries* reveals Shields's inability to deal with "[d]rama, passion, complicated feelings - all the stuff of life … the big events happen off-stage" (182), and points instead to Shields's concern (particularly evident in her most celebrated novel) to re-examine the notion of what constitutes a "big event," whether in the "macro" discourse of official history or in the "micro" discourse of the personal life. In this sense, her fiction is not "about" ordinary lives; rather, it seeks to re-evaluate the assignment of such a category, to deconstruct the notion of "*what we mean* [by] ordinary life" (emphasis added).

Shields's sense of a "gender prejudice" in critical responses to her fiction became increasingly overt, and her articulation of it progressively more combative: "[o]f course now that men are writing so-called domestic novels they are not called [domestic] at all; they are called sensitive … reflections of modern life"; "[w]hen men write about 'ordinary people' they are thought to be subtle and sensitive. When women do so, their novels are classified as domestic" (Anderson 1995, 141; Colvin 2000). Such prejudicial complaints about the adequacy of "women's ink" (*U* 308) are not new, for as Elaine Showalter reminds us, "[t]he debate about women's writing - is it too restricted, domestic and love-obsessed, in contrast to the more sweeping, historical, socially aware and experimental novels of men - has been going on since Jane Austen's day" (Showalter 2002). (Shields's final novel, *Unless*, addresses these concerns directly.) The conflict is dramatised succinctly in the dismissive remarks made by one of the female protagonists in David Hare's 2002 play *The Breath of Life*:

> Madeleine: I don't read what they call female novels. Where they say, oh, there's as much drama in pushing a stroller down the street as there is in fighting a war. They bore me stiff. Because there isn't, you know. (Hare 2002, 33)

In Hare's domestic and female-focused drama, this perspective may be presented with some irony. It is worth quoting here, however, because the passage contrasts directly with Shields's statement that it is *not* the duty of "serious literature" to deal with "war or race relations or … idealistic quests." "I would never write a war story," she claimed, "[it] is an entirely male-modelled genre, and I have no interest in it at all. I think it doesn't involve much reflection" (Anderson, 143). This does not signify that her work ignores social realities, however. While a number of her protagonists do experience a sense of detachment from socio-political events, they are also, as Krolik Hollenberg notes, "preoccupied with the intersection of personal and social history" (339), and some participate directly; in *Swann*, for example, Sarah Maloney attends anti-apartheid rallies, while in *The Stone Diaries*, Cousin Beverly's service with the Wrens is presented as one of the defining events of her life. Thus Shields's texts demonstrate an awareness of the socio-political context from which any individual story is generated; indeed, her fiction reads as a sustained attempt to find ways of combining an exploration of the interiority of the individual self with attention to the wider social world.

The disjunction between that private self - with its (frequently unexpressed) thoughts, fantasies, fears, memories and visions - and its public persona(e) is an abiding concern. Repeatedly, her texts explore the implications of the constructions of the self made by others, the constructions of others made by the self, and the ways in which social roles both express and suppress the individual. One of the principal propositions of her work is that the greatest human conflicts may occur not in the public sphere, in interaction with others, but rather privately and internally; as such, her characters often live their profoundest struggles and adventures in their own heads. Readings which view her protagonists simply in terms of passivity, acquiescence or "niceness" fail to acknowledge the doubts and inner conflicts which continually beset these highly introspective, "thought-*full*" characters, as well as the feelings of rebellion and resistance which reside inside. Her texts' sensitivity to the myriad instabilities of the personal life and the ways in which identities, relationships and emotions shift and mutate through time also broadens out into the public sphere: an exploration of changes in gender roles and sexual politics throughout the 20th century is central to her work. In this way, her writing fails to correspond with the reductive definition of "female novels" outlined in the Hare quotation, for the only major "stroller" scene in her fiction (in the short story "Dressing Up for the Carnival") involves a significantly *vacant* stroller. Thus I would support Anne Denoon's assessment that domesticity should be viewed not as "the

subject" but rather as "the context" of Shields's work (Denoon 1993, 9).

