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Moments of Being: Carol Shields's Short Fiction

Elke D'hoker

> The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps did never come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly into the dark.
>
> — Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 249

Experimental Fiction

In "Ilk," one of the stories of Carol Shields's last collection, *Dressing up for the Carnival*, the first-person narrator has a narrative theory to defend. "Forget all that spongy Wentworthian whuss about narrative as movement," she urges the reader, "A narrative isn't something you pull along like a toy train, a perpetually thrusting indicative" (441). Instead, she argues, "It's this little subjunctive cottage by the side of the road. All you have to do is open the door and walk in." Narrative, after all, is "ovarian, not ejaculatory as so many of our contemporary teachers/scholars/critics tend to assume" (442). The narrator, a young and ambitious narrative theorist, here echoes the author herself, who in "Arriving Late: Starting Over" criticized traditional short story structure as "that holy line of rising action that is supposed to lead somewhere important, somewhere inevitable, modelled perhaps on the orgasmic pattern of tumescence followed by detumescence, an endless predictable circle of desire, fulfilment, and quiescence" (248).

Evidence of Shields's rejection of that ejaculatory mode of storytelling is everywhere in her short fiction. Her first collection, *Various Miracles*, is usually read as Shields's departure from the conventional fictional forms of her first novels and a preliminary to such acclaimed postmodern works as *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries*.[1] In this first collection, Shields experiments with different genres and narrative forms. She tries out anecdote and memoir, word game and Borgesian metafiction, fantasy and magical realism. The exercise was a positive one for Shields: "I felt bolder for it, healthier. The range of possibility appeared dazzling

— anything was allowed, *everything* was allowed. And I was so late in finding it out" (De Roo 42). In *Various Miracles,* as in *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, many stories are theme-driven rather than plot-driven. The different anecdotes and tales that make up stories like "Dolls, Dolls, Dolls, Dolls," "Love so Fleeting, Love so Fine," "Dying for Love," "Keys," or "Invention" are united by a common theme or simply linked through association. Following Todorov's terminology, Simone Vauthier classifies these stories as "*récits de substitution*" (115) and offers an excellent reading of their different modes of closure.

Another form of experimentation which has drawn the attention of critics is Shields's use of metafictional elements to address such topics as language, art, and authorship (cf. Eagleton). In her short fiction, far more than in her novels, the emphasis is on the power of art and the imagination to "find out" about other people, to invent new stories, new lives.[2] Indicative in this respect are the 'what if-stories' in *Dressing Up for the Carnival,* which try to find out what would happen if the weathermen went on strike ("Weather"), if a tax on windows were to be imposed ("Windows"), or if a Roman arena were discovered in South-West Manitoba ("Reportage").[3] As Coral Ann Howells has demonstrated, several stories in this last collection also make use of carnivalesque elements to convey the "subjunctive mood" which Carol Shields — like the narrator of "Ilk" — associates with true narrativity.

In this paper I propose to look at Shields's experimentation in her short fiction from yet another angle: the epiphanies or transcendent moments which punctuate many of her stories. As the hallmark of the modern short story, the epiphany already realizes a departure from the traditional, plot-driven tale which Shields has criticized. Yet, as I hope to show, Shields goes even further. In her use of epiphany, she departs on a number of points from the modernist model and transforms the literary moment so that it becomes a part of both the experimental structure and the world view of the short fiction. In what follows, I will first analyze the form and content of Shields's transcendent moments and the ways in which they depart from the Joycean norm. This will then allow me to gauge Shields's transformation of the short story in the larger historical context of that genre and to draw more general conclusions about the poetics and world view of her fiction.

The Modern Epiphany

The term most widely used to denote the significant 'moments' which are so typical of the modernist short story is Joyce's concept of epiphany. Although the origins of this literary moment have been traced back to Wordsworth's "spots of time," Coleridge's "flashes," Browning's "infinite moment," and Conrad's "moment of vision" (Nichols 4-5), it is still Joyce's definition of epiphany which provides the basis of most critical usage. Among the different theories of epiphany Joyce supplied, the definition in *Stephen Hero* has probably been the most influential: "By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. It was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments" (221). Since this definition and Joyce's corresponding literary practice are far from straightforward, however, commentators have often differed in their readings of this term. Most famous, perhaps, is the debate as to whether the Joycean epiphany is to be understood epistemologically, as a sudden insight or moment of revelation, or rather aesthetically, as an artistic strategy of imbuing ordinary things or experiences with meaning.[4] In the first reading, epiphany is the inheritor of the Romantic cult of the moment; in the second reading, epiphany becomes part of an aesthetic idealism and can be likened to Katherine Mansfield's use of the symbol or T.S. Eliot's theory of objective correlative.

