

“The Coded Dots of Life” Carol Shields’s Diaries and Stones

Speaking of her childhood reading, Carol Shields notes her attachment to *Anne of Green Gables*: “Anne transforms her community with her exuberant vision. She enters the story disentitled and emerges as a cherished daughter, with loving friends and a future ahead of her, and she has done it all without help: captured Gilbert Blythe, sealed her happiness, and reshuffled the values of society by a primary act of re-imagination” (“Thinking” 10). The tone and tenor of this passage celebrating a model woman’s “primary act of re-imagination” resonate with Shields’s Governor-General-Award and Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Stone Diaries*. In this book, Daisy Goodwill Flett’s own “primary act of imagination” (76) redeems and transforms her experiences into an exuberant auto/biography, which imitates and ironizes biography and autobiography, even as it re-views the values of society and their impact upon her.

The Stone Diaries is, however, a novel of contemporary sensibility, and Daisy’s role is much more complicated than Anne’s. She does transform and shape her experiences, but she is also transformed and shaped by them. She finds voice(s) with which to speak, but is simultaneously spoken by others, leading to the conclusion that the site of language and body is both her own and forever mediated by others. This book explores the characters’ longing for self-definition and control of their lives and narratives, concluding that the subject is the site of contradictory impulses and multi-vocalic utterances, which are always-already never our own—but which, Shields maintains, the imagination can seize and reshape.

Although in an interview Shields argues that *The Stone Diaries* is Daisy Goodwill Flett's fantasy of "what other people imagined about her" (Shields, Web Interview), this character exists partly as a narrative centre, and partly as a nexus of events and language: mediated by others through "the socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures and the socially structured situation," i.e., "habitus" (Bourdieu *Outline* 6), she is hardly more than an absence herself. This absence is, however, part of an important conceptual and thematic relationship between instability and stability, indeterminacy and pattern, "fate and choice" (Poole 20), relationships that bear the strong imprint of chaos theory. The diaries and stones announced in the title of Shields's book serve as figures for the main character's self-construction and her construction by others and for their "chaotic" implications. In this essay I will use the diaries to explore Daisy as the nexus of a system of dispositions and her own agency, as well as others' and her own narratives, and the figure of the stones to investigate the continuing and problematic role of her parents in constructing and maintaining this habitus. The use of the diaries and stones, explored through chaos theory and the social constructivism of Pierre Bourdieu, leads to my conclusion that the book's central operating hypothesis is that our lives are self-formed *and* the product of habitus, indeterminate *and* determinate, and random *and* patterned in strange and wonderful combinations.

i. The diaries: the mediated body, nexus, and mosaic narration

Although Shields's main character Daisy faithfully fulfilled the traditional duties of daughter, wife, mother, and friend, her language and voice—her diary—and those of others redefine that adherence to convention. In a way, Daisy is the paradigm of the traditional author/subject, searching for coherency and meaning within and outside society, while other voices with their varying "range of tones" (Weil 174) problematize that perception, suggesting that meaning is constituted beyond the reaches of the individual subject. Shields's language and, especially, her multiple and even contradictory narrators and narrations, undermine the "wholeness" of societal, auto/biographical, and novelistic conventions, asserting that the subjectification of identity and text is complicated and implicated.

A "genial," "clever," and "obedient" woman (59), Daisy presents herself as the near-perfect, twentieth-century, *Good-Housekeeping* embodiment of the upwardly mobile daughter, wife, mother, and friend. She had a rela-

tively good life and to outward appearances was the model of stability, predictability, and “wholeness.” Born in 1905 to a stone cutter who later became a stone carver and quarry owner, married in 1935 to an Ottawa civil servant, she was offered a position as a part-time gardening columnist after the death of her husband in 1955, only to lose that position in 1964. Sometime between 1965 and 1977 she moved to Florida where she may have died in the 90’s. As a young girl, she tended to the needs of her father, as a wife to her much older husband Barker Flett (perhaps another version of a father), as a mother to her three children, as an aunt to her niece who raises an illegitimate daughter in Daisy’s household, and as a friend to her pals from childhood days. Even in her 80’s after a coronary by-pass, kidney operation, and smashed knees, her unfailing courtesy and “persevering strictures of social discourse” (314) remained intact. These were her familial and societal obligations, and Daisy fulfilled them completely—or so she would have us believe; she lived what Richard Ford in his own fiction has called a “perfect, crystallized life” (202). Indeed, her daughter Alice claimed that Daisy’s life was more crystallized than most, for “being a young wife to an older husband . . . kept her girlish, made her a kind of tenant in the tower of girlhood. There she remained, safe, looked after” (235-36), the equivalent of a fairy-tale princess locked in a tower. In an interview, Carol Shields expresses the opinion that this crystallized life characterized a whole generation of North American women whose lives have been nearly forgotten (Web Interview).

In terms of system and stability theory, Daisy’s well regulated life, her orderly system, involves a pattern of expectation for women, proceeding in the same linear direction:

birth → school → college → marriage → family → part-time job → retirement → death.

This systematic and predictable progression may be called a fixed-point attractor, characterized by stable motion, repeatable pattern, and identical recursions. In terms of human behavior such patterning suggests a preference for stability and routine and a disposition against adventure and imagination. It also suggests that, in a regular way, small causes will have minor effects and large causes will have major effects. Such a view is positioned on balance and order.

