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What's the Matter?
Authors in Carol Shields' Short Fiction

In all her fiction—long and short—Carol Shields returns repeatedly to the figure of the writer, usually but not always female. Judith Gill in *Small Ceremonies* is a writer of biographies who has also tried her hand at fiction, a novel based on a plot which she has filched from her English exchange partner, John Spalding, and which is in turn filched by her novelist friend, Furlong Eberhardt. Fay McLeod in *The Republic of Love* is a folklorist researching a study on mermaids. Mary Swann in the novel of that name is a brilliant woman poet lost to literary history and gradually being reclaimed by literary critics and the biographer, Morton Jimroy. Reta Winters in *Unless* is an author of light fiction, and translator and editor of the work of Danielle Westerman. Shields is also preoccupied with the work of "real" authors: several famous names feature in the literary field sketched out in *Mary Swann*; like many Canadian women writers, Shields is haunted by the work of Susanna Moodie—she has written a biography of her and Judith Gill is doing the same. Shields has also written a biography of Jane Austen.[1]

Though Shields is not writing in deliberate dialogue with critical theory, as one would find in the work of Umberto Eco or J. M. Coetzee or Gilbert Adair, an awareness of recent debates on authorship certainly informs her creative work. The theoretical language and the intellectual shenanigans of the academic author are always satirised by Shields. In "Ilk" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival*), for instance, she combines a clever spoof of academic-speak on narratology, some sharp comment on women's difficulty in getting tenure and a hesitant, more tender narrative of past tragedy (a suicide) and

possible future love.[2] Yet she recognises the constructedness of authorship, asking questions that echo Michel Foucault's "What is an author?" (141–60). She seems to share Foucault's interest in authorship as a position, its function, and what the name of the author signifies in history and discourse. Shields also understands Pierre Bourdieu's question, "Who creates the 'creator'?" (76–77). The creative person is not an inexplicable genius, as the "'charismatic' ideology" that Bourdieu critiques would have us believe, but the product of a network of internalised social and historical determinants that sanction the creative person's thinking and acting. *Mary Swann*—exploring competing forces in the literary field and attempting to create not only Swann herself as a poet of distinction but even her damaged and lost poetry—particularly lends itself to Foucauldian and Bourdieuian analyses.[3]

The capital "A" Author, the master of control and meaning that Roland Barthes has so influentially discussed, makes few appearances in Shields' work (142–48). When it does, this author figure is always male and always debunked. Morton Jimroy in *Mary Swann*, or the Professor from Massachusetts in "Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass" (*Various Miracles*) may have pretensions to this status but they are never fully realised. Like Barthes, Shields would like to remove the author from a revered position. Her aesthetic philosophy is thoroughly democratic: she believes that creative ability or an aesthetic sense may emerge in the most unexpected people or circumstances. But Shields is loath to abandon the authorial subject. In "Absence" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival*), the loss of the letter "i" from the writer's keyboard does not have consequences simply for her composition; it proves how indispensable is the authorial "I."[4]

My focus on the author in Shields' short fiction emphasises materiality. Shields understands the author and writing, particularly within gender politics, as produced in specific material conditions. Her creation of the woman author—frequently on the margins of the literary field, devalued by critics, involved in subtle negotiations and accommodations with domesticity and family life, enabled, in recent years, by the discourse of feminism and changes in markets—relates closely to a materialist-feminist critical line from Virginia Woolf to the present. But another order of questioning in her work prompts me to explore Shields' response to materiality in three ways. Firstly, through her perspective on the nature of creativity and its resistance to a materialist explanation. Shields is intrigued by what *isn't* easily explicable in materialist terms and looks to explore these areas without falling back on a Romantic or transcendental view where authorship is inspiration and

the domain of a chosen few. Secondly, through her interest in the material as subject matter and the ethical questions raised in the author's handling of subject matter; here ethics and aesthetics can be at odds. And, thirdly, through the challenge posed in her texts to the materiality of the author as a coherent subject in control of her/his writing and placed in a recognisable material world.