In a more detailed investigation of the modern literary moment, Ashton Nichols tries to have it both ways when he argues that "in the modern literary epiphany, the perceptual experience *and* its transformation into language is primary" (33; emphasis added). The two aspects are of course related, since the recording of the epiphanic experience inevitably adds a symbolic dimension to the mundane. Or, as Valerie Shaw has put it, "to emphasize such moments of newly perceived significance, many twentieth-century writers use symbolic methods, crystallizing meaning on a level other than plot, and making a symbol take over the part hitherto played by action and analysis" (194). In fiction, moreover, the transcendent moment becomes part of a narrative structure; hence what is to the character an experience that reveals life is to the reader an artistic construction that reveals character.

Nevertheless, it is useful to distinguish the actual experience of the revelation — the "moment of vision" (Hanson 63), or the "instant of radiant insight" (Shaw 193) — from the symbolist poetics which are often associated with it.[5] In what follows, therefore, I will limit the term to the "psychological event," the special perception whereby "trivial circumstances are elevated to new significance by the mind" (Nichols 10). In this conception, epiphany is typically characterized by "suddenness", "irrationality", "singularity", "momentaneousness," and "incongruity" (Langbaum 44), as the "manifestation is out of proportion to the significance or logical relevance of whatever produces it" (Beja 18). This emphasis on the experience of revelation does not mean, however, that the encoding of epiphany in a narrative structure is neglected. On the contrary, the narrative position, the form, the subject and the object of epiphany will be of crucial importance in the following analysis of the transcendent moments in Shields's short fiction.

Ordinary Significance

In her insightful critical study on the short story, Clare Hanson draws attention to a basic distinction: between stories "in which the primary emphasis is on plot" and "those in which plot is subordinate to psychology and mood" (5). It is in the second group, with its origins in the modernist period, that epiphany plays a major role, as it "does not deal with the avowedly strange or marvellous [as in many plotted tales] but tends to reveal that quality of the marvellous which is hidden within the mundane, obscured by habit or by dullness of perception" (6-7). In many plotless fictions, therefore, "a moment of heightened awareness acts as a focus, a structural equivalent for conventional resolution or plot" (7). In the modern short story, this moment of revelation also literally takes the place of plot resolution and typically appears at the climactic end of the story. Or as Valerie Shaw has it, "short stories often work towards a single moment of revelation [in which] suddenly the fundamental secret of things is made accessible and ordinary circumstances are transfused with significance" (193).

In its emphasis on character over action, the modern short story goes one step beyond the traditional tale with its arc of rising action and resolution, criticized by Shields. Yet, it still maintains a forward thrust, a structure leading to the climactic, illuminating epiphany. That this traditional pattern may be hard to resist, moreover, is shown in several

of Shields's more conventional stories which also end in an epiphany. These are typically stories which focus on the psychology of individual characters and relationships and which Simone Vauthier has classified as "*récits de contiguité*" (115). In "Milk Bread Beer Ice," for instance, a middle-aged couple is driving through the States in their new car. Their bored and desultory conversation reflects the staleness of their marriage. When they turn off the highway in search of a motel, they notice a series of gas pumps with signs advertising "MILK ICE BREAD BEER" (393) in various combinations. These cryptic messages bring them closer together again and lead the focalizer, Barbara, to experience the following epiphany:

> But, surprisingly, the short unadorned sounds, for a few minutes, with daylight fading and dying in the wide sky, take on expanded meaning. Another, lesser world is brought forward, distorted and freshly provisioned. She loves it — its weather and depth, its exact chambers, its lost circuits, its covered pleasures, its submerged patterns of communication. (394)