In terms of chaos theory, an area of curiosity and knowledge for Shields herself (Web Interview), this appearance of stability is deceiving, for

around and within it exist various manifestations of instability. Indeed *The Stone Diaries* itself suggests that beneath this crystallized life are ungovernable beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and feelings—things that those around Daisy “can only register and weigh and speculate about” (230)—because her identity was not fixed and her self not “carved on entablature” (231). The book’s view resembles that of various scientists of chaotic activity who argue that order is an inherent part of a dynamic process which also contains disorder, and that the symmetrical, orderly “world of almost Platonic purity” (Briggs and Peat 14) defined by traditional science does not, in fact, exist apart from turbulence, irregularity, randomness, unpredictability, and asymmetry. Rather than patterns defined by orderly movement (attractors), there are curious and unpredictable patterns formed by random and asymmetrical processes caused by some kind of extreme turbulence (strange attractors). Such turbulence often takes the form of bifurcation (as when water rushes around a large rock), which is a fragmenting and dispersing of the previously unified flow into stable and unstable forces, in which the resulting dynamics are much greater than the initial cause. Many scientists and social philosophers now accept the validity of this assumption, but they value it differently: for instance, Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers argue that *order arises from chaos*; Benoit B. Mandelbrot asserts that *order is inherent in chaos*; and M. Mitchell Waldrop, contrary to both, believes that *chaos arises from order*. Although these views are mainly ascribed to the fields of science and mathematics, they have significance for the construction of identity and narrative, as James Gleick and N. Katherine Hayles have demonstrated. In both identity and narrative, the notion of a transparent, essentialized, centred self or text is surrendered to an indeterminate, non-linear one of opacity, dispersion, gaps, and boundaries.

In many respects, Daisy herself bears out the implication of the strange combination of order and disorder, symmetry and asymmetry, the rational and the mysterious. Shields highlights this lack of a consistent and unitary persona by omitting Daisy from the gallery in the middle of this fictive chronicle that presents purportedly authentic photographs of the central family residence as well as family members and acquaintances. Daisy, who dominated the book from beginning to end, from her birth to death—is nowhere to be found in any picture. Although Shields claims playful post-modernity (Parini 3) in inserting the pictures drawn from museums and

galleries (the older pictures) and her own family (the more recent pictures) to give the book a biographical cast (Thomas 59), the fact remains that Daisy is absent, “blinded, throttled, erased from the record of her own existence” (76). She is further almost hidden from view in the genealogical tree at the front of the book. If Daisy cannot be found in the pictures and only barely traced in the genealogical tables, neither at the end can she be found under the stone chiseled beside her husband’s. Nor in this book in which every significant event has a date, is the day and year of her death actually revealed. Finally, even the name Daisy may be arbitrary for it was not a name bestowed by her parents, but rather one her foster mother Clarentine had “taken to calling her” (49).

These are significant omissions and gaps, making the reader wonder who and what Daisy really was, apart from her social context and network of relations. “Her life,” as the introductory poem intimates, “could be called a monument,” but it is more accurately an “assemblage of dark voids and unbridgeable gaps” (76), an abundance of elusive words that circle her life and trace its boundaries. Daisy is like the evanescent, insubstantial “arc of a rainbow [which] cannot be touched; its dimensions are not measurable, and its colors fade even as they are apprehended” (57).

The lack of Daisy’s picture in the gallery of *The Stone Diaries* is the same absence that haunts this work filled to the brim with lyrical prose and personal ruminations, for, of all that we come to know about Daisy, we never understand precisely who she is and what she thinks about many issues. As in any other diary or autobiography, more of the subject is hidden than exposed and is likely “full of systemic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams” (196).¹ The holes in the narrative remind the reader that “human beings are defined as much by the things that don’t happen to them as by the things that do” (Summers 45) and that, in the Derridean sense, excess impoverishes. The excess of narrative—Daisy’s account of her own life and other voices and narratives (diaries) as well—tends to reduce the subject as a meaningful presence.

These unbounded narratives are like a chorus of socially dialogized voices that play against each other, but that also show links and interrelationships (Bakhtin *Dialogic* 263). Daisy’s is the organizing and foremost voice, but it is not consistent, nor is it the dominant one—in fact, this chorus arguably has no dominant voice. These multivocalic, polyphonic, and heteroglossic voices include Daisy herself from a young girl to an old

woman, her mother and foster mother, her children and grandchildren, her extended family, and her close friends. The diaries also include occasional speeches, letters, invitations, announcements, lists, recipes, and poems that cast some light on Daisy and her changing attitudes and circumstances. These are the multiple mediators that contribute to the understanding—or the illusion of understanding because Daisy invents or edits them, too—of Daisy and establish her place, and theirs, within the social and cultural matrix of the institutional and community framework. In fact, these are the threads of the narrative that Daisy constructs to give herself identity; indeed, narrative is all we have of her identity—and by extension anyone else—for in certain respects we are all constructed by narrative. Daisy's autobiographical account was, for her, constructed to give perspective and pattern to her life, but for her family and acquaintances she is an "indeterminate site" (Bourdieu *Field* 43) or text which they will continue to gloss in the hope of arriving at a knowledge of her and themselves. For the reader she is the nexus of all the narratives and events. This method accomplishes something very important: it undoes traditional, logical, linear narrative form, presenting a plethora of voices that simultaneously subvert personal and narrative consistency and any notion of a unitary person, text, or history of narrative autobiographic form. In more conventional autobiographical narratives, the first-person or sometimes third-person narrator provides a sense of coherent design and structure, whereas here the eruptive narrative of many voices undermines coherent identity. In terms of chaos theory, linearity and overt coherence give way to non-linearity and lack of obvious coherence.

