Carol Shields and the poetics of the quotidian

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"The quotidian is where it's at," Herb Rhinelander wrote last week in his nationwide syndicated column. "People are getting their highs on the level roller coaster of everydayness, dipping their daily bread in the soup of common delight and simple sensation." (Carol Shields, "Soup du Jour")

A prolific writer whose corpus includes three short story collections and seven novels as well as plays, poetry, criticism, biography, and essays, recipient of a Governor General's Award, an American Books Critics Circle Award, and a Canadian Authors' Association Award, shortlisted for the Booker Prize and awarded a Pulitzer Prize for The Stone Diaries (1993), Carol Shields has built her international reputation on her uncanny ability to re/present the details of everyday life, to anatomize the mundane.

In an essay entitled "The Same Ticking Clock", Shields denounces the way in which serious literature previously suppressed the domestic component of our lives and replaced the "texture of the quotidian", rich in meaning, with "the old problem-solution trick", that she likens to "a photo opportunity for artificial crisis and faked confrontation" (258). Her own aesthetics of the domestic have both enthused and irritated: reviews of her work alternately dub it smaller than life or else praise it for its alchemy of the everyday. Her trademark role, bard of the commonplace, is so firmly established that in "Soup du Jour", one of the stories in her latest collection, Dressing Up for the Carnival, Shields parodies the very aesthetics in which she grounds her writing.

The extract quoted in the epigraph above encapsulates the writer's characteristic combinatory tropological strategy consisting in mixing irony, paradox (highs/ level), or oxymoron (level roller coaster) with the powerful transforming figure of the metaphor (here dominantly alimentary but also carnivalesque) in order to suspend the referential function of language and set up a state of contemplation. Having overturned with light...
irony the journalistic mixture of truisms, faddish colloquialisms, and facile alliterative metaphorical style, Shields's extradiegetic narrator then goes on to proclaim:

The ordinary has become extraordinary. All at once - it seems to have happened in the last hour, the last ten minutes - there is no stone, shrub, chair, or door that does not offer arrows of implicit meanings or promises of epiphany. *(Dressing Up, 163)*

The flow of the syntagm with its enumeration implying an open-ended amplification, an infinity of possibilities to be envisaged and celebrated, is interrupted by the figure of the parenthesis, which not only self-reflexively foregrounds the process of enunciation, but also satirizes literary fashions through the device of hyperbole (in the absurdly restrictive temporal precision), aporetically cancelling out the promises of higher meaning and epiphanic disclosures behind pedestrian objects. Yet, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, this is precisely what Shields does offer: through stones and shrubs, chairs and doors, objective correlates or figurations of nature and culture, she transforms objects into signs - symbols or emblems of an ontological stance.

I shall argue that Shields's poetic practice functions simultaneously - and aporetically - in a vertical and a horizontal fashion. The writer paradigmatically reconfigures universal aesthetic and metaphysical concerns, all the while that she syntagmatically questions the ontological existence of any reality outside of representation. Coral Ann Howells's article "In the Subjunctive Mood: Carol Shields's *Dressing Up for the Carnival*", studying the collection from the angle of fantasy and masquerade, judiciously grounds the critical discussion in an essay by Shields in which the author makes an analogy between her vision and mode of writing and the subjunctive mood of grammar:

*Diurnal surfaces could be observed by a fiction writer with a kind of deliberate squint, a squint that distorts but also sharpens beyond ordinary vision, bringing forward what might be called the subjunctive mode of one's self or others, a world of dreams and possibilities and parallel realities.* (Shields, "Arriving Late", 246; emphasis mine)

At the core of Shields's writing, then, is a paradigm characteristic of modernism suggesting a supra-reality beyond the senses, deeply concerned with figuration and representation, or the order of the world. But this vertical mode is enmeshed with a horizontal one characteristic of postmodernism: it is concerned not with re/presentation, but with the *presentation* of a world through the "parallel realities" of fiction.