In "Fuel for the Fire", to give another example, the first-person narrator describes her New Year's Day: cleaning the house, preparing the food, welcoming family and friends. At the end of the evening, everyone is gathered around the fire which is fuelled by old bowling pins. The way the pins catch fire reminds the narrator — in an epiphanic moment — of mortality:

> It flares, catches, glows, splits open and dies. I pay attention to it. Usually I am so preoccupied, so busy, I forget about this odd ability of time to overtake us. Then something reminds me. Cemeteries — they stop me short, do they *ever* stop me short — and old buildings and tree stumps, things like that. And the sight of burning fires, like tonight, like right now, this minute, how economical it is, how it eats up everything we give it, everything we have to offer. (381)

In both of these instances, entirely ordinary things — "unadorned sounds," a fire — lead the protagonists to a sudden, brief moment — "a few minutes," "this minute" — in which these ordinary circumstances are transformed. Life, their life, is briefly viewed in another light and gains a special significance. These moments satisfy most of the basic criteria for epiphany: suddenness, momentariness, and psychological association (Langbaum 44). They are also, as Shaw has put it, on the

"boundary between the ordinary and the mysterious" as "ordinary circumstances are transfused with significance" (193). This being on the "boundary" between the ordinary and the extraordinary can be taken entirely literally in Shields's epiphanies. In the epiphanies just mentioned, indeed, the revelatory moment not only springs from ordinary circumstances, but also returns to them. In "Milk Bread Beer Ice" the epiphany leads Barbara back to the "submerged patterns" which determine her conversations with her husband; and the closing line of the epiphany in "Fuel for the Fire" brings the narrator back to the food, gifts, warmth, and welcome she has all day long given, or "offered" to her family and friends.

An attention to the ordinary, the domestic, the (apparently) trivial is often called one of the hallmarks of Shields's writing. It is a characterization which she felt ambiguous about and makes fun of in "Soup du Jour". "Everyone is coming out these days for the pleasures of ordinary existence", the narrator notes at the beginning and goes on to describe — in highly ironic tones[6] — the various pleasures people have discovered:

> Everywhere adolescent girls stare into ditches where rainwater collects and mirrors the colors of passion; their young men study the labels of soup cans, finding therein a settled, unbreakable belief in their own self-sufficiency. 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 meaning or promises of epiphany. (525)

If the workings of epiphany are clearly mocked here, the story itself, which goes on to describe certain events in the lives of three people, does end in an epiphany. A boy, sent out for groceries by his mother, forgets the object of his errand as he is counting the paving stones on his way. He panics, tries to remember, pictures the circumstances, and just before the entrance of the store,

> the word celery arrives, fully shaped, extracted cleanly from the black crack in the pavement, the final crack (as luck would have it) before the three smooth cement steps that lead up to the sill of the corner store. The boy's gratitude is thunderous. He almost stumbles under the punishment of it, thinking how he will remember it all

> his life, even when he is old and forgetful and has given up his obsession with counting. He says it out loud, celery, transforming the word into a brilliantly colored balloon that swims and rises and overcomes the tiny confines of the ordinary everyday world to which, until this moment, he has been condemned. (531)

The last lines of this story can again be read as an accurate description of the very process of epiphany which was mocked earlier: the ordinary circumstances which spark off the revelation are briefly and suddenly transformed. Yet, there is a difference between the phenomenon mocked and the moment registered, and this points to a first difference between Shields's epiphanies and the Joycean model. In the cultivation of the ordinary mocked by the narrator, the ordinary is immediately accorded a special "meaning" (525): rainwater puddles become symbols of passion; labels of soup cans are read as signs of self-sufficiency. "A fallen log" comes to stand for "history" and "entropy," and a "thimble" becomes a metaphor for "perfection" (524). In these examples, as in the Joycean epiphany, the everyday is literally transcended, or left behind, in favour of specific insight or lofty meaning. Hence, the ordinary becomes but a pretext for the extraordinary; the material but a means of access to the spiritual. Shields's mockery of such epiphanies in "Soup du Jour" seems to suggest that this is not really a celebration of the ordinary, but rather a celebration of the self's superiority — whether artistic, spiritual or epistemological — at the expense of the material circumstances of the everyday world.