Multivocality and multiplicity are important means of breaking down the solipsistic centredness of an individual, familial, or communal vision. When interrogating one kind of centre—Daisy's socially gendered position—the multivocal narrative disrupts all similar centres, even as it breaks down the conventional narrative structures used to speak of and support those societal positions. Shields accomplishes this task not only by moving from one first-person, one-directional voice to another, but from first-person to third-person narration as well; the book also sometimes moves from past to present, following the arrow of time, but at other times, especially when multi-personed and non-linear, it will move backwards in time. The book opens with Daisy as the narrator—in a modified traditional diary form—giving an imaginative account of her own birth and her mother's

simultaneous death, and the book ends with Daisy's real or imagined death and the family's discovery of some of her buried past. In between, the treatment is not all of a piece by Daisy, and it is not directly chronological because the narrative weaves around the lives of the various characters, conveying a sense of simultaneous discontinuity and continuity and of "segments of time . . . untied to any other time" (11). As chaos theory reminds us, the linearity of life and narrative is often thought of as consistent and in a straight line ("the name 'linear' refers to the fact that if you plot such an equation on graph paper, the plot is a straight line" [Waldrop 64]), but both may be regarded in completely different ways. As M. Mitchell Waldrop points out, the brain is not linear, and, as writers know, most classical works follow some method of plot triangulation (cf. Freitag's triangle), and many modern works are much more curvy, cyclical, and open-ended. Indeed, "virtually everything and everybody in the world is caught up in a vast, nonlinear web of incentives and constraints and connections. The slightest change in one place causes tremors everywhere else" (Waldrop 65).

Daisy's own voice is extremely important to this non-linear narrative and herself because she does not want her views lost or her voice deafened by interpretation that "marches ahead of her. Announces her. Declares and cancels her true self" (122). At the tender age of eleven she decided that her life would have to be held together by a "primary act of imagination" (76), which would consist of the real, outrageous, false, and exaggerated. As with the remainder of the voices, hers is, then, neither constant nor consistent, and an omniscient narrator, perhaps Daisy herself in another guise, reinforces this position, noting her "blend of distortion and omission, its willfulness, in fact" (283). These reservations about personal observation, commentary, and story make us aware of the ways everyone distorts experience and, hence, the need to hear the views of others who can fill in the gaps and add different perspectives, but it also paradoxically makes us trust Daisy's comments more because of her candor, self-effacement and "talent for self-obliteration" (124).

Even when the narrative voice is predominantly Daisy's, it is heteroglossic, changing from occasion to occasion and inflected by knowledge that she cannot realistically have. For example, her narrative is sometimes assisted by obscure narrator agents who peek into the fiction, revealing details closed to her. In Daisy's opening account of her birth and her

mother's unfortunate death, the narrative reveals much about her mother's and father's intimate thoughts, observations, and even sexual relations, often in a voice that sounds vaguely archaic, an inflected voice that could not be very different from Daisy's mother's. This may be Daisy's imaginative re-creation of her mother, but the language is undoubtedly not what she herself would use, even if her father revealed to her everything he knew and she repeated it in his voice. Nor does the account only give voice to "legend along with facts," as Shields would have us believe (Web Interview). It is almost surely, in part, the voice of Mercy Stone Goodwill, Daisy's mother. This especially knowledgeable first-person voice is layered on top of, and mingles with, Daisy's more restricted and limited first-person voice, giving a sense of interior knowledge and complexity that goes beyond ordinary physical, historical, and linear boundaries, beyond the usual "pure" first-person narrative forms. The narrative repeats this technique in the pages immediately following the conflating of Mercy's and Daisy's voices when that of Clarentine Flett blends with Daisy's, providing a certain view of Mercy, and still later when Abram Gozhdë Skutari, the Jewish peddler who discovered Mercy collapsing and giving birth to Daisy, reflects on that moment of life and death. The final voice—a narrative aside—that blends with Daisy's might be that of an unidentified grandchild (329).

These penetrative first-person omnisciences suggest that bodies dissolve into language and that the voices and experiences of the past are embedded within the present, creating an historical mosaic. This is not Bakhtin's chronotope, which removes devices, functions, and motifs from temporality and contextuality (Holquist *Dialogism* 109-113), but an intertemporality that shows the non-linear penetration of one period or event by another. Indeed, I would like to call this technique "mosaic narrative," in which first- and third-person voices from the past and present blend to create a sense of continuity and presence coupled with discontinuity and absence.

In intertemporal mosaic narration, the past and present bear remarkable affinity, and, as one of her children said after Daisy's supposed death, "the past is never past" (352).² Of relevance in understanding this phenomenon are Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of language acquisition and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "dispositions" and "habitus." According to Bakhtin (Volosinov), children acquire from their parents and community not only language but a method of organization and a way to think (*Marxism* 11-13).

In Bourdieu's formulation, each of us picks up in an unconscious fashion certain attitudes, conceptual models, and sensitivities to cultural structures and ways of negotiating them. This habitus is

a 'feel for the game', a 'practical sense' (*sens pratique*) that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules. Rather, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The habitus is the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early childhood, which becomes a 'second sense' or a second nature. (Bourdieu *Field 5*)

There is, of course, room for individual agency, but habitus suggests a multi-generational structure in which structures and ideas are continually reproduced. Daisy's archaic narrative voice at once conveys the flavor of the speech of Mercy Stone Goodwill and Clarentine Flett and suggests the very imprint of their being, their "system of dispositions" and habitus, on her. (I will turn to this aspect more fully in the second section.) Despite their belief that, as orphans, Daisy and her mother had no "coherent history," their "dispositions" would have been part of the general society, but the lack of at least one parent gave them a sense of difference and existential dis-ease; it allowed them to experience a "disenchantment" with the prevailing doxa (Bourdieu *Outline*), a disenchantment fostered and underscored by non-linearity and multivocality.