From the ordered world of homely things, we constantly slide into the ordered world of language and representation. Rather than "artificial crisis and faked confrontation", Shields pursues "the real mystery" of the self, of the other, of the creative process itself. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, "real mystery" takes on the contours of the following interrogations: "How do you know anyone? How does art come out of common day?" ("Interview", 41). The writer confesses her fascination with numinous moments, when we sense "the order of the universe beneath that daily chaos" (43). She argues that in order to perceive the pattern of the universe, in order to lead creative lives, we need order and safety:

*I think creativity flourishes in tranquil settings ... What the writer needs is everydayness.* (Wachtel, "Interview" 39)

Recognizable in her statements is a rather neoclassical mode of idealism which marks a certain verticality of the quotidian, metaphor of a higher order, sign of a supra-reality: fiction represents things as something beyond which is more elevated. The preoccupation with an undisclosed meaning underlies and even catalyzes *Mary Swann,* a
novel in which ambitious academics unscrupulously reconstruct, even reinvent, the biography and oeuvre of an ordinary farmer's wife who has inexplicably authored extraordinary poetry:

The mythic heavings of the universe, so baffling, so incomprehensible, but when squeezed into digestible day-shaped bytes, made swimmingly transparent.

Dailiness. The diurnal unit, cloudless and soluble. (Mary Swann, 21-22)

Dailiness as the doorway to the mythic heavings of the universe, but also the thingness of Being-there or Being-in-the-world, containing its own meaning and needing no explicatory act of language - reminiscent of Heidegger's Dasein - are fundamentally what the stories in Dressing Up for the Carnival aporetically revolve around.

The writing, rooted in everydayness, is profoundly metaphorical. At the core of the metaphorical network are the alimentary and vestimentary dynamics that both codify and are codified by a given sociocultural reality. These are the leitmotifs that provide the point of emergence where the pattern of relations constructed by the text rise to the surface and proclaim the power of invention.

Defying the linear plot of conventional short story structure, the title story of the collection is constructed upon the rhetorical devices of seriation and hypotyposis. The omniscient narrator chooses one spring day in a North American city and juxtaposes a dozen scenes made even more vivid and dynamic through the use of the nonnogocentric present tense, grounded in the here and now, focussing in turn on characters of different ages, backgrounds, and sexes without ever providing a narrative interconnection. The only linking thread is the vestimentary leitmotif proclaimed in the opening sentence: "All over town people are putting on their costumes" (Dressing Up, 1). As the choice of the theatrical term indicates, the accoutrements that the characters take up are not merely vestimentary items but accessories that include a mango, a bouquet of daffodils, a football, a violin case, or an English pram. The opening sequence sets the tone, as a young woman, Tamara, dresses for work in an apparently non-functional way. Without checking the weather, she chooses a yellow skirt and white blouse, along with a straw belt, yellow beads, earrings, bone sandals, and bare legs. The outfit can be viewed simply as a carnivalesque disguise or concealment, or as a form of conformity to or transgression of social codes and conventions, yet by setting it within the framework of the multiple segments or variations that it anticipates, Shields nudges it towards an ontological statement.

Yes! The yellow cotton skirt with the big patch pockets and the hand detail around the hem. How fortunate to own such a skirt. And the white blouse. What a blouse! Those sleeves, that neckline with its buttoned flap, the fulness in the yoke that reminds her of the Morris dances she and her boyfriend Bruce saw at the Exhibition last year.

Next she adds her new straw belt; perfect. A string of yellow beads. Earrings of course. Her bone sandals. And bare legs, why not?

She never checks the weather before she dresses; her clothes are the weather, as powerful in their sunniness as the strong, muzzy early morning light pouring into the narrow street by the bus stop, warming the combed crown of her hair and fuelling her with imagination. (1-2)

She taps a sandalled foot lightly on the pavement, waiting for the number 4 bus, no longer just Tamara, clerk-receptionist for the Youth Employment Bureau, but a woman in a yellow skirt. A passionate woman dressed in yellow. A Passionate, Vibrant Woman About To Begin Her Day. Her Life. (2)
In a pastiche of the headlines of trashy tabloids, Shields capitalizes even unstressed grammatical words that serve merely to specify the relationship among the lexical words that carry meaning, and that normally remain uncaptionized, thus placing the authorial voice as well as the receptor at an ironic distance from the free indirect discourse containing the character's inflated lexicon and melodramatic statement. Yet we cannot help noticing the multiple existential resonances. The final word sentence concluding the segment contains the single noun "life". The juxtaposition of the penultimate and ultimate sentences, with the added parallelism of the possessive adjective, generates an equivalence between "day" and "life": we construct our lives just as we structure our days. The grammatical ellipsis of the verb "to be" throughout this incantatory passage is significant through the presence of its absence. We divine that the portrait of Tamara conforms to the rhetorical convention regulating description, designed to move from effictio (outward appearance) to notatio (inward moral qualities). The surface (the yellow skirt) does not cover but rather unveils the inner truth of the self (passionate/ vibrant). Or even more radically, the skirt is the self, in the Hume-like sense that there is no definitive self, only a collection of perceptions and habits.