Immanence and Transcendence

Shields's own epiphanies counteract this spiritual celebration of the Joycean epiphany in two ways: they foreground experience over insight and they emphasize the embeddedness of the epiphany in the domestic and the everyday. In most of Shields's moments, first, the epiphanic experience is far more important than any interpretation or insight which is — often belatedly — attached to it. In "Soup du Jour," for instance, the young boy has remembered something of substance — celery — a necessary ingredient in the soup of the day which requires vegetables, not insight. It is, hence, the celery he will recall in later years, not some philosophical reflection on the mysterious ways of the human mind or some psychological insight into the numerical obsession of a young boy. In a number of Shields's moments, furthermore, this

absence of meaning is explicitly commented on. "Taking the Train," for instance, ends in an epiphany in which the three characters meet in a song: "And now, Gwyneth thought: here we are, the three of us, holding on to this wailing rag-tag of music for all we're worth, and to something else that we can't put a name to, but don't dare drop" (177). In "Scenes," to give another example, Frances recalls several moments from her life which are special and trivial at the same time. They are always momentary, surprising and sudden, she notes, and "only rarely do they point to anything but themselves. They're difficult to talk about. They're useless, attached to nothing, can't be traded in or shaped into instruments to prise open the meaning of the universe" (110). These moments of being are treasured for themselves alone, and Frances subsequently compares their closed-off beauty to a set of little keys on a chain and to the rounded thingness of her mother's Easter eggs.

It is hardly coincidental that in these similes, Frances's moments are connected to keys or Easter eggs. Just like the celery in "Soup du Jour," the burning fire in "Fuel for the Fire" and the food in "Milk Bread Beer Ice," these are eminently practical things: they are part and parcel of everyday domestic economy. Far from being superseded in and by transcendent meaning, moreover, these ordinary, domestic things are foregrounded in the stories and realized as essential components in the corresponding epiphanies. Very often, indeed, the domesticity of the trivial objects that spark off the epiphany is carried over into the metaphoric description of the revelation itself. Think for instance of the "exact chambers" in "Milk Bread Beer Ice," the "economical" fires in "Fuel for the Fire," the "rag-tag" of music in "Taking the Train," the "keys" and "Easter eggs" in "Scenes," and the "little lights" in "Home:" these metaphors clearly echo the domestic circumstances that caused the epiphany in the first place. Much more than modernist epiphanies, in other words, Shields's moments of being are grounded in the ordinary and the domestic. This immanence makes them also less irrational or incongruous than the Joycean epiphanies, since material circumstances and the revelatory experience are somehow in accord, as when the burning pins in "Fuel for the Fire" remind the narrator of time and mortality.

In some epiphanies, however, this embeddedness appears to be annulled by metaphors which denote a transcendence of ordinary time and space. Thus, in "Soup du Jour," "the tiny confines of the ordin-

ary everyday world" are momentarily overcome (531), and in "Love so Fleeting, Love so Fine," the protagonist experiences a brief revelation which "widen[s] for an instant the eye of the comprehended world" (147). In "Collision," similarly, the protagonist experiences a moment which "seems to last and last, one quarter-hour unfolding into a measureless present" (331). Yet, these descriptions do not really point to a transcendence, a leaving behind, of time and space. They suggest, rather, an expansion, a widening of the coordinates of everyday existence. Moreover, as the epiphany in "Milk Bread Beer Ice" points out, the other world which is thus brought into being is not necessarily a better one. Here it is called "a lesser world," a phrase which is echoed in a later story, "Dressing Up for the Carnival." This theme-driven story records the performative power of small things — clothes, a pram, a book — to briefly transform people's lives. The last character thus portrayed is "X, an anonymous middle-aged citizen, who, sometimes, in the privacy of his own bedroom, in the embrace of happiness, waltzes about in his wife's lace-trimmed nightgown" (403). He subsequently takes on the perspective of the narrator who has observed these small daily transformations and reflects, "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" (403). The curious insertion between brackets adds, as in "Milk Bread Beer Ice," a darker edge to the epiphany. The world glimpsed in epiphany, it suggests, is not the real world: it is a simpler — aestheticized and domesticated — version which may offer consolation or brief revelation, but is not to be confused with the real thing. These examples make clear that Shields is certainly not idealizing the domestic or the ordinary in her epiphanies. They offer, rather, a different perspective on the ordinary — a perspective which can transform but also alienate, which may aestheticize but also distort. Never, however, do her epiphanies simply transcend or float free from the ordinary: they always return to or reflect on the domestic situation from which they are born.[7]