The multiplicitous secondary observers add an elaborated view of these social dispositions. In some cases Daisy reveals herself to these commentators, and they react to those observations. In other cases, she is a symptom, and others try to diagnose her origin, meaning, and cure. These polyphonic voices suggest that Daisy's personal life was part of a generally recognized social phenomenon in a certain class at a certain time, and that her personal life was constrained by these systems of dispositions. They also reveal that she sometimes eluded those constraints. These voices try to decode her acts and language, but part of Daisy remains aloof, mysterious, and ultimately separate because systems of dispositions are always-already heteroglossic.

This attempt to locate Daisy, decode her voice, and define her resistances is nowhere more evident than in the recounting of her black, lengthy melancholic despair following her sacking. Up to that time she had a sense of purpose, community, and responsibility, whether of family or profession. Those around her expressed their concern and analysis in this narrative partly as a response to each other—not that they were present in each

other's company, but that one presented a viewpoint and another dismantled or augmented it. This dialogic, effective only if the reader disregards fidelity to time and place, suggests how family and friends project onto Daisy their own justifications, choices, shortcomings, solutions, and self-definitions, revealing more about themselves than about Daisy—adding still another dimension to the richness of this narrative. Perhaps none of these is right—not even Daisy in the guise of the omniscient narrator who interposes at the last moment—or perhaps all of them are right in a limited fashion. From these differing accounts, it is obvious that the narratives cross over and intersect with one another in a non-linear manner, and that they fail to locate the “real” Daisy. She remains elusive and “virtual,” the nexus of non-essentialized narratives.

Two other voices from her distant past are included with the others because they prophesied her emotional crisis, add to the non-linearity and multivocality, and reinforce the mosaic narration. Cora-Mae Milltown, the Goodwill nanny from Bloomington, saw when Daisy was little that she would have a “dark place” in her future because she had no mother to raise her, and the peddler Abram Skutari sensed the newly-born child's “loneliness of an extreme and incurable variety” (260). The omniscient narrator has the final say in this chorus, announcing that the sorrow Daisy hears and feels “may just be the sound of her own soul thrashing. It sings along the seams of other hurts, especially the old unmediated terror of abandonment” (262). These latter three voices in the mosaic narrative reinforce Daisy as a nexus lacking “presence.”

It is this sense of existing in a void and belonging to no one which Carol Shields uncovers in the life of Daisy and which she places side by side with the more orderly, though heteroglossic, systems of dispositions and the sense that Daisy and others like her belong to everyone: given adequate means of support and surrounded by accepting family, Daisy nevertheless discovered that she had no centre, that she was indeed all absence and boundaries. Despite her crystallized past, despite her orderly system of dispositions, habitat, and cultural structures, she remained a spiritual orphan in an existential void, a suffering wanderer and an unanchored vessel, a random particle. At eleven years of age she sensed this vacuum and developed a deep anxiety because she lacked “the kernel of authenticity” (75). Later, the presence of family members disguised some of that emptiness, but the truth of it persisted, and she longed “to bring symmetry” to the too-

evident “discordant elements” of her life. At sixty her sense of helplessness and loneliness took over, offering little more than despair: “In the void she finds connection, and in the connection another void—a pattern of infinite regress which is heartbreaking to think of—and yet it pushes her forward, it keeps her alive” (281). In a sense, it is not logical that at eleven and sixty she should suffer such distress. In the way of chaotic phenomena, however, a small cause can create large-scale, catastrophic effects. Daisy’s deep despair is one such effect and related to that is her decision in each case to follow another course. Her sickness as an adolescent and her job loss as an adult become points of bifurcation altering the symmetry of her life and creating the need for new decisions and insights, arguably resulting in the development of heightened imagination and the narrative account of her life.

The connections and voids must, then, be balanced against her imaginative *tour de force* of confronting and embracing loneliness, of choosing “to lie alone in death” (347), far from her husband and his headstone. These expressions of absence, loneliness, and lack must be placed alongside her ability to keep moving and her imaginative re-creation of events, perceptions, and emotions, which, taken together, create loosely symmetrical patterns, and sense of order coming out of chaos. It was during the depression of her early confinement for measles and pneumonia and much later sacking that she most fully recognized and articulated the need for the primary act of imagination. Indeed, Shields suggests that only through isolation and existential despair can imagination and transcendence take shape (Smyth 140-41).

In a sense her decision to lie alone in death is a major cusp in the narrative and her life because as death loomed she accepted the inevitability of loneliness and absence—what she had ignored, struggled against, or held at bay. If she does not exactly celebrate loneliness, she at least accepts it as her lot, and perhaps that of many other women in her generation, for this is a text about the impossibility of securing full identity and place. Daisy’s void *and* the imaginative act of affirmation, her sense of isolation *and* the multitude of inquisitive and even comforting voices which surround her in these diaries—these give a sense of life being simultaneously lonely *and* companionable, empty *and* full, disconnected *and* connected, symmetrical *and* asymmetrical.

It is an understanding that others across the generations have shared, for Daisy, although not an average woman of average sensibilities, philosophically portrays the state of human kind. In the moments before Daisy’s

birth, her foster mother Clarentine Flett anticipated this, as well. She attributed her own malaise to “loneliness, not the unhappiness of life itself” and believed that she and Mercy were “alone in the world, two solitary souls, side by side in their separate houses, locked up with the same circle of anxious hunger” and encircled by a “ring of disability” (18-19). Mercy, Clarentine, and Daisy are unified in their loneliness and bound by their separateness.