The vignettes that follow vary the accessories as well as the protagonists in a metonymic fashion, antonomastically multiplying individual flat characters that function synecdochically as universal, even allegorical types. Roger, of average age, height, class, and profession, has impulsively bought a mango for the first time in his life, and carries the sensuous exotic fruit in his hand, all the while that the epanalepsis "Mango, mango" of the free indirect discourse transforms the alliterative acoustical image into a mantra. The prosaic, everyday scene - a man on the street hurrying back to work after his coffee break - is a scene of revelation reminiscent of the Hegelian quest for self through encounters with the Other, but with a light touch that invites celebratory laughter:

he freezes and sees himself freshly; a man carrying a mango in his left hand. Already he's accustomed to it; in fact, it's starting to feel lighter and drier, like a set of castanets which has somehow attached itself to his left arm. Any minute now he'll break out into a cha-cha-cha right here in front of the Gas Board. The shrivelled fate he sometimes sees for himself can be postponed if only he puts his mind to it. Who would have thought it of him? Not his ex-wife Lucile, not his co-workers, not even himself. (3; emphasis mine)

The collision of incongruous, almost antithetical terms, such as Gas Board/ cha-cha-cha, suggests that the self is a performance, that being is a representation, a construction. From Roger breaking into a cha-cha, to Wanda delivering her employer's empty pram home and soothing the imaginary baby in a gesture she has rehearsed in dreams, or little Mandy "striking a pose" at the traffic light as she races to the field with the football helmet that her adulated older brother, star halfback, has forgotten at home, all the characters envisage life as a spectacle, and represent themselves to themselves as well as to others on the stage of the world.

The verb "to be", elided in the initial segment, becomes omnipresent in the subsequent scenes that equate representing and being. Running along to deliver the helmet, her breath blazing in "heroic pain", Mandy is touched by an epiphanic recognition: for the first time "she comprehends who her brother is, that deep-voiced stranger whose bedroom is next to her own" (8), and who previously held only a spatial reality. The
process of sympathy corresponding to the aesthetics of sentimentalism set up by Adam Smith is so complete that:

[t]oday, for a minute, she is her brother. She is Ralph Eliot, age seventeen, six feet tall, who later this afternoon will make a dazzling, lazy touchdown, bringing reward and honour to his name, and hers. (8)

14 The exploration of being-in-the-world is consolidated by the shortest vignette, made up of three brief sentences grounded in three different angles of vision:

Jeanette Foster is sporting a smart chignon. Who does she think she is? Who does she think she is? (9)

15 The initial objective point of view - narrator as external observer - shifts through the play of italics to, first of all, inner polyfocalization, recording in essence the struggle for control of image, the disapproval of the social group confronted with a gap between image already held (static), and image newly-generated (dynamic), and then to the subjective point of view of the omniscient narrator musing over the nature and power of the self.

16 The antonomasia that catalyzes the allegorical dimension of the apparently banal episodes is reinforced by the fact that the next to last character remains anonymous ("a young woman"), and the identity of the protagonist of the closing scene is explicitly effaced: he is designated by the letter that conventionally represents an unknown factor. X is an "anonymous middle-aged citizen" who represents existential uncertainty in the form of ambivalent sexual orientation: behind closed doors, he takes pleasure in "waltz[ing] about in his wife's lace-trimmed nightgown"(9). In this attire, the liminal character's glance out the window discloses a world suffused with aporia, a fertile flux of inexpressible sensations dissolved in the objective correlative of the pear tree, and grounded in the cosmology suggested by sun and evening:

He lifts the blind an inch and sees the sun setting boldly behind his pear tree, its mingled coarseness and refinement giving an air of confusion. Everywhere he looks he observes cycles of consolation and enhancement, and now it seems as though the evening itself is about to alter its dimensions, becoming more (and also less) than what it really is. (9, emphasis mine)

17 To be remarked above is the final word which concludes the story on its major key or motif, just as a musical composition ends on the main centre of its tonal framework. Within the verb denoting existence, Shields slides from the world of substantial things, the world of the senses, to the mental acts of perception, thought, and representation.