It is not the *only* context, however. For even as Shields's writing asserts the primacy and importance of domestic experience, it engages with many issues which can not be classified in such terms. For example, the domestic-emphasis of much criticism has obscured the extent to which Shields is a writer preoccupied by travel, and the fact that airports, aeroplanes and hotel rooms are habitual locations in her fiction. (Her decision to set her first play, *Departures and Arrivals* [1984], entirely in the transitional space of an airport is merely emblematic of this.) Reflecting her own scholarly work as a creative writing teacher at the University of Ottawa and an English professor at the University of Manitoba, the academic sphere is also as central to her work as the domestic. Her fiction teems with writer characters - of biographies, poems, novels, histories, letters, diaries, feminist criticism, theses, and gardening columns - and the joys and difficulties of language and the writing act is, as this study suggests, a constant preoccupation of her often overtly metafictional work. Moreover, as chapter three demonstrates, her attention to dailiness and domesticity is increasingly supplemented by fantasy and the supernatural, as "the texture of the quotidian" is shown to incorporate synchronicity, moments of epiphanic vision, and "impenetrable, ineffable mystery" (*S* 119). This exploration of what Howells has termed "the co-existence of ordinariness and strangeness" (Howells 1987, 72) further complicates a categorisation of Shields's work as celebratory domestic miniaturism. To classify it as such is to undervalue the frequency with which her writing shifts into other, apparently antithetical modes: satire, parody, farce, slapstick, and, particularly in the short fiction, allegory and fable. As Morrison notes: "[o]nce you stop labelling her, you begin to see how much more is going on" (Morrison 2002a).

From the publication of her first poetry collection *Others* in 1972 to her last completed novel *Unless* in 2002, Shields was a prolific writer, producing a total of ten novels, two more poetry volumes, four plays, three short story collections, a study of Susanna Moodie, a biography of Jane Austen, and fiction for children. (A completed but unpublished first novel entitled *The Vortex* is among the mass of material held in the Carol Shields Fonds at the National Library in Ottawa.) She also co-edited two anthologies of writing by women with Marjorie Anderson, and contributed numerous reviews and articles to magazines, newspapers and journals. This list testifies to the breadth of her generic range, and the expansive nature of her fiction is further evidenced in the diversity of its intertexts; this study identifies and explores connections between her work and that of Phillip Larkin, Iris Murdoch, Alice Munro, Studs Terkel, Saul Bellow,

Phillip Roth, and Margaret Atwood.

That the Canadian context of her work has received relatively little attention may be due to her frequently stated cynicism about the tenability of national literature categories. As Hammill has shown, both *Small Ceremonies* and *Swann* offer "a sceptical analysis of those critical categories which posit the existence of the essentially Canadian in experience, culture or writing" (Hammill 1996, 91). In interview with Denoon, Shields dismissed attempts to distinguish between American and Canadian fiction in terms of thematics as "*quite* irrelevant": "I love to evolve theories about everything in the world, but I've never evolved a theory about the difference between Canadian and American writing … The border doesn't mean much to me" (Denoon, 12). This apparent inattention to Canadian and American difference is another aspect that Henighan takes issue with in his analysis of *The Stone Diaries* as "Free Trade Fiction," a text that ignores "the cavernous psychological and historical differences" (14-15) which separate Canada from the U.S.[7]