Embedded Epiphanies

Another way in which Shields emphasizes the embeddedness of her moments in ordinary reality is through the narrative structure. We have seen how the most 'traditional' of Shields's short stories place the epiph-

any in its usual slot at the end of the story. In most stories, however, this climactic narrative structure is abandoned in favour of a different patterning. A first mode consists of epiphanies which are embedded within the characters' lives. If the Joycean epiphany stands somewhat separate from the life it has — supposedly — transformed forever, Shields's moments are shown to be part and parcel of the life of a character: they grow out of these lives and are recovered in it. This is signalled, for instance, by the fact that a number of epiphanies are related in the past tense, suggesting that there is a before and an after to the moment. In "Hinterland," two negative or abysmal epiphanies — they are rare in Shields's work — are shown to become part of their life story so that "the terror, with all its freshness and redemptive power, will give way, easily, easily, to the small rosy singularity of this shaded lamp, and the arc of light that cuts their faces precisely in half" (296). In "Mirrors," to give another example, we are given scenes from the life of a married couple, centred on the purposeful lack of mirrors in their holiday cottage. While their married life has not been as stable as it seemed — with unfaithfulness and lapses in love on both sides — the final scene does record a brief moment of union in the form of an epiphany:

> And then she had turned and glanced his way. Their eyes held, caught on the thread of a shared joke: the two of them at this moment had become each other, at home behind the screen of each other's face. It was several seconds before he was able to look away. (460)

While the moment is placed at the end of the story, it is — as the past tense indicates — already encapsulated in memory, embedded in the story of their lives.

This form of embeddedness is carried even further in the second type of patterning which recurs in Shields's short fiction: that of the sequence or string of epiphanies. In "Scenes," for instance, Frances's life is told through a series of small scenes or moments of being, rooted in ordinary reality: touching her dead grandmother, talking with a stranger in an elevator, learning to read, or hearing a foreign language through an open window. In all of these moments, time is suspended and the ordinary reality in which they are embedded is briefly transcended. "They seem to bloom out of nothing," Frances observes, or, rather, out of the mystery of the everyday: "out of the thin, uncollected air of defeats and

pleasures. A curtain opens, a light appears, there are voices of music or sometimes a wide transparent stream of silence" (110).

The stories "Various Miracles" and "Dressing Up for the Carnival" also provide strings of epiphanies. Here, they are not united by a single life, but rather by a single theme. In "Dressing Up," as I have already noted, the theme is that of a performative 'dressing up' which brings about a moment of transformation and consolation. The scenes in "Various Miracles," on the other hand, are united by the theme of striking coincidences, bordering on the miraculous. "Several of the miracles that occurred this year have gone unrecorded," the narrator notes and goes on to give a list of such striking coincidences (23). As the miracles recorded expand from an "example" over an anecdote to a miniature story, the epiphanic quality comes more to the fore. Unlike in the previous stories, moreover, the recipient of the epiphany is not always the character, but may also be the narrator and/or the reader.

In his typology of literary epiphanies, Wim Tigges makes a distinction between a "subjective" epiphany, which is "experienced first of all by a character," and an "objective" epiphany, which is "transferred to the reader" or "even recognized as such by the reader (or at most the omniscient narrator) rather than by the character" (32). While epiphanies registered by the character and, possibly, transferred to the reader are the most common type, also in Shields's short fiction, in "Various Miracles" and "Dressing Up," Shields draws attention to the godlike narrator and reader as the observant recipients of epiphanies. In "Dressing Up," it is the narrator, later joined by the "anonymous citizen" who perceives the pattern behind the individual moments of transcendence and transformation all over town. In "Various Miracles," several of the miracles are only recognized by the narrator. Thus the narrator describes how, on "August 26," a painting drops from the wall in a Montana home at the exact moment that the painter finds himself on the very bridge he painted from a postcard many years before. While the painter himself experiences a moment of revelation, "This is it" (26), without knowing its cause, the greater coincidence is only perceived by the godlike narrator. In both stories, it is the narrator who draws attention to the wider pattern: the network of coincidences and relationships which is hidden beneath ordinary reality. In other stories, however, the same pattern is also briefly glimpsed by characters. In fact, this aspect of Shields's epiphanies returns with a certain insistence in her short fiction, and

it points to a final important distinction from the traditional Joycean epiphany.