The totality of the narratives or diaries evaluates life and finds that it is indeed lonely and random, even in the midst of companionship and family support, and yet strangely full and whole, in the midst of aloneness. The events of everyday life and those special moments of happiness and sadness are important, but there are intimacies and feelings that cannot be wholly shared, except ironically in this case by the reader. Despite the habitus or system of dispositions that she is born into, and despite the heteroglossic voices that constitute this system, Daisy comes into and exits from the world an orphan. Her *raison d'être* is never definitively located, but, as the key figure in Carol Shields's novel, she represents our longing for wholeness, coherency, and meaning and our worst fears of loneliness, fragmentation, provisionality. Shields's very techniques of story-telling create and sustain this dilemma: heteroglossic and intertemporal mosaic narrative emphasizes both Daisy's place within systems of dispositions (her objectivity) and her intensely personal loneliness and agency (her subjectivity), both the continuity and importance of her social function and her very real psychological and spiritual isolation and resistance, both the orderly and disorderly in life. This mosaic narrative mediates Daisy's body, decentralizing her, others like her, and this text in radically innovative ways, even while it suggests that this, too, is part of a temporal continuum, which is rescued and mediated by acts of primary imagination.

ii. A woman of tapestry stone

If the diaries do not suggest that Daisy Goodwill Flett is a subjectivized “presence” and object of order, neither do the stones. The complex, multi-vocal, heteroglossic narratives of *The Stone Diaries* are not enduring monuments “written in stone,” and the various stones, these other “coded dots of life” (301), likewise reveal inconsistency, unpredictability, and indeterminacy amidst suggestions of pattern. Daisy is strongly identified with stone throughout her life, especially in her early years, though her later

years are equally identified with stone.³ Leona Gom argues that stone is “the dominant image/symbol/themes running through the novel” (22). Indeed, there are so many allusions to stones within the book that they are like the heteroglossic voices of the diaries; multi-lapiscanery, they also fail to “locate” Daisy or create a single monument to her. On the surface, stones have a solidity that does not characterize diaries which are never “cast in stone,” either figuratively or realistically, and which are always personal and provisional, often not meant for public dissemination and not necessarily standing for, or representing, public positions. But, the use of stone and diary together is deliberately ambiguous, standing in certain respects for the appearance of solidity and general continuity but only in relation to contingency and randomness. Neither the diaries nor the stones affirm traditional notions of identity, order, and textuality, but neither do they wholly confirm their opposites.

Although Daisy ultimately chose a headstone inscription that reflected her own agency and not that of others, the stones most intimately connected with her identity are associated with her father and mother and together reinforce the relationship of pattern to indeterminacy and habitus to self-formation observed in the mosaic narratives. Stone represents the origins of her existence, the force of her birthplace, the premature death of her mother and foster mother, her father’s economic, social, and cultural impact upon her life, her ability to mediate and structure her own experience through language, and even the persistence of customs, habits, and attitudes from her adolescent years in Winnipeg and Bloomington.

In her teenage years and much of her adult public life, Daisy shared her father’s view of stone as supportive of a good life and representative of stability, endurance, and even transcendental beauty. His is an almost Emersonian view of stone as useful commodity, vehicle for art, symbol of a quest for self-discovery, and sign of a more universal pattern. By contrast, in her very early years and those preceding her death, Daisy identified with the stones related to her mother and foster mother. These are neither hard, stable, nor transcendently inscribed, but associated with the arbitrariness, lack, absence, instability, and impermanence which exert an influence on Daisy’s subconscious and unconscious life. The exterior of her life is very like that of her father’s stones—stable and patterned, but her interior life takes its problematic and meaning from her mother’s.⁴

Of these possibilities, the stones of Daisy’s father are more-or-less related

to continuity and stability. For his brief time with Daisy's mother, they put food on their table and quite literally held Mercy's food preparations in place. The stones Cuyler removed from the Tyndall and Bloomington quarries gave him a good livelihood and served as the polished and carved building material for many fine churches, banks, insurance company offices, law courts, and college buildings. In this respect, stone is strongly identified with the idea of progress and the underlying ideals of the American dream, denoting the ability to come from poor origins and become wealthy. Furthermore, the stone suggests national progress, for the limestone used in Winnipeg went into fine business and civic buildings, and in Bloomington for similar public and private edifices. Stone, then, served as a means to establish Cuyler personally and stands as a symbol of rising North American prosperity. In this sense, Daisy's description of stone implies economic solidity and immutability, an indication of certainty in her father's career and her adolescent development and a representation of a certain kind of endurance and continuity.

Cuyler also believed that the uniquely centred Tyndall tapestry stone or the variable but uniform Indiana stone could be grasped by the imagination and turned into beautiful, transcendent art. Stone, then, was not only utilitarian in providing a good, systematic, orderly living for Cuyler and Daisy, but also in serving as the material for artistic production. It stimulated Cuyler's imagination, which Daisy reproduced on some psychological and personal level, certainly in her garden where she turned stones and dirt into glowing beds of colour—beautifully patterned and artistic but ultimately impermanent⁵—and also in her imaginative, autobiographical reconstruction of her life. Daisy initially seemed to accept her father's belief in the stability and basic orderliness of life and the force of economic and cultural symbolic practices, but these precepts were tempered, and perhaps even superseded, by the impermanence, disorderliness, and unpredictability represented by the stones associated with her real and foster mothers.