In fact, Shields's work does not entirely dismiss either the notion of "Canadianness" or of U.S./Canada difference. Her texts' interest in travel and their scepticism regarding generalised definitions of national "characteristics" and "types" means that her fiction frequently roves between countries and continents. Nonetheless, Canada remains its recurrent reference point, and as both Perry Nodelman and William Neville have demonstrated, Winnipeg in *The Republic of Love* and *Larry's Party* is presented with a depth of detail that no other fiction writer has previously afforded it (Nodelman, 40-55; Neville, 27-37). Furthermore, her texts increasingly work to contest American attitudes towards Canada. In *The Stone Diaries*, Daisy encounters "educated Bloomingtonians who have never heard of the province of Manitoba, or if they have, [are] unable to spell it correctly or locate it on a map … It's as though a huge eraser has come down from the heavens and wiped out the top of the continent" (*SD* 93). This same sense of Canada's invisibility to its southern neighbour is explored in *Larry's Party*, in which Larry finds that to his American friends Winnipeg is regarded simply as "somewhere *up there*, somewhere northerly, a representative piece of that polite, white, silent kingdom" (*LP* 206). In contrast to both Henighan's assessment and her own interview comments, then, Shields's novels do indeed articulate what Peter Dickinson has termed a "border consciousness" (Dickinson 1999, 84), for they express impatience with the American perception of Canada as "a country where nothing seems ever to happen," a nation with a melting pot set to a curiously "low temperature" (*SD* 93). While her characters could seldom be termed Canadian nationalists, such elements of critique, often

treated with humour, frequently feature in her work. The protagonists of her story "Accidents," for example, complain about the way in which Canadian news is "condensed and buried" in (or else entirely absent from) the European *Herald Tribune* newspaper (*CS* 44). Taking such references as evidence of the "Canadianness" of Shields's work, chapter three of this study suggests that the stylistic experimentation of her fiction may be generated from a specifically Canadian literary context, while chapter six identifies the Canadian trope of "survival" as central to her late writing.

Rather than over-emphasising the Canadian specificity of Shields's texts, however, it may ultimately be more appropriate to consider her fiction in terms of a dual national heritage - or "border consciousness" - which more accurately reflects her background as an American-born Canadian migrant writer. In interview with Krolik Hollenberg, she discussed the question of her dual nationality:

> I see myself as a Canadian because I live here, and have for forty years, and I know more or less how things work in this country. But I also had an American childhood, and an American education. Today I carry two passports … I have to say that I feel fortunate to have a foot on each side of the border. (Krolik Hollenberg, 352)

With its Bhabhaian resonances, Shields's conception of her own liminality here suggests an assimilation of post-colonialist theories of national identity, and accounts for the frequency with which migrations between Canada and the U.S. are presented in her fiction. Her remarks may also be interpreted in the context of Victor Turner's more comprehensive theorisation of liminality as a state "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony" (Turner 1969, 95), for the quotation expresses a doubleness of perspective which this study views as central to her work. References to doubleness, duality and dialectic permeate her texts. *Small Ceremonies* characterises female psychology as a "see-saw ride" between "optimism and pessimism" (*SC* 114), while, in *The Box Garden*, Charleen describes herself and Eugene as "half-educated, half-old, half-married, half-happy" (*BG* 128). Fay and Tom in *The Republic of Love* are described as possessing a "skewered double vision" (75, 121), Reta in *Unless* proposes that linguistic "doubleness" (between the French and English languages) helps to "clarif[y] the world" (146), and the story "Times of Sickness and Health" suggests a "hopeful rejoicing at the overlapping of categories" (*CS* 341). Elsewhere, in interviews, Shields commented upon her own border status beyond nation, defining the writer's position as an intrinsically doubled one - "having one foot in one world and another in the real world"

(Colvin 2000) - and identifying herself as "one of [those] women [born] in between [the two feminist movements]" (Wachtel 1989, 37). Thus her description of Susanna Moodie as "a bridging figure, a woman whose consciousness spanned two continents, two cultures, two political philosophies" (*SM: VV* 74) is a description that may be applied, with significant amendments, to Shields herself.

Accordingly, as its title suggests, this study seeks to emphasise the liminal position of Shields's texts on a series of borders: between self and other, realism and postmodernism, auto/biography and fiction, male and female narratorial perspectives, randomness and pattern. The trope of doubleness - which functions in Shields as structural principle, philosophical position, and challenge to hierarchical binary categorisation - helps to problematise reductive readings of her texts, revealing the principal moods of her work to be ones of contradiction, ambivalence, uncertainty and paradox rather than unequivocal celebration. It is these qualities that I identify as central to Shields's "double art."