Connection and Coincidence

The story "Home," for instance, starts out with a description of a few passengers aboard a transatlantic flight, each with their ordinary lives, habits, and motives for travelling, and records how each of these passengers experiences a sudden strong epiphany. Yet the story passes from the realist mode to the fantastic, when this experience is generalized to all the people in the plane:

> By some extraordinary coincidence (or cosmic dispensation or whatever), each person on the London-bound flight that night was, for a moment, filled with the steam of perfect happiness. Whether it was the oxygen-enriched air of the fusiform cabin, or the duckling with orange sauce, or the soufflé-soft buttocks of the stewardess sashaying to and fro with her coffeepot, or the uncharitable currents of air bouncing against the sides of the vessel … whatever it was, each one of the one hundred passengers — one after another, from rows one to rows twenty-five, like little lights going on — experienced an intense, simultaneous sensation of joy. (183)

And even though each is busy "with his or her private vision of transcendence," they are for a moment "swimmers riding a single wave" (182-83). This wave of happiness renders the plane briefly luminous, and this strange sight is perceived by a lonely boy on a beach in Iceland, who is to treasure it as "the only sign of mystery he had ever perceived" (185). Years later, however, the boy is himself part of a miraculous coincidence, when he is one of the 109 passengers on a plane who are all wearing blue jeans. The baggage-checker who perceives this also experiences an epiphany: "a head-shaking thrill of disbelief, then amusement, then satisfaction and, finally, awe" (186). The narrator concludes, "In no time it's over; the tourists, duly processed, hurry out into the sun [,] … drifting off into their various inventions of paradise as though oblivious to the million invisible filaments of connection, trivial or profound, that bind them one to the other and to the small planet they call home" (186).

I would argue that this is a crucial statement for Shields's practice of epiphany, as Shields's epiphanies are often those moments in which characters either catch a glimpse of this hidden network of relations,

as in "Various Miracles," "Dressing Up," or "Home," or feel connected to the people around them. In "Taking the Train" three friends share a moment of being; in "Mirrors" and "Milk Bread Beer Ice" estranged couples experience a moment of rapprochement. In "Collision," to give another example, two strangers meet for a brief moment when sharing an umbrella. This too is experienced as an epiphanic moment:

> Martä and Malcolm are locked together by this rhythm, left and right, left and right, one body instead of two. If only they could walk like this forever. Malcolm has spent his whole life arriving at this moment; this is the best bit of walking he's ever going to do, and it seems to last and last, one quarter-hour unfolding into a measureless present. (331)

So as to make clear that this moment is really shared, the narrator registers the thoughts of Martä too:

> Martä, dazed by the distortion of time and light, thinks how this round black umbrella gives an unasked-for refuge, how the rain becomes a world in itself, how the half-mile of rutted city street has become a furrow of love. It will never end, she thinks, knowing it is about to. (332)

As is typical of Shields's moments, time is suspended — "Eternity in an Hour" — and so are the usual borders between people. In this shared epiphany, the characters achieve a moment of rare unity and become briefly aware of that network of connections which binds people together.

Moments of Being

What can Shields's use of epiphanies tell us about her contribution to and transformation of the modern short story? First, it is clear that the unconventional formal structure of Shields's moments ties in with her rejection of the traditional problem-resolution pattern of the modern short story. We have seen how Shields sometimes moves away from the traditional recipient of the revelation, the character, to take the god-like view of the narrator. This undermines the subjective focus of the modern short story, centred on the individual consciousness, and offers a bird's-eye view on life itself. The narrative positioning of moments within the stories is even more clearly part of Shields's rejection of the traditional short-story structure which ends in a climactic epiphany. Especially in the collections *Various Miracles* and *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, the moments of being are either firmly embedded within the

story or they are part of a theme-bound sequence. In this way, Shields suggests, on the one hand, that these moments are very much part of life, of ordinary life. In "Scenes," they are even what life is made of. On the other hand, this patterning also makes clear that these moments do not bring about a final revelation, a great insight, which leaves the character's life transformed forever.