Materiality and Creativity

Herb Rhinelander, a syndicated columnist, believes that, "The quotidian is where it's at," ("Soup du Jour," *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, 162). As the narrator says a few lines later, "The ordinary has become extraordinary" (163). The narrator's comment is almost a synopsis of many reviews of Shields' work. Everybody recognises Shields' interest in materiality, particularly the everyday, the small scale and a carefully realised world of the family, the married couple, the close friends. But the everyday is often defamiliarised. Shields likes the non-dramatic gestures that are charged with history or, as in "Keys" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival*), the inconsequential objects that are redolent with metaphorical suggestiveness. Small material details signify in larger and more abstract ways. In what is generally a positive review of Shields' *Collected Stories*, Hermione Lee indicates the danger: "The risk of this attention to the overlooked and everyday is that it can edge into banality and coyness . . . a penchant for happy endings (which she can satirise in herself, too) for cutely punning titles, folksy parables and comforting adages" (26). An equal danger, among some reviewers and critics, has been to turn to an elevated aesthetic vocabulary as a way of explaining Shields' preoccupation with the commonplace while giving status to her writing. Thus, the extracts from reviews used as puffs on the back of the Fourth Estate edition of *Various Miracles* refer to "sentences [that] transmute base metal into gold," "moments of supernatural transcendence," "a fragile incandescence," and "transfiguring the mundane with meaning." Evidently, an idealist aesthetic is good for selling books. From this perspective, the everyday is either sadly suburban or meaningful only when it is no longer everyday.

This view of writing as alchemy is one form of the historic image of the writer as the conjurer, wondrously bringing life out of nothing but also dangerous. While Shields would not ally herself with this magical view of writing or with the charismatic ideology of which Bourdieu speaks and to which the Professor in "Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass" seems attracted, she

is aware that not everything in writing can be explained by the material conditions of the author or by the demands of the literary field. Hence, one can understand Meershank's writer's block in "Block Out" (*The Orange Fish*) as the product of a series of incidents that have dented his confidence. But there is no explanation for how Meershank gets through his writer's block. The lead character in his new novel is Mimi Cornblossom, who wakes up one morning with a song in her head, a song which everyone thinks is going to be a winner. The essential difference between the old Mimi (manicurist) and the new Mimi (show-biz star) is specifically *not* of material substance or circumstances. It is "the thinnest of membranes. It's made out of air. It's colorless. It's not in the dictionary, not in the phone book, not in the bureau drawers or hall cupboard" (109). This tremulous insubstantiality is both the coming into being of Meershank's character and Mimi's unexpected talent.

In *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Margaret Atwood suggests that creativity in this sense is in the nature of a gift. Making use of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Atwood claims that

> the part of any poem or novel that makes it a work of art doesn't derive its value from the realm of market exchange. It comes from the realm of gift. A gift is not weighed and measured nor can it be bought. It cannot be expected or demanded; rather it is granted or else not. In theological terms it's a grace proceeding from the fullness of being. (60)

Elsewhere in the book, Atwood tries to describe that elusive moment when writing takes place. She quotes the end of Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* where Levi, a chemist by training, traces the movement of an atom through the body to the point where a hand, his hand, writes a dot on the page. Atwood rejects this narrative as "too bloodless" (49). Atwood's own suggestion is that writing takes place when, like Lewis Carroll's Alice, the author "passes through the mirror. At this one instant the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life, neither the one thing nor the other, though at the same time she is all of these at once" (49–50). These proposals are suggestive but problematic. Atwood is right that creativity cannot be understood solely in material terms, in this case through a work's market value. But her reference to the gift—gift from whom?—and to the theological places creativity once more in the realm of the transcendental. What Atwood sees as "too bloodless" in Levi's example strikes me as an exciting combination of the material in the

form of the corporeal and the fantastic improbability of the atom's journey. But if Levi's account explains, to some satisfaction, this dot on the page, it does not necessarily account for all the other dots and signifiers that make up the complex sign system of a text. Both the Levi and Carroll examples suggest that creativity is momentary—that dot, that "instant" of dissolution—which does not help us understand creativity as a sustained process. However, Atwood's working of the Carroll image teases out the doubleness of the author. The author is both a material self in a material world and someone else who is somewhere else.