18 Nowhere is this clearer than in Shields's trademark rhetorical device of enumeration, such as the list of items in the story "Keys", that, along with a bent key just found and so devoid of any usefulness, are contained in a cracked china cup in a kitchen drawer:

a single hairpin, a handful of thumbtacks, a stub of a candle, half an eraser, a blackened French coin, a book of matches from the Informatic Centre, a rubber band or two, and a few paper clips. (Dressing Up, 101)

19 The enumeration functions on several levels: one remarks the exophoric dimension inviting the receptor to identify with the odds and ends of dailiness, as well as the entropic implications of dysphoric words such as "stub", "half", or "blackened". Simultaneously, even before they become more explicitly metaphorized, the items quietly evoke desire and despair. The cracked cup with its "miserable, broken, mismatched contents, its unsorted detritus of economy and mystery" (102) is a synecdoche of life, and one night when the character, a thirty-four-year-old single woman named Cheryl, sits reading a book significantly called The Sands of Desire, she
suffocates, opens a window, and begins to fling out the objects that come to hand: a package of Cheese Twists that is ironically family-sized, a brown-edged head of lettuce, and finally the contents of the cup. The series of word sentences that accompany the objects rattling down and that conclude the sequence,


shift from the phonic symbolism of the opening onomatopoeic lexeme evoking an objective physical act/sound to the phonic symbols of regret, transgression, and mortality, in which the final component of the series is an abstract odd man out. Remarkable throughout the whole sequence revolving round this character is the ontological vehemence, to borrow a term from Paul Ricoeur, that underlies the naming process. When Shields names or enumerates, she is in effect creating the be-ing of the object, affirming that it exists. Yet by limiting herself to the point of view of the same character, the writer aporetically questions the existence of any material reality outside the perceptions of the mind:

The real world, of course, is in her own head, which she sometimes thinks of as a shut room provisioned with declaration and clarity, everything else being a form of theatre. (100)

In this, Shields reconfigures the pre-existent aesthetic traditions that have subtended the texts of writers from Shakespeare to Milton and Shelley. The relationship between external and internal, mind and matter, thought and thing have been since the Renaissance at the core of seminal works such as The Tempest, As You Like It, and Macbeth, as well as Paradise Lost, or Prometheus Unbound, to take but a few of the best-known examples. Shields’s originality in reconfiguring what is essentially an ancient metaphysical as well as an aesthetic preoccupation may consist in the manner in which her reclaiming the familiar entails not only a cosmological assessment, but also an assessment of commodity culture.

In one of the final segments of the title story "Dressing Up", previously discussed, Susan, an arts student who has been assigned Beckett’s Waiting for Godot to read, "strides along, strides, her book flashing under her arm" (8) with the title plainly visible. What clearly amounts to a performance contains ontological overtones that a simile conveying an axiological collision deflates but does not cancel:

She is a young woman who is reading a great classic. Vistas of possibility unfold like money. (8, emphases mine)

The inner focalization behind the pecuniary analogy implies that while high culture still enjoys a comparably high status in the dominant socioeconomic community, a certain commodification of the aesthetic has nonetheless occurred. Shields suggests that commodity culture has been naturalized, and that the social cost may be high because, as Jed Rasula argues, "the very ground of the given, the immediate, is saturated with the logic of the marketplace, seeming to be 'given' along with the natural elements" (718).

The everyday has been undeniably conceptualized and integrated into postmodern artistic praxis in a systematic way: one has only to evoke the work of a conceptual artist like Andy Warhol, fascinated, like modernists before him, with the thingness of things. Warhol defamiliarized the subject of representation by painting indifferently Mao Tse Tung and Mick Jagger, and he equated people and things by filming celebrities and doorknobs alike, and by promoting with his silk screens the serial principle of mass production. The first filmmaker to use real time as story time, or to place ‘real’ time in
synchronicity with ‘reel’ time11, Warhol also blurred the distinctions between the kitchen and the art gallery, or even between artwork and the support used for representation. Such formal vindication of banality in literature as in the visual arts has interestingly been accompanied by a fascination with the text/context dialectic - whereby the one constitutes the ground for, and cause of, the other - and the object/ivity or object/ifiability of the aesthetic object. Postmodernists like Shields challenge representational veracity, positing that the only reality or ontology to which we can cling is that of language or story, or the story of language, which can be identified with the genre-transcending mythos that Northrop Frye defines in *Anatomy of Criticism* as structures of imagery in movement (140).