Doubleness also forms the organisational principle of this study which takes both a broadly chronological and a thematic approach to Shields's work. Each chapter groups together a selection of texts in order of publication and examines correspondences (and divergences) of theme and style, emphasising the ways in which her books extend, contradict and interact with each other. The study also draws upon interviews with and essays by Shields, not to suggest that her professed "intentions" about her work should necessarily govern its interpretation but rather to demonstrate the extent of her authorial self-awareness and her engagement with literary history, and also to present her views in counterpoint with those of other writers and critics. Beyond the overriding concern with liminality, no monolithic conceptual or theoretical perspective is offered; rather, the study utilises a diverse range of theories and approaches in order to illuminate the primary texts. Thus the following chapter addresses Shields's poetry and companion novels through Lacanian concepts of alterity in order to explore the central tension between "otherness" and "intersection" which is developed in this early work. The chapter argues that the conflicts between connection and alienation presented in the character interactions in these texts are reflected in the dialogic structures of the novels and incorporate into their exploration of family dynamics a far greater ambivalence than has been recognised.

Chapter three similarly emphasises the doubleness of Shields's approach, examining how *Various Miracles* and *Swann* combine self-conscious narrative "play" with a realist commitment to character construction and moral issues. These texts, it is argued, emerge from a

quarrel with realist and postmodernist tendencies, and constitute Shields's most direct attempt to establish a literary style positioned "betwixt and between" these discourses. Chapter four investigates the relationship between silence, speech and society in her mid-period work, exploring her fascination with the possibilities and fallibilities of language, and arguing that her extensive deployment of dialogue challenges the alleged limitation of the social range of her fiction.

Chapter five extends extant analyses of Shields's "use and abuse" of auto/biographical convention by drawing upon unpublished early essays and tracing her development of *The Stone Diaries* and *Larry's Party* through their multiple manuscript revisions. The chapter explores how Shields's experiments with narrative voice and transformations of personal biography in these texts contribute to their status as hybrid "auto/biografictions." The final chapter proposes that her generically disparate last texts are linked thematically by an inquiry into the "Canadian" trope of survival. Constructing characters who are experiencing some form of physical or emotional deprivation, the short story collection *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, the biography *Jane Austen* and the novel *Unless* each stress the difficulties and the value of endurance, emphasising the human ability to survive by maintaining "one foot in one world and another in the real world" - that is, through creative acts of writing, revision and imagination.

Notes

[1] It should be noted that Morrison, a perceptive commentator on Shields's work, seeks to challenge, rather than reaffirm, this view.

[2] *Dressing Up for the Carnival: A Portrait of Carol Shields*. BBC2. 12 August 2003, 11.30pm-12.20pm.

[3] Henighan's reading of Shields's fiction is situated within the wider context of *When Words Deny the World*'s critique of contemporary Canadian literature. In Henighan's assessment, the "best" Canadian fiction was produced between what he figures as the country's two colonisations: the first by Britain, the second by the United States following the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994. Asserting that the decade between 1965 and 1975, when Canada depended less on Britain and had stepped back from America's involvement in Vietnam, produced the most successful Canadian writing, he claims that "nothing memorable" has been written by Canadian authors throughout the 1990s because "no sooner had the Free Trade Agreement gone through than Canadian novelists lost the thread of contemporary Canadian experience" (180). (The 1980s are a lost decade in this formulation.) Henighan is disturbed by the tendency of Canadian novels to migrate outside Canadian borders and views this as an avoidance of Canadian reality.

While his analysis raises some interesting issues, it is flawed by its aggressive value judgements, generalisations about Canadian and American difference, and by the problematic neatness of its formulations. While Henighan accuses Shields's fiction of "neo-conservative nostalgia," I would argue that it is in fact his own text that succumbs to this tendency, as it continually eulogises an alleged "golden age" of Canadian literature now passed.