Shields also suggests the link between creativity and the psyche. In "Death of an Artist" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival*)—a title which, of course, recalls "The Death of the Author"—a troubled past is hinted at in the childhood toys which the author wanted to ignore, including a silver cup on which his name is misspelled and a red crayon. Without the red crayon with which he wrote his eight volumes of diaries, "his name would be only a name and his life less than a life" (190). He uses the red crayon on his last page to say how alone he is. The crayon may be the final pose or it may, like Charles Foster Kane's "Rosebud," signify the loss in childhood that drives his desire, in this case to write his name correctly and to have his name known.[5] But more frequently, Shields ties the insubstantiality of creativity to serendipity. We can recall that her companion novels of a husband's story and a wife's story are called, jointly, *Happenstance*, and one volume of her short stories, *Various Miracles*.

"Miracles" may, again, suggest the theological but in the title story it is the miraculous as chance, coincidence, unexpected insights or connections that can fuel the creative process. The author, Camilla LaPorta, has been criticised by her publisher for relying too much on coincidence and, acting under her publisher's direction, has removed from her latest novel all incidences of "fate, chance or happenstance" and replaced them with "logic, causality and science" (43). Having dropped the manuscript on the way to the publisher's office, she loses the key page, "the page that explained everything else" (43–4). The twist is that the loss of the explanation improves the novel. Now the publisher believes that "[s]ometimes it's better to let things be strange and to represent nothing but themselves" (44). The missing page is picked up by an actress who reads on it a description of herself and what she is doing at that moment. This is the last of a number of "miracles" related in the story, all of which test the reader's credulity and would fit happily into the "strange but true" section of a tabloid. In trying to account

for everything, Camilla LaPorta's publisher has restricted the range of possibility. Shields, on the other hand, stretches her basically realist mode into a realm of uncertainty and wonder but does not see the need to reconcile the two.

Finding the Material

Writing as magic and alchemy features also in Alice Munro's short story "Material" but here "matter," in the sense of the subject-matter of the work and the materiality of the lives that form the subject-matter, takes the reader as much into ethics as aesthetics. Reading a story by her ex-husband, Hugo, the narrator recognises how he has turned into "Art" the life of Dotty, the woman who lived in the basement flat when they were young and first married, and appreciates that it is "an act of magic," "a special, unsparing, unsentimental love" (35) that makes this possible. But the letter of congratulation that she begins to pen to Hugo somehow changes into a diatribe. In the wife's eyes, the creative transmutation does not compensate for Hugo's being a "filthy, moral idiot" (33), for being able only to "dramatize" rather than "realize" (34). "Realize" here means to see the effects of his actions, to understand what is happening around him in the context of social exchange and responsibility rather than as fodder for "Art." A moral ambiguity at the centre of Hugo's art is produced from a blindness to others' needs and yet his writing remains something of value.

Shields fully understands this ambiguity. In several stories she questions the responsibility writers have to their material: is the relationship simply instrumental; does everything bow before the demands of "Art"? In Munro's story, the figure who is ignored in life is dignified in writing; in "Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass," the figure who is despised in life is vilified in writing. Mrs. Turner's particular sin, in the eyes of the Professor, is her "defilement" of Art; her body, her accent, her behaviour, her conversation, the tawdry contents—in his view—of her bag are all an affront to this purveyor of "taste" (36). The Professor's sense of disgust at this "little pug of a woman" with "the red toenails, the grapefruity buttocks" is visceral (36). Mrs. Turner represents "vulgarity" and "tastelessness" and the poem he writes about her reminds the listeners of the "unspeakable," the "tacky," and "banality" while the Professor experiences "transcendence," "sublime beauty," and appreciates the "ancient and exquisitely proportioned" (36–7). Shields satirises here the politics of a transcendental aesthetic and illustrates what Pierre Bourdieu would call the "symbolic violence" integral to the "high" aesthetic the Professor supports. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu's monumental

study of taste, he shows how fully our concepts of "taste" and "tastelessness" are implicated in systems of social difference and how violently "the infallible taste of the taste-maker" seeks to expose "the uncertain tastes of the possessors of an 'ill-gotten' culture" (91). As Shields makes clear, the material factors of gender difference, class difference and the Professor's greater cultural and symbolic capital support his elevated view.[6] Mrs. Turner's delight, as she travels the world, in seeing carrots and lettuces, fences or telephone poles would be dismissed from this perspective as "facile" or "childish" or "primitive."