Not surprisingly, then, *Dressing Up for the Carnival* is self-conscious writing that is language-centred rather than plot-centred, belonging to the mode that Linda Hutcheon has identified as "narcissistic narrative", which shifts the focus "from the 'fiction' to the 'narration'" and makes the narration "into the very substance" of the content (*Narcissistic Narrative*, 28). The story "Invention" notably begins by recounting how the narrator’s grandmother invented that pedestrian object, the steering-wheel muff, and built a commercial empire that destroyed her marriage as it grew. The story slides imperceptibly from narrative to narration as the focus slides from the world of commodities to the world of language. In an appropriately random, digressive fashion, the narrator challenges the notion of perfectibility along with that of scientific or technological progress by proclaiming that "invention is random and accidental" (*Dressing Up*, 178). The text deflates the mythical overtones that have been culturally constructed around certain products or theories, by resorting to seriation, periphrastic parallelisms, and juxtapositions that engender unusual equivalences between, for instance, gunpowder and the hoola hoop, or chairs and Darwinism:

For instance, someone discovered one idle afternoon that a loop of plastic tubing will defy gravity if gyrated rapidly around the human body. Someone else, in another slot of time, noticed that a mixture of potassium nitrate, charcoal, and sulphur will create a new substance which is highly explosive (...) Other people - through carelessness or luck or distraction or necessity - invented keys, chairs, wheels, thermometers, and the theory of evolution. (*Dressing Up*, 178)

Simultaneously, the narrator celebrates other inventions that pertain to the world of writing, and that remain unacknowledged and unsung: the banal word-space, the full stop, the comma, and the hyphen. Through a litotic analogy with the apparently insignificant yet ground-breaking zero, the narratorial voice lauds the blank, praises the oxymoronic weight of emptiness, and celebrates the silence that "distinguishes speech from speech and thought from thought" (176). Playfully attributing the scriptorial invention of the comma to a slip of the pen of another absurdly precise yet historically vague member of the family ("one Brother Alphonse, a very distant cousin on my paternal grandfather's side" [177]), the narcissistic narrator’s voice, overlapping with Brother Alphonse’s, metalinguistically dubs it "a curled worm of ambiguity", and describes it in temporal and spatial terms as the very site of creation in process: "a sacred pause, a resting place during which time he might breathe out his thanks to God for the richness of his blessings, and prepare his next imprecation"(177).

Mixing fantasy and self-reflexivity, the narrator attributes the invention of the hyphen to a sixteenth-century cooper-cum-grammarian ancestor. The extravagant logic according to which a barrel-maker is best qualified to be a word-smith is presented by an analogy between the hyphen and a barrel which is so extra/ordinary that it verges
on the conceit. The barrel is held together by an iron hoop, which "connects what is unconnectable", for as the personification makes clear, the barrel-maker's bent staves "long to spring apart" (177). With the implied authorial voice overlapping, the narrator argues that the hyphen takes on the same function. A diacritical mark of great simplicity, it joins what is similar and also what is disjunctive. Two words may be read as one, a case of compounding meaning and doubling force, but this horizontal bar, requiring only a sweet, single stroke of the pen, divides as well as marries. (178)

The metalanguage sets up a parallel between the page and the land, between art and craft, between the building materials of a text - signs of its object/ivity - and those of a farm:

Aesthetically, the hyphen is superior to the slash, you will agree, and it makes a set of parentheses look like crude homemade fencing (178).

The resonances with the stance of Utilitarianism, which links the beautiful and the good with the concept of the useful, making them convertible and indissociable, are made explicit in the affirmation that "successful inventions are both functional and elegant" (178).

The self-conscious short fiction I have been discussing posits that life is spectacle, an artistic performance in process, while art, in a complementary fashion, is a constructional craft grounded in the daily world of things. The writer's preoccupation with representation is an attempt to make sense of what we call reality, to make sense of our past and present in order to allow us to at least begin to picture - as one of the child protagonists in "Keys" cannot yet do - the "unscrolling of a future" (106) in which a key ring represents the societal comforts and obligations of house, office, club, and cottage. Yet Shields's poetics of the quotidian are also grounded in postmodern aporia. On the one hand, her metalinguistic self-consciousness never ceases to call attention to itself and to its own process. On the other hand, her stories are suffused with the ontological vehemence that seems to be the metaphysical equivalent of Austin's concept of the performativive. When Shields announces "This is", she is in effect creating the be-ing of the object, making her scene operate with a centripetal force, revolving and closing in upon its own centre. In poetic texts, as Ricoeur argues, such a practice contains the ex-tatic moment of language, when language is outside of itself, expressing a desire to efface itself, to vanish within the confines of the "l'êtredit" (313), the being-said - in turn the consequence of the act of speech. The Word creates: telling engenders being.