[4] Henighan's comments about Shields's "conservative upper-middle-class" female admirers, his reference to the "doctors' and lawyers' wives" who constitute Jane Urquhart's readers (187), his allusion to the "[y]oung Canadian women who know little … about Canadian writing [but] have heard of Barbara Gowdy" (197), and his concern with female authorial "primness" (182, 200) are intriguing. The critic's thinly-disguised contempt for contemporary women writers and readers, and his prescriptive ideas about what constitutes suitable subjects for fiction, are particularly disturbing aspects of *When Words Deny the World*.

[5] "Carol Shields," *The Times* (18 July 2003) www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-45-748752,00.html Accessed 24/7/2003.

[6] "Meet the Writers: Carol Shields," http://btob.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=743856&userid=2V8WO Accessed 28/6/2003. Lorraine York's essay deals perceptively with Shields's negotiation of her public image.

[7] Shields's Canadian protagonists, Henighan argues, "placidly assimilate into continental (ie. U.S.) norms," the texts ignoring what he terms "the discrepancies in history, culture, outlook, landscape, climate, language and institutions that differentiate [Canada and the U.S.]" (184-5). Such are the reasons for his designation of *The Stone Diaries* as "the flagship novel of Free Trade Fiction." Again this analysis is selective and contradictory. On the one hand, Henighan states that Shields is "unique in preaching an untroubled, ahistorical North Americanism"; on the other, he suggests that her novel is simply part of a wider 1990s movement in which *many* Canadian novelists began to purge their work of Canadian elements and to defer to American cultural values. Furthermore, Henighan makes no reference to Shields's own migrant background, or to the trajectory of *Larry's Party*, which concludes with the protagonist's return to Canada from the U.S. I would also argue that the tentativeness about belonging which *The Stone Diaries*'s protagonists experience should be read precisely in the context of their status as migrant subjects.

CHAPTER TWO

OTHERNESS AND INTERSECTION: SHIELDS'S POETRY AND COMPANION NOVELS

Asked in a 1988 interview whether she considered "the mystery of personality and human exchange" to be one of the primary subjects of her fiction, Shields responded in the following way:

> Yes. The mystery of personality and the unknowability of others. Otherness. Even if we were allowed to go up to strangers and ask the most intimate of questions … we would still remain in a state of ignorance about their lives. And yet moments do occur, as we all know, when we seem almost to enter into another body and sense something of its essence. These random glimpses appear to have little to do with how long we've known someone or the nature of what we might reveal. (De Roo, 43)

With its suggestion of the inadequacies of language and its insistence upon the arbitrary and provisional nature of any moment of sympathetic "human exchange," Shields's remarks articulate a tension between a sense of isolation and a sense of connectedness which constitutes one of the central dynamics of her work. In her texts, characters in a variety of circumstances experience feelings of acute alienation and anxiety, sensing what is most frequently figured as a "void" or a "vacuum": an "emptiness at the heart of life" (*S* 35). In interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Shields identified such moments as offering "glimpses of chaos … [when] your whole life … seems meaningless … a kind of angst when you suddenly feel … alone and powerless" (Wachtel 1989, 39). The collocation of the last words - "alone" with "powerless" - is affirmed in her fiction, in which negative feelings of impotence or stasis often emerge during a character's apprehension of his or her separateness from others. The intense "gusts of grief" experienced by Daisy Goodwill as akin to "a migraine coming on" throughout *The Stone Diaries* (189) and Larry Weller's less painful but pervasive sense of "something missing" in *Larry's Party* (178) are symptomatic of an alienation which Salley Vickers, in a radio discussion

of Shields's fiction, has identified as "existential" (*Open Book* 2003). Repeatedly, Shields's characters, regardless of gender, age, class or the quality of their familial affiliations, feel themselves to be "anointed by loneliness, the full weight of it" (*SD* 190). In contrast to the prevalent view of Shields as a writer who benignly extols the virtues of marital contentment, it is possible to view her fiction as being populated by isolated individuals who (whether married or unmarried) experience loneliness as their habitual state. In *The Republic of Love*, Tom Avery's awareness of his own mental and corporeal alienation - a "solitary body, alone in a bed, alone at a table, alone in the rubbish heap of his unarticulated thoughts" (323) - is one of many such examples. "Absence," and how it is survived and managed, is, as the final chapter of this study illustrates, an issue with which Shields's fiction has been consistently preoccupied.