Shields sees not only the presentation of subject-matter but the actual gathering of it as a potentially suspect activity which can place the author in a dubious, at times almost corrupt, position. In *Mary Swann* she refers to "duplicity" and "deception" (163), "subtle thefts and acts of cannibalism" (231); in *Small Ceremonies* writers are described as "no more than scavengers and assemblers of lies" (144). The title of Shields' story about two writers driving round the UK and picking up hitchhikers just so they can hear their stories is called "Poaching" (*Various Miracles*).[7] The writers feel that what they are doing is "like stealing" (90) and that, parasitically, they live "like aerial plants off the packed fragments and fictions of the hitchhikers" (91). In this pursuit they are ruthless, favouring the "slightly distraught" (92), who more easily reveal things; others have to be "kindled" (93) while some they need to "wring dry" (92). There is something passive-aggressive in their concealing of their occupations and purpose, and something chilling in their strategies to get others to reveal themselves.

Yet, as is common in Shields' short fiction, the story's proposition is complicated or turns ironically at the end. In "Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass," not only is Mrs. Turner's unsophisticated aestheticism upheld but she herself is aestheticised in ways less cruel than the Professor's. Mrs. Turner, "a sight" that is appalling at the start of the story, becomes "a sight" that is admirable by the end (27, 38); she also enjoys how the cotton underdrawers she made as a girl have become a cultural artefact in the town's local history museum. Equally, the Professor, who has so traduced Mrs. Turner, is described unironically by Shields as having an "authentic" and "spiritual" experience on his trip to Japan, which produced poetry of quality ? "He wrote and wrote, shaken by catharsis, but lulled into a new sense of his powers" (35). She shows him realising that his poem about Mrs. Turner was short on aesthetic value, "a somewhat light piece" and a "crowd pleaser" (35). Like Hugo, a lack of ethics does not necessarily inhibit an engagement

with the aesthetic. Finally, Dobey in "Poaching" pumps people for material but, unlike the Professor, acknowledges that everybody has material that is worth more than ridicule: "Behind each of the people we pick up, Dobey believes, there's a deep cave, and in the cave a trap door and a set of stone steps which we may descend if we wish" (94). The deep cave in Mrs. Turner's life—the birth of an illegitimate child to a black father and her abandonment of it in a baby carriage outside a large house—is an event that could easily have been aestheticised in tragic or heroic mode but it remains unrevealed.

In "New Music" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival*), the woman author does not think herself superior to the quotidian, material world of family life or that she has to remove herself physically from it but, when writing, she is estranged from the everyday. Working on her 612-page biography of the sixteenth-century composer, Thomas Tallis, the author forgets her wifely and motherly duties and rises early not to bake scones but to write. The family accepts the intensity of the author's involvement that takes her "elsewhere," leaves her *distrait* with some of the domestic duties undone. This distance provokes an objectivity between her and her family and opens up the possibility of the family, specifically her husband, becoming unanticipated subject-matter. For the first half of the story we think that the narrator is an impersonal, omniscient narrator who tells us of the author's meeting with her husband and of her interest in Thomas Tallis precisely because he is considered second to his pupil, William Byrd. As the writing of the biography comes to its end, a first-person, singular pronoun intrudes—"She's spent four years on this book. I've already said that, haven't I?" (155)—and then, the first-person plural possessive pronoun as the author lies down on "*our* canted, worn sofa" (155; my emphasis). The singular pronoun enters on three further occasions, always with a rather self-deprecating tone: on Tallis, "I'm no expert, but I've been told" (155); on Tallis' portrait, "I am not a particularly tall chap myself, and so I instantly recognise and connect with a short man's uneasy gaze" (156); and on imagining the author as "a girl just twenty-one years old," "I'm aware that I probably should say 'young woman'" (159). The first-person plural features again when the author, on finishing her book, stares at her family "as though *we* are strangers. . . . *We're* not exactly unwelcome, her look tells *us*, but the nature of *our* presence has yet to be explained" (157; my emphasis).