Both of these aspects, which I consider crucial not just for Shields's use of epiphany, but for her world view as a whole, can be related to Virginia Woolf's theory and practice of epiphany. The term 'moment of being' — which suits Shields's literary practice perhaps better than epiphany — was first used by Woolf in " A Sketch of the Past," the start of her unfinished memoir. Certain powerful reminiscences of her earliest childhood lead Woolf to conclude that there are two kinds of experience: "moments of being" and "moments of non-being" (70). While the latter are the stuff of habit, the "non-descript cotton wool" of daily life, the first are heightened moments of self-consciousness, moments of "ecstasy" or "shock," which are followed by the "desire to explain it" (72). In another essay, however, Woolf contradicts this urge for explanation and argues that "moments of vision are of an unaccountable nature; leave them alone and they persist for years; try to explain them and they disappear; write them down and they die beneath the pen" (qtd. in Beja 116). This leads Morris Beja to conclude that, for Woolf, "the moments themselves are far more important than the meanings they involve. … it is the experience of revelation that matters, not what is revealed" (114-15). While the experience itself takes indeed greater pride of place in Woolf's fiction than in Joyce's, the epistemological aspect — insight, interpretation, explanation — continues to be important. In Woolf's short story "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points,'" for instance, the central epiphany, triggered by a trivial remark, is followed by an elaborate interpretation on the part of the focalizer as she tries to assign meaning to the experience itself. And although *To the Lighthouse* recognizes the absence of one "great revelation," the "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly into the dark" (249) do have an explicit epistemological character.

While it may be possible that Woolf's moments of being provided an inspiration to Shields — she is certainly closer to Woolf's practice of epiphany than to Joyce's — Shields also goes beyond Woolf in foregrounding the ontological over the epistemological dimension of

epiphany. As we have seen, Shields's moments only rarely, if at all, offer illumination, insight or vision. Instead, they grant the characters an intense moment of being, in which the ordinary reality is expanded and a feeling of harmony or unity is achieved. What these moments offer, then, is not knowledge or self-knowledge, but happiness, enhancement or consolation. Similarly, if for Woolf the epiphany continues to offer a transcendence of the ordinary into the aesthetic, the philosophical, or the true, Shields emphasizes the immanence of the moments of being, their firm embeddedness in domestic life. Her epiphanies not only spring from the everyday, they remain inspired by it — witness the images used — and eventually return to it, so that they become part and parcel of ordinary human existence. In this way, Shields's epiphanies mark a development from epistemology to ontology and from spiritual transcendence to domestic immanence. And while the first development can be construed as part of the postmodern paradigm shift,[8] Shields's revaluation of the domestic carries this evolution even further.

Subjunctive Cottage

The primacy of the domestic for Shields's poetics is also hinted at in the image of the "subjunctive cottage," with which I began this essay. Let me, therefore, return to this passage from "Ilk" and quote it in full:

> A narrative isn't something you pull along like a toy train, a perpetually thrusting indicative. It's this little subjunctive cottage by the side of the road. All you have to do is open the door and walk in. Sometimes you might arrive and find the door ajar. That's always nice. Other times you crawl in through a window. You look around, pick yourself a chair, sit down, relax. You're there. Chrysalis collapses into cognition. You apprehend the controlling weights and counterweights of separate acts and objects. No need to ask for another thing. (441)

Clearly, this metafictional statement is not just a rejection of narrative as movement but an expression of Shields's poetics in several other ways as well. First, this extended metaphor highlights the importance of the domestic in Shields's fiction: a story is like a cottage with a door, windows, and chairs. These ordinary things are important: you get to know them, they become familiar, they become real. And this reality of the subjunctive world, this realization of the potential — as "chrysalis collapses into cognition" — is enough in itself. No special insight, no

transcendent meaning is required. Shields's metaphor may thus remind one of Heidegger's opposition between 'transcendence' and 'residence' in "Building Dwelling Thinking." If Heidegger's building as construction could be likened to the forward thrust or ejaculatory mode of narrative as movement, his conception of dwelling is very similar to Shields's metaphorical cottage. For Heidegger, indeed, dwelling is a form of "safeguarding": "Dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold [the earth, the sky, the divinities and human being itself] in that with which mortals stay: in things" (353). In foregrounding the human connection with material, domestic reality, Shields thus restores Heidegger's sense of "dwelling," of residence. And in their privileging of ontology over epistemology and of immanence over transcendence, her epiphanies are testimony to this.