There is certainly a self-perpetuated illusion about Daisy's conception of an orderly childhood marked by the presence of stones, for her construction of events is based on selective memory, and the narrative interrogates her and Cuyler's representation of stability and authenticity. Their optimistic accounts must also be weighed against the deaths of Daisy's real and surrogate mothers and her first husband as well as the various dislocations she endured in moving from place to place in Canada and the United

States. Daisy's impression of that endurance, permanence, and pattern is further problematized by the very composition of limestone itself. The stone that Cuyler quarried in Stonewall, Manitoba was known for its surprising images: "Some folks call it tapestry stone, and they prize, especially, its random fossils: gastropods, brachiopods, trilobites, corals and snails. . ." (25). These images in the stone suggest a rare kind of beauty, though their "tapestry" means that they are inherently ambiguous and, as we shall discuss more fully later, in the words of complexity theory, chaotic.

The artistic function of tapestry stones and Cuyler's attempt at permanence are also highlighted and problematized in his monumental tower in honour of Daisy's mother. He decided to build the tower when carrying a single stone to mark her grave: he saw a magnificent rainbow that seemed "made of glass or a kind of translucent marble, material that is hard, purposeful, pressing, and directed. Directed at him, for him . . . Solid and perfect, and through its clean gateway shines a radiant slice of paradise" (57). The conjunction of rainbow and stone is most ironic, for, while a rainbow is evanescent, Cuyler viewed it as "solid," even as he saw the stone itself as "hard, purposeful, pressing, and directed." Cuyler's hopes, then, to build an enduring tower with carved images on the stones, "elaborate ciphers" that would "reflect the capriciousness of the revealed world" (64), is more ambiguous and self-contradictory than he realized. In his mind, the "capriciousness" was not the on-going fickleness and indeterminacy of the revealed world so much as the variety of possibilities for carving, and he formulated a theory of craftsmanship and art based upon the understanding that "every piece of stone in the world has its own center with something imprisoned in it" (90). For Cuyler, this was not vaguely spiritual but explicit in unifying materiality and spirit: he believed "that the earth's rough minerals [were] the signature of the spiritual, and as such could be assembled and shaped into praise and affirmation" (63). Daisy, however, reveals that even as Cuyler was leaving this part of Manitoba for Indiana, the youth of the community were clambering over the stones, defacing some and carrying others away. Between vandalism and weathering, the tower did not even survive his life, and points to the impermanence of stone.

The most important key to the figure of the stones, their instability, and relationship to identity and the network of narratives is, I would argue, Daisy's relationship to her mother and the significance of her mother's name: Mercy Stone. It is Mercy's last few hours in life which opens the

book: her preparation for a meal with her husband, the ingredients of the recipe for Malvern pudding that she was using, her relationship with her husband and neighbor, and the “accidental” birth of Daisy. It is Daisy’s last days which close the book: her loss of life—if not selfhood; the ingredients to a recipe for lemon pudding that lingers on after her death; her relationship with her children and the staff of the hospital; and her belief that, in turning into stone, she becomes one with her mother. (Perhaps, ironically, she also came closer to resembling the shape of her mother in later years.) While different in certain important ways, the beginning and the conclusion of the book are highly reflective of one another and reinforce the mother’s lasting influence upon the daughter—whether or not Daisy was aware of this power. In her dying moments—or her imagined projection of them—she consciously recognized this affinity, equating herself with her mother and the stone effigies. The tragedy of isolation, orphanhood, and worthlessness that Daisy sometimes felt was somewhat dispelled and dissipated when she saw herself as a stone resembling her mother:

Stone is how she finally sees herself, her living cells replaced by the insentience of mineral deposition. It’s easy enough to let it claim her. She lies, in her last dreams, flat on her back on a thick slab, as hugely imposing as the bishops and saints she had seen years earlier in the great pink cathedral of Kirkwall, . . . and feels herself merge with, and become, finally, the still body of her dead mother. (358-59)

This expression of unity with her mother is singularly powerful, for Daisy uttered it in her final days when she had a highly developed sense of agency and narrative.

Given Daisy’s recognition of her unity with her mother, it is perhaps ironic that Daisy became interested in her father-in-law’s past, but never really investigated her mother’s. There are undoubtedly many compelling reasons for this omission, one being the fact that Mercy was an orphan and arbitrarily given the name of Stone, as were all the orphaned children of unwed mothers in Stonewall. Another possibility is that the search for her father-in-law is really, as Victoria believed, a displacement of the need for her mother. The most important reason she did not attempt to explore her mother’s background may be that Mercy Stone dwelt inside her in a way which she only inchoately recognized, but nevertheless experienced.

This latter possibility implies that one generation enters another, especially that a mother continues to exert a powerful and compelling influence

upon the life of her children—whether or not they are consciously aware of it or want it. Despite being orphaned and lacking her mother’s “presence” and despite her ache of loneliness and lack of authenticity, Daisy experienced her “felt absence,” which could not be discounted, diminished, or dismissed. Daisy, too, would likely continue to exert this same influence and pressure upon her children and account for attitudes and responses within their lives, becoming a felt or present absence around which they would trace the boundaries of their lives. Mercy and Daisy together demonstrate how mothers become located in their children as a kind of nexus of narratives, remembrances, and possibilities,⁶ how they become symbols of order and continuity in the midst of chaos and disorder. Paradoxically, it is through the symbol of the absent mother that Shields most fully expresses a persistent order, and through the symbol of the present father that she dismisses an inadequate construction of order.

iii. Conclusion: the complex relationship of chaos and order

The paradoxical relationship between the legacy of father and mother, need for pattern amid random thoughts and events, interplay of habitus and agency, and master narrative and multivocality underscores the indeterminacy and unpredictability which mark the words of Daisy as opposed to her socially conforming actions. Despite her family’s belief that Daisy lived a simple, patterned existence with little consciousness, her life was more thoughtful, surprising, and unpredictable than they imagined, but also more informed by the imprint of her father, mother, and social environment. They assumed that Daisy was “pure granite” (356), solid and heavy, but her life was clearly as random, unpredictable, and yet beautifully patterned as tapestry stone.⁷ These tapestry stones that Cuyler admired so much in Manitoba have fossils unpredictably embedded in them and suggest artistic patterns to random events. They are the very stones that lay “gleaming whitely just inches beneath the floorboards” of Daisy’s birth spot (40), and which added real and symbolic value to her life. The unpredictability and haunting beauty of such stones and fossils also characterized the stony promontories and plains of the Orkney Islands where Daisy felt especially happy and where Daisy’s father-in-law had settled. There she sensed the fragility of the pastoral beauty of the landscape, which disguised “a thin covering over beds of layered rock. Rock is what these islands are made of, light shelly limestone, readily split into flakes and flags . . .” (298).