At this point the reader's suspicion is confirmed; the narrator is the long-suffering husband, the one who has to wake every morning to a cold bed. That disconcerting look returns a year later when the author begins to work

on William Byrd and regards her husband "with an odd, assessing measuring clarity" (161). What does she see? Shields subtly hints that this modest man—himself an author of *Distribution of Gravel Resources in Southwest England*—is included in her fascination for the second best. His presence might have informed her work on Tallis in some imperceptible way and now, as Tallis' star rises and Byrd's begins to dip, the shifting status is driving her work on Byrd. All the husband knows is that it is best to stay out of her way and that he is once again referring to himself in the third person. He is becoming a stimulus to her subject-matter, her subject rather than his own, "he" rather than "I." To be a writer is, it seems, to have a sliver of ice in the heart.

The Material Subject

Shields' work is uncertain about sources of creativity, and about authors' finding and managing their subject matter. It also puzzles about who the author actually is. On one level, Shields leads us to believe we know the author. She works in a realist mode; her characters have credibility, and they live in recognisable social settings. Moreover, Shields' interest in both biography and autobiography encourages traditional associations with the authentic revelation of a human subject. Shields' openness about her own life and writing lend support: she gave many readings and interviews throughout her life; her daughters and friends have written warmly about her; and the special issues on her work, from *Prairie Fire* and *Room of One's Own*, are full of family photos, including, on the cover of *Room of One's Own*, of Shields as a bride. We might feel that we are getting to the truth of Carol Shields but, then, we remember how, in *The Stone Diaries*, Shields plays with both biographical and autobiographical modes and how the photographs in that novel—some of which, interestingly, are of Shields' own family—heighten the sense of verisimilitude. So photographs of a real family are employed in fiction to establish the "reality" of a fictional family.[8] In the short fiction too, Shields indicates that neither biography not autobiography necessarily helps us in understanding who the writer is. In "Collision" (*Various Miracles*) the universe is saturated with "biographical debris" (139); it is a "narrative litter-bag," which remorselessly and indiscriminately absorbs material (140). The author's concern should be with "the harvest, the gathering in, the adding up, the bringing together, the whole story" (158). But elsewhere Shields illustrates how such wholeness is impossible. The literary fields themselves are riven with the combative and the self-interested. Biographers, and particularly autobiographers, have

good reason for believing that they "know" the author but they may also have questionable motives and be subject to conscious or unconscious pressures to fashion their material in a particular way. Furthermore, in post-structuralist terms, the materiality of the author as a consistent, knowable human subject is fractured, rendered unknowable and constantly in process however much the individual may deny this.

The biographer of Edith-Esther ("Edith-Esther," *Dressing Up for the Carnival*), an eminent novelist now reaching the end of her life, jollies her along by saying "You're exactly who you are," to which she replies sardonically, "Whoever that may be" (143). This biographer is determined that he knows who Edith-Esther is, though her hyphenated name already suggests that her subjectivity might be more complex than he thinks. He wants to produce what Liz Stanley calls the "modern biography," as opposed to the postmodern, through a detailed, linear, developmental reconstruction of "a great life." As Stanley indicates, such a view depends on believing that the past can be discovered, that biography can give us the truth of a person—and, indeed, that a consistent, rational self is reclaimable—and on ignoring how "any biographer's view is a socially located and necessarily partial one" (7). Shields' story undercuts the first two claims and confirms the third. While Edith-Esther cannot always remember the details of her past—was *Wherefore Bound* "[p]art of an early trilogy? The second volume? Or else the first?" (141)—the biographer's reconstruction of her life-narrative as a "spiritual odyssey," as his biography is ultimately called, is an imposition. He forces on her life a narrative which is at once impossibly coherent, as everything has to fit this predetermined pattern, and which ignores the resolutely secular nature of Edith-Esther's work. This view of her life can be established only by a process of omission, wilful misinterpretation and overinterpretation, all in the name of some "kernel of authenticity" (140). Edith-Esther recognises the vested interests that are at play, how her biographer's insistence on a spiritual underpinning comes from his own needs and is, at the same time, a useful marketing strategy: "I'm praying that it hits the best-seller lists by next week" is the biographer's wonderful conflation of the spiritual and the material (147). She sees also how the feminist content of her work is excised: "Other times, other rhymes," says the biographer dismissively (147).