Yet, Shields's cottage is not only a place in which the connection with things is restored, it is also a place in which people meet. As we have seen, her epiphanies often highlight these moments of meeting, whether ordinary or extraordinary, profound or slight, fated or entirely coincidental. In this way, Shields's epiphanies transcend the very concept of epiphany which, both in its Romantic and in its modernist conception, emphasized the uniqueness of individual consciousness.[9] In doing so, finally, she transforms the modern short story too, as this has been essentially defined around the isolated individual. Wendel Harris voices general critical opinion in this respect when he argues that "the essence of the short story is to isolate, to portray the individual person, or moment, or scene in isolation — detached from the great continuum — at once social and historical. . . . The short story is indeed the natural vehicle for the presentation of the outsider" (188). Although Shields is interested in personal stories and individual lives, her short stories betray an even greater interest in the relationships between people: not just the visible ties of blood, love or friendship, but also the hidden, coincidental connections "which bind people together, and to the small planet they call home" (186).

Notes

[1] See, for example, Eleanor Watchel's introduction to the special Shields issue of *Room of One's Own*.

[2] In "Invention," the imaginary process of inventing, or "finding out" as the narrator puts it, is illustrated in the progressively more fantastic inventions the narrator relates.

[3] This emphasis on the power of the literary imagination in Shields's short fiction is in marked contrast with her exploration of the limits of imagination and representation in her novels. While in her novels, as Sarah Gamble has put it, "Shields is particularly concerned with exploring the limitations of narrative, and the experimentation in her texts tends to push toward the point where the conventions of storytelling falter, and language falls silent" (41), in her short fiction she offers a complementary picture of narrative representation with an emphasis on the transforming and performative power of language and storytelling.

[4] See Morris Beja for a defence of the first and Hugh Kenner for a demonstration of the second option. William T. Noon traces a development in Joyce's work from the first to the second meaning of epiphany.

[5] Interestingly, the symbolic counterpart of epiphany can also be found in Shields's short fiction. In "Carol Shields and the Poetics of the Quotidian," Marta Dvorak traces the symbolist poetics in Shields's short fiction: "through stones and shrubs, chairs and doors, objective correlatives or figurations of nature and culture, she transforms objects into signs — symbols or emblems of an ontological stance" (58). Mary Eagleton, in another essay, notes a tension in Shields's artistic practice between a Joycean view of the writer as alchemist and a recognition of the "symbolic violence" inherent in this transcendental aesthetics (75).

[6] Although the mockery of this celebration of the ordinary is quite pronounced in "Soup du Jour," some reviewers and critics seem to have taken it quite literally. Adriana Trozzi, for instance, refers to Shields's ironic expression "the ordinary has become extraordinary" in the title and motto of her critical study on Shields. I argue that a more careful reading of the story makes clear the difference between "turning the ordinary into the extraordinary," as Trozzi puts it, and highlighting the mystery inherent or embedded within the ordinary, which is a more accurate description of Shields's epiphanic project.

[7] This circular movement of originating from and returning to the ordinary could be related to the concentric movement of Shields's short stories as a whole, which Adriana Trozzi has described as follows: "from the main focus the narration widens in concentric circles to come back to the point it started from, enriched with the many elements collected during the excursus" (110).

[8] In his reading of epiphany in Heaney and Larkin, Jay Losey argues, "postmodern epiphany … undermines epistemology, the urge to discover meaning through epiphanic insights" (379).

[9] In this too, Shields can be said to take the lead from Woolf. For in the climactic epiphanies of *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*, the characters "achieve a measure of union — and salvation through a climactic moment of being" (Beja 143). Again, Shields goes further, as she makes the union between characters not just the context but also the theme of her epiphanies.

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