These fossils and their green mantle of grass revealed the quirks and beauty of the biological process, though they would “always frustrate the attempt of specialists to systematize and regulate; the variables are too many” (293). Even the sense of history articulated by the building stones on Orkney reiterate this strange union of chaos and order. All the monuments and abodes—villages, forts, cairns, burial chambers, and landing stones from the prehistoric era; Iron Age monuments; Norse monuments from the ninth century; medieval, feudal, and monastic buildings; and various early modern and modern buildings—give the impression of continuous human habitation, but the cultures are impermanent, each falling victim to the next invasion, period of transition, or cultural wave.

The tapestry stones of Manitoba and the fossils and successive settlements of Orkney exemplify the curious relationship between randomness and pattern in chaos or complexity theory. This relationship is, for example, what Stephen Jay Gould describes in *Wonderful Life*, in which a pocket of the environment was unaccountably preserved and immortalized in stone by certain random environmental actions, leaving other large and important areas untouched in such a way that the remaining species would continue to change and adapt. The fossils bear testimony to a life that was full and might have developed had not some cataclysm intervened. The “chance,” “luck,” “time,” and “miracles” that Daisy’s father saw in the formation of the Indiana limestone—how the climate had been favourable for the existence of the sea creatures, the ocean clear, and the depth of water ideal for the sedimentation which created such beautiful stone—involved the operation of randomness and indeterminacy, the so-called “bent corners of evolution” (143) in the creation of pattern and beauty. But the conditions that allowed for the continuance of other life forms, of which the human is one, also involved randomness and beauty.

The indeterminate and unpredictable fossil development and the alternative development of other life forms tell us something about Daisy’s life and our own. It is perhaps this feeling of awe and even confusion that overwhelmed Daisy when dwarfed by the enormity, immensity, and inconsistency of the remnants of past life for they overshadowed the present and refused it special status. The sky, the sea, and the moor were awe-inspiring, but in the Orkney Islands she could glimpse “the surface of the hidden world, . . . find a microscopic tracing of buried life. Life turned to stone. To bitter minerals.” She and her niece hoped to find “a trace, even, of bacteria,

fine as knitting, the coded dots of life" (301). She wanted what her father believed he had found, "some ancient subtle strand of memory, a luminous image of proof and possibility" (34). This code would not, however, necessarily lead to such a certain identifiable message or pattern as Cuyler believed, for the life extending beyond the fossils must also be considered. Such patterning would have to admit the complicated, multiplicitous, enigmatic, and indeterminate, and Daisy would have to think of herself as simultaneously inside and outside the great flow of life, united with and separate from others. Though others might see her as the nexus of a social and familial network, she would view herself as psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually outside, a woman without centre, a woman of margins and boundaries, a woman of tapestry stone and immense imagination. And the truth would lie in the tension between the socially constructed and independently imaginative, habitus and agency, centre and boundary, pattern and randomness. In an interview Shields expresses the universality of this complicated relationship: "It doesn't matter how well insulated you are, you're going to get these glimpses of chaos. . . . [and] those other, equally rare, transcendental moments when you suddenly feel everything makes sense and you perceive the pattern of the universe" (Wachtel 39).

The diaries and the stones of *The Stone Diaries* both interrogate and affirm the relationship between stability and instability, determinacy and indeterminacy, the fossil and the living. The narratives or diaries are unbounded, diffused, and indeterminate, refusing to follow the chronology of Daisy's life and weaving a tapestry around the lives of the various characters, conveying a sense of simultaneous discontinuity and continuity.⁸ Time and timelessness, the conscious and the unconscious, coherent linear language and its opposite—these are the dualities that underlie Daisy's life and finally become the fundamental supporting structure of the text with regard to all the narrators. Like the stones themselves, these diaries are the coded dots of Daisy's buried life, but coded dots that do not create a certain or single pattern, and that offer more questions than answers about the mysteries inherent in Daisy's life.

Daisy Goodwill Flett knew that her life consisted of discordant elements to which she longed to bring symmetry, she recognized the reality of her essential helplessness, waste, and opacity, and she saw herself as an absence and centreless boundary, but the autobiography itself also confirms its opposite: the structures and forms of family continuity and everyday life

were maintained, and her imagination continued to wrest meaning out of chaos and, perhaps, chaos out of meaning. Her life was simultaneously empty and full, disconnected and connected, unstructured and structured. As Carol Shields's key figure, Daisy represents our longing—and the provisional quality of that longing—for wholeness, coherency, and meaning and our worst fears—and possibly joy—that we are fragmentary, provisional, and void of certain meaning. The narratives, the diaries, describe her as surprising, unstable, indeterminate, and random. Like stone, her life may appear to have symmetry and beauty, even endurance and continuity, but her life can not be decoded into a neat pattern or construct or channeled into one determinate meaning. Like the beautiful tapestry stones, the coded dots of her life and narrative are random *and* patterned, indeterminate *and* determinate, surprising *and* conventional.