What Edith-Esther ruefully thinks of as "death by biography" (137), the fear of every famous writer, probably comes to pass; the story ends with her having some kind of seizure as the biographer's final harassing phone call

reveals how fully her life and work have been distorted. Throughout the story is a recurring image of the field. Edith-Esther believes all her novels "blend into the width of a long, grassy field" (135); thinking of her early work she sees "a meadow landscape, classic birds, wild grasses, a blur of shredded cloud" (141). As her health fails, the nature of the field changes. She finds herself "stumbling across a width of unlevelled ground, still wet with the morning's dew" (144) and, in the final, extended image at the end of the story, the field becomes "a garden in a state of ruin"; disappointment mingles with ugliness, and weeds and sedges attack her (148). Edith-Esther remembers her friend, Magdelena, the one to whom the biographer had wanted to give a religious connotation; she remembers the literary groupie who took her pencil jar, an earlier literary exploitation. The letter opener Magdelena gave her becomes the blade with which she attacks "the savage purple grass rising up around her" (149); the word "purple" reminds us of an earlier moment when she had looked at her aged arm and seen "a veiny ridge of fine purple" (137); the Latin words, RARA AVIS, on the handle of the letter opener are, perhaps, a too obvious comment on Edith-Esther herself or link back to the "classic birds" in the field. The irony is that the biographer never knows these more allusive, associative processes in Edith-Esther's creativity—could never know them as, by this stage, they are unspoken, barely conscious—but is also inhibited from knowing by his own absolutism. His limited pursuit of facts or synthesising theories, a strategy followed also by Morton Jimroy in *Mary Swann*, is always deadly—almost literally deadly for Edith-Esther and metaphorically deadly in its restrictive control. It misses that other narrative, which is richer but more difficult to handle.

If the biographer is not to be trusted with the material identity of the author, neither is the autobiographer. Atwood writes in *Negotiating with the Dead* about the doubleness of authors generally. Doubleness has an ontological dimension—the person who lives an ordinary daily life is not quite the same person who writes the books—and a historical one—the person who writes the books is not the same person as the author one reads. Such difference, Atwood tells us, is essential to that move through the mirror from self to other, from here to there on which Atwood as an author relies but it is also a convenient way for the author to deny responsibility for what she writes and the effects the writing has. In doubleness, then, Atwood also sees duplicity and she surveys a fascinating range of literary examples—the doppelgänger, the alien that inhabits the human, the virtuous twin and the evil one, the uncontrollable hand that separates from the body, Dorian

Gray, and the quintessential example of doubleness, Jekyll and Hyde. "Which half of the equation, if either, may be said to be authentic?" Atwood asks (39). The hope that the two halves might be brought together in autobiography has not survived deconstruction. As Laura Marcus writes: "Either the autobiography serves to create an illusion of a unified self out of the fragments of identity, or the text reveals, in its fissures, its doublings and its incompleteness, the fragmentations of the subject and its lack of self-confidence" (218).

In Shields' "Death of an Artist" (*Dressing Up for the Carnival*), the double, the empirical person and the author, come together not through a common authenticity but a common inauthenticity; the author's whole life has been a consummate performance of the cultural conventions of "the author." What he *is*, is no more than a compilation of writerly personas. The story suggests both biographical and autobiographical modes, biographical in that it narrates the author's life, in this case retrospectively, from his death at the age of 88 to his childhood, and autobiographical in that we see how, in Paul de Man's words, "the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium" (69). Shields' story could be read as a humorous take on de Man's comment as the author appears to have lived every moment with a consciousness of autobiography and with his epitaph in mind. De Man describes the "dominant figure of the epitaphic or autobiographical discourse" as "the prosopopeia, the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave" (77). Tracing the etymology of the rhetorical term, he links from voice to face: "*prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)" (76) and the word "face" then suggests "deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration" (76). Thus Linda Anderson explains:

> What the author of an autobiography does is to try to endow his inscription within the text with all the attributes of a face in order to mask or conceal his own fictionalization or displacement by writing. Paradoxically, therefore, the giving of a face, prosopopeia, also names the disfigurement or displacement of the autobiographical subject through tropes. (13)

In "Death of an Artist," the author's literary output and his carefully-scripted, life-long performance establishes this memorable voice and face which, together with the investment of the literary field, will ensure that he lives beyond the grave. But the artifice of the whole process also suggests his disfigurement, that there is no substance subtending the tropes.