The cosmological reckoning subtending Shields's aesthetics of the commonplace does not deny the referential function of language: on the contrary, her texts seem almost to defy the Saussurean principle that a linguistic sign unites only a concept and an acoustical image, so intensely do our senses perceive the materiality of the objects conjured up. They seem to be the verbal equivalent of the still lifes of baroque painters like Chardin, which suggest that the meaning of life is right here at hand, in the very substance of the silently luscious fruits. Yet at the same time, objects are often signs or figurations of something beyond - or meta. Grounded in postmodern aporia, Shields's poetic practice reconfigures universal aesthetic and metaphysical concerns, confirming Benveniste's affirmation that language literally re-presents or re-produces reality (25), all the while that the writer questions the ontological existence of any reality outside of representation. We cannot fail to recall the "diurnal unit" of dailiness in Mary Swann, or the writer's confessed fascination with the "diurnal surfaces" in her essay "Arriving
Late, Starting Over", which etymologically suggest daily occurrences or realities, but also evoke coexisting paradigmatic and syntagmatic dimensions. They evoke invisible realities - the hidden world of the diurnal flower that closes at night, that the figurative "squint" cultivated by the writer and resulting in sharpened vision promises to disclose. Yet they also evoke a juxtaposition of the diurnal and the elided nocturnal: two worlds placed side by side. The writer's poetics, in which the texture of the quotidian is distorted but also sharpened, takes us effectively into a world of parallel realities in which the ordinary exists extraordinarily.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Cf. Joel Yanofsky's delight in Shields's alchemy in his review of Dressing Up for the Carnival, or Ajay Heble's professed boredom in his review of Larry's Party with respect to what he qualifies as the "non-meteoric rise of Larry Weller from one kind of ordinariness to another" (256).

2. Interestingly, the suggested verticality is inverted. In the phrase "the order of the universe beneath that daily chaos" it is expressed in the term "beneath" rather than "above", implying the possibility of stripping away the layers that veil the core of meaning.

3. The technique seems to be an elaboration of the scenic epanalepsis that Simone Vauthier remarks in her study of "Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass" in Various Miracles (Reverberations, 126).

4. Emphases in the text unless otherwise indicated.

5. Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiment (1759) notably proclaimed sympathy or empathy to be the principal motivation of our acts and the basis of our moral judgments.

6. "We are such stuff/ As dreams are made on". IV, i, 148-149.

7. "All the world's a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players:/ They have their exits and their entrances,/ And one man in his time plays many parts". II, vii, 139-142.

8. "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more". V, vi, 24-26.

9. "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n". Book I, 254-255.

10. "He gave man speech, and speech created thought,/ Which is the measure of the universe."

11. Warhol notably recorded the Empire State Building in continuity for eight hours by shooting consecutive rolls of film with a stationary camera. He filmed a friend sleeping for six and a half hours, then provocatively copied one and a half hours of the reel and reinserted it to make a total of eight hours of 'sleep', the artistic mediation thereby self-reflexively challenging the very idea that he playfully posited: that mimetic art can capture and re-produce or re-present reality.

ABSTRACTS

Carol Shields a construit sa réputation internationale sur une certaine esthétique du familier: elle sait à merveille re/présenter les détails de la vie quotidienne et anatomiser le banal. Cet essai vise à montrer que sa pratique poétique, ancrée dans l'aporie, fonctionne à la fois de manière verticale et horizontale. D'une façon paradigmatique, l'écrivain reconfigure des préoccupations esthétiques et métaphysiques universelles, alors que d'une façon syntagmatique elle interroge l'existence ontologique de toute réalité en-dehors de la représentation. Au coeur de son écriture se trouve un paradigme qui est caractéristique du modernisme, qui évoque une sur-réalité au-delà des sens, et qui se prédétermine de questions de figuration et de représentation, autrement dit, de l'ordre du monde. Or, ce mode vertical se mêle d'un mode horizontal qui, lui, est caractéristique du postmodernisme: à la place de la représentation, ce mode se préoccupe de la présentation d'un monde par le biais des réalités parallèles de la littérature. Cette étude analysera son dernier recueil de nouvelles, Dressing Up for the Carnival, et montrera que ces textes métaphoriques et métalinguistiques propose de révéler de l'autre côté du quotidien le flux mythique de l'univers, mais aussi la choses de l'Etre-là qui ne manquera pas d'évoquer le Dasein de Heidegger. En même temps, ces récits auto-réflexifs postule que la vie est spectacle ou
représentation artistique, alors que l’art est un métier de construction ancré dans le monde quotidien des choses.

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