NOTES

- 1 There is no diary in the strictest sense for Daisy gives up her "private journal" when she marries Barker Flett, and her travel journal gets lost. Similarly, her daughter Alice, who also has a significant voice in this narrative, burns her own old diaries. Instead of diaries in any traditional sense, *The Stone Diaries* is a collection of variously authored or narrated entries primarily about Daisy, but, of course, also revelatory of other characters.
- 2 At the very end of *The Stone Diaries* the voices of Daisy's children are undifferentiated, perhaps to emphasize that they all bear a fundamental relation to Daisy's voice and to reinforce the intertemporality of the narrative.
- 3 Her mother and father met when her father, Cuyler Goodwill, was sent to the Orphan's Home where Daisy's mother worked, to reset the stone of the front entrance. For a wedding gift they were given an adamantine clock by Cuyler's parents. At the time of her birth, her father was a stone cutter at the Tyndall quarry in Manitoba, though in his adolescence and early adulthood he worked at the Stonewall Quarries. When Daisy was twelve, the two of them moved to Bloomington, Indiana, where he first worked as a carver for the Indiana Limestone Company and later acquired a stake in a highly successful stone-carving company and eventually built a magnificent stone house. Her mother, who died giving birth to Daisy, was Mercy Stone who grew up in the Stonewall Orphan's Home in Stonewall County, Manitoba. After Mercy's death, Daisy's father built a stone tower to memorialize his wife and, many years later, after seeing the limestone pyramids in Egypt, attempted to build a miniature pyramid out of stones from locations throughout the world. Daisy's foster mother Clarentine Flett was killed when she was hit by a bicyclist in Winnipeg and hit her head on the cornerstone of the Royal Bank Building—quite possibly and ironically stone quarried by her estranged husband Magnus.

Daisy's first husband Harold Hoad was killed when he fell (or jumped) from their bedroom window in France to the stone pavement. Nearly a decade later, after she and

Barker Flett married, they lived in a large, lovely stone and brick home in Ottawa. Daisy pursued the memory of her ostracized and unknown father-in-law (who was known for "Unyieldingness . . . Narrowness. Stone" [299]) to the Orkney Islands and stayed in the Grey Stones Hotel, while her niece and boyfriend looked for rare fossils. Daisy eventually hoped to become a stone effigy resembling those she had seen in an English cathedral. Finally, she refused to be buried with her husband under his headstone, instead choosing, we are led to believe, one with her own individualistic, rebellious inscription.

It is, of course, possible that Daisy invents all of this background for in depicting herself at eleven, she raises the possibility of her inventing, exaggerating, lying, and "even dreaming a limestone tower into existence" (76). The possibility that she invents everything does not change the implication that this is a book about randomness and pattern.

- 4 The stones of Daisy's childhood bear out this complexity. Daisy was born in Stonewall Township, Manitoba, where her father was a master stonemason, and spent her childhood with Clarentine Flett in Winnipeg (a city of limestone buildings) and adolescence with her father in Bloomington, Indiana, where he became a wealthy owner of a stone-carving operation. These were places and years of some certitude, though complicated by the death of Daisy's mother and foster mother. She followed in the footsteps of her father who had a "curious bond with rock and earth" (81), whose life was, in a certain way, a "fossil field" (91), and who, following intercourse with his wife, had a "stone" removed from his throat, giving him voice and an affinity with words, which Daisy inherited.
- 5 By this Shields suggests that all of us are capable of acts of imagination, which turn chaotic materials into pattern and beauty. These may take the form of cooking and gardening that Daisy inherits from her real and foster mothers, and are perhaps even more critical to her development than her father's imaginative sculpturing of stone. There is, of course, a connection between the artistic production of stonework and Cuyler's ability to speak. He felt a stone dislodged in his throat, and he began to speak in wonderful ways. Perhaps speech and stones are linked to suggest that all things in life, however patterned, beautiful, and momentarily meaningful, are ultimately evanescent.
- 6 Daisy's mother's sense of lack, beginning with her orphanhood was reinforced by Clarentine Flett, who, just before Mercy gave birth to Daisy and died, commented of Mercy, "Poor thing, poor lost thing. Never a mother to call her own" (9). Daisy's own sense of lack develops, almost like puberty, when at eleven years she caught measles and bronchial pneumonia and began to doubt that she had a "kernel of authenticity" (75).
- 7 Indeed, Daisy's life itself suggests unpredictability, for example, in her father's unpredictably falling in love with her mother, Daisy's own unanticipated birth, and her own ill-fated marriage to Harold Hoad. Her husband Barker, too, despite his own patterned existence, experienced such randomness. Indeed, he imagined "fixed voids" in "the separate layers of his brain" (142), and generally experienced these in his life and death.
- 8 This non-linearity is signaled concretely at the onset of the book when Clarentine Flett reflected on the time her work took:

God sees her, of course. He must. God observes her at the window where she stares and stares at the shadows of the caragana blowing across the path, or sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, locked into paralysis over her mending basket, watching a fly creep across the table. The minutes tick by, become an hour, sometimes two. These segments of time are untied to any other time she recognizes. It happens more and more frequently, these collapsed hours. . . . (11)

What Clarentine (and, through her, Daisy) observed is that linearity is a concept fraught with problems, that mental time is very different from chronological time, and that life consists of the two often operating at variance. Clarentine tied this particular observation to another: that lapsed moments share something in common with the life of the imagination and the use of language: "this is something new, her lost hours, her vivid dreams and shreds of language, as though she'd been given two lives instead of one, the alternate life cloaked in secret" (12).

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