The decade-by-decade review of the author's life approximates in form an obituary or a published memoir but the language and tone is cutting. The contradictions of his life invite a deconstructive reading. He is a success: people file past his coffin; the progress of his life has been recorded by microphones and cameras; he has several biographers; he is pursued by the paparazzi; he is highly sought after in the right social circles. He is also a failure: he is "furiously unproductive" (185) and what he does produce is incomplete or contrary—"undiaries," an "anti-journal," "neo-diaries" and "crypto-diaries". The literary forms he uses indicate revelation and, yet, the prefixes with their suggestions of negatives and deviations from the forms, and his mannerisms and props, which change by the decade, point to fictionality. Unlike Edith-Esther, this grand old man of letters has provided copious evidence for his readership but all this materiality tells us little about the author. The narrator—and the author's words confirm this—describes him as role-playing and amid disguise, theatricality, masquerade, posturing and chimera. Every casual *aperçu* from the author is, in fact, always rehearsed. Can any authenticity be found in this labour-intensive creation of "the author"? To understand this author one would have to be suspicious of the "face" the author has constructed and move back and forth between success and failure, revelation and disguise, arrogance and vulnerability.

Conclusion

The preoccupation with authorship in Shields' work belongs to a metafictional strand in contemporary fiction. There can be playfulness and knowingness as the author speaks to other authors and an educated readership about the tricks and the vicissitudes of the trade. But metafictional writing encourages also a serious engagement with the nature of writing and the role of the author. Shields' questioning, in a number of ways, about materiality undermines the "cosy" view of her work that Hermione Lee touches on in her review. She can at once value and be self-consciously mocking about small-town life; she can at once work her narrative through the daily engagements of families, partners and friends while also asking important questions about her craft. Shields operates on a border between the everyday and the ethereal, the known and the unknown; she assumes a non-prescriptive position with an openness to possibility and doubt. That the source of writing or its production can never fully be explained or that the author can never fully be known does not detract from the writer's belief

that she is involved in something important and urgent, something that *matters*. As Reta Winters says in *Unless*, in what one inevitably reads posthumously as the final attestation of Shields, "the writerly impulse, or the 'long littleness,' to use Frances Cornford's phrase, of a life spent affixing small words to large, empty pages . . . matters, the remaking of an untenable world through the nib of a pen; it matters so much I cannot stop doing it" (208).

NOTES

I should like to thank the anonymous readers of this essay for their extremely helpful comments.

1 Shields' *Mary Swann* was published in Canada and the United States under the title *Swann: A Mystery* and in the General Paperbacks edition in Canada, *Swann: A Literary Mystery*.

2 Shields herself is no slouch on theories of narrative. See her essay, "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard" in Eden and Goertz.

3 Bourdieu asks this question frequently. See, for example, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 76–7; *Sociology in Question*, 139–48. For a Foucauldian study of Shields, see Brian Johnson (1995); for a Bourdieuian analysis, see Mary Eagleton (2003).

4 A fuller discussion of this story with respect to Barthes' concept of the death of the Author is included in my forthcoming *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*.

5 I refer here, of course, to Orson Welles' film, *Citizen Kane*, which memorably features the image of Kane's childhood sled with the name Rosebud on the side.

6 Bourdieu's concepts of "symbolic violence," "cultural capital," and "symbolic capital" are developed and explained throughout his work. A useful introduction to these concepts is in Webb, Schirato and Danaher, *Understanding Bourdieu*.

7 I say "writers" though the two characters are so circumspect that it is never made explicit in the story what form their interest in narrative takes.

8 Shields' use of photographs in *The Stone Diaries* has been discussed by Deborah Schnitzer, but there is another essay to be written about the use and effects of Shields' family photos in essays about her work.

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