This abiding concern with existential aloneness and separation from the "Other" means that Shields's work engages with concepts theorised by Jacques Lacan.[1] In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan posits the "Other" as a structural position in the Symbolic order, a state that, in the paraphrase of Paul Goring, "everyone is trying to access, to merge with, in order to [abolish] the separation between 'self' and 'other.'" For Lacan, however, "the fulfilment of this desire is by definition impossible, because the sense of the self comes about through an apprehension of separateness. So, the existence of the Other creates and sustains a ceaseless sense of lack" (Goring 2001, 363).

However, if the "sense of lack" so frequently experienced by Shields's protagonists would appear to constitute an unequivocal affirmation of Lacanian theory, the notion that contact with the Other is "*by definition* impossible" - a "bar [that] can never be crossed" (Rivkin and Ryan 1998, 124) - is a thesis which her fiction ultimately subjects to significant amendment. Indeed, the feelings of estrangement experienced by her characters have the capacity to yield to an affirmative sense of connectedness, with many protagonists undergoing a moment of vision, in which they intuit a "net of connections" (*HHS* 158) linking their lives to other lives and to a wider world. Larry's particular image of human separateness, for example - "every last person on earth withdrawing to the privacy of his own bones" (*LP* 283) - is countered by the narrative voice and recognised as only a partial truth:

> It is impossible to live a whole life sealed inside the constraints of a complex body. Sooner or later, and sometimes by accident, someone is going to reach out a hand or a tongue or a morsel of genital flesh and enter that valved darkness. This act can be thought of as a precious misfortune or

> the ripest of pleasures. (283)

Although the crucial qualification "by accident" re-emphasises Shields's sense of the arbitrary nature of these "epiphanies," such fleeting moments of engagement nonetheless provide characters with a sense of heightened perception and renewal, an impression of the worthiness and "possibility" of their lives, and "a great gift of happiness" (Wachtel 1989, 43). For Shields, these "transcendental" (but not illusory) experiences emerge either during an "odd, chancy … moment of connection" with another human being or in "the accidental collision of certain events" (Thomas 1995, 127; Wachtel 1989, 43).

Adapting the titles of Shields's first poetry collections, this chapter figures the experiences outlined above as, respectively, moments of "otherness" and "intersection," and examines the ways in which Shields's first four novels - works she deemed "companion texts" due to their interlinked narratives and parallel perspectives - attempt to mediate and negotiate between the two positions. These early fictions, it is argued, are comedies about perception, in which the desire to highlight the positive connections linking characters is combined with an acknowledgment of the importance of accepting the separateness of those allegedly "closest" to one another: siblings, children, parents, spouses, friends. This dual perspective incorporates into Shields's portrayals of family dynamics a far greater ambivalence and complexity than has been recognised. However, in order to provide a more complete perspective on such issues, it is useful to begin by looking *backwards*, at the inauguration of these concerns in Shields's poetry itself.

Larkin with Lacan: "Self" and "Other" in Shields's Poetry

Critical interest in Shields's first poetry collections, *Others* (1972) and *Intersect* (1974), has remained slight, with only one substantial article, by Katherine Nicholson Ings, devoted to them. This lack of attention has been justified by a generally accepted conviction that Shields's poetry is, in the words of Constance Rooke, "less impressive than her fiction": "simple, domestic, generous in spirit … often technically undistinguished" (Rooke 1983, 752). Closer attention to both collections identifies a number of areas of interest, however, and reveals the relationship of the poetry to the subsequent novels to be particularly significant. Encountering Shields's poems now, as most readers might discover them - through the perspective of the later fiction - is to find a notable amount of correlation in terms of