

Written in “Women’s Ink:”

French Translation and Female Power in Carol Shields’s Unless

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Carol Shields’s last novel, *Unless* (2002), was a finalist for the Canada Reads contest for the best Canadian novel of the first decade of the 20th century. It would have been an ideal winner, not only because it is a brilliant novel, but also because it is distinctively Canadian in combining the English and French languages. Protagonist-narrator Reta Winters, née Summers, daughter of a Francophone mother and an Anglophone father, combines Canada’s two major languages. “My mother always spoke to me in French and my father in English, and I was allowed to reply in either language,” Reta recalls: “My mother, a *pure laine* Marteau from Montreal, spoke a musical French, and my father a crisp Edinburghian English, only slightly eroded by his years in Canada.”¹ Naturally, she adds, “The French-English dictionary was our family bible.” Reta reflects, “Oddly, the epic confusion of my early years was not caused but rather mitigated by immersion in two languages; doubleness clarified the world: *la chaise*, chair; *le rideau*, curtain; *etre*, to be; *le chien*, dog. Every object, every action, had an echo, an explanation. Meaning had two feet, two dependable etymological stems,” reflecting Shields’s penchant for doubling (146).² Reta concludes, “I swam in English, a relaxed backstroke, but

¹ *Unless* 146. All parenthetical citations, unless otherwise stated, will be to this text. *Unless* was a finalist for the Man Booker Prize, the Orange Prize, and the Governor General’s Award.

² Shields comments, “I’ve always thought that people who have two languages have so much more power than those of us with just one. If you have a foot in another language, in another culture, I think you have a much surer stance in the world, so I wanted her to be a translator. It’s Canadian to have these two languages” (Wachtel 166). Dualities pervade Shields’s oeuvre: Ellen Levy examines motifs and structures of doubleness in Shields’s fiction in “‘Artefact Out of Absence’: Reflection and Convergence in the Fiction of Carol Shields,” and Manina Jones explores Shields’s use of double structures in “Scenes from a (Boston) Marriage: The Prosaics of Collaboration and Correspondence in

stood up to my hips in French” (146-7). Clearly, Reta, like Carol Shields herself, is totally *bilingue*.

Not only a writer of fiction, like Shields, Reta is also a translator—although she relegates her creativity to her “back story,” her “front story” being her life as a wife, mother, and home-maker (50). The opening section of *Unless* focuses on her translations from French to English. Readers may not think of Shields as a bilingual author, but, thanks to her study of French, supplemented by family sabbaticals and vacations in France, where they eventually bought a house, she became fluent.³ She makes particular use of French in *Unless*: whenever Reta, or Shields, wants to emphasize a point, such as women’s powerlessness, she employs French translation (104). Thus, translation is important as both a motif and a practice in *Unless*. Shields employs three levels of translation—from Latin via old French, meaning “to carry across”⁴: first, Reta’s literal translations from “French into English” in the opening segment of the novel (44); second, Shields’s transmutation from a breast cancer narrative to a novel about the disappearance of a daughter; and, third, Reta’s metafictional transformation of her realization about women’s powerlessness to her understanding of fiction and back again in this feminist millennial novel. Reta translates the work of Danielle Westerman, French “feminist pioneer, Holocaust survivor, cynic, and genius” (98)—“Simone de Beauvoir’s spiritual daughter” (48), as Rachel Cusk observes. Her surname a combination of the words “western” and “man,” suggesting western culture, as well as gender concerns, and her Christian name a feminized version of Daniel,

A Celibate Season.”

³ Don Shields recorded in a 2012 email message to me: “About 1996, we bought a house in La Roche Vineuse, in Burgundy. La Roche Vineuse is half way between Macon and Cluny. We sold the Monjouvent house in 1997. The Burgundy house is called Chateau Pulitzer by the family. We turned a stable into an office for Carol to write in—an ‘office of one’s own’. The last time Carol spent time there was in 1999, for a month in the summer before we moved to London in September for a sabbatical/Guggenheim year. She was too ill to ever go back.” I wish to thank Don Shields for sharing this information with me.

⁴ *The Oxford Etymological Dictionary* explains that the original significance of the word referred to moving saints’ bones from one burial site to another.

suggesting both biblical and gender issues, she represents the feminist pole of this, Shields’s most explicitly feminist novel.⁵

Reta translates Westerman’s book of poetry, *L’Ile*, as *Isolation* because the “direct translation, *Island*, did not quite capture the sense Danielle had at that time in her life of being the only feminist in the world” (102). Here Reta employs her power as translator to interpret the author’s meaning and to render it as accurately as possible. Danielle even wants to translate the name of her publisher from Éditions Grandmont to Big Mountain Press: “This is a translation, dear God [...] why not give those pretentious French *éditeurs* a nice name from the New World” (102). Although Reta believes that a “writer’s *partis pris* are always—must be—accommodated by her translator” (64), revealing her privileging of the author’s judgment above the translator’s, she draws the line at translating the name of the publisher. Like Shields, Danielle is a poet, as well as an essayist and memoirist. Reta comments on her translation, or *traduction*, as Danielle insists on terming it, of her poetry: “I found the poems themselves very tricky to translate (poetry is not my specialty), but I was younger then and willing to stretch myself and be endlessly patient about moving words back and forth, singing them out loud under my breath as translators are told to do, attempting to bring the fullness of the poet’s intention to the work” (101). As Irish modernist playwright John Millington Synge explained, “A translation is no translation unless it will give you the music of a poem along with the words of it.” Cognizant, perhaps, of Robert Frost’s definition of poetry as “what gets lost in translation,”⁶ Reta admits, the poems were like little toys with moving parts, full of puns and allusions to early feminism, most of which I let fall

⁵ Shields called *Unless* “my most overtly feminist book” (Wachtel 157). Wendy Roy writes, “*Unless* is Shields’ most explicitly feminist novel” (125).

⁶ Quotations on translation attributed to Frost, Eco, Cervantes and Yevtushenko are drawn from <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/translation.html>. Shields’s first published books, like Westerman’s, were collections of poetry. Many of her texts have been translated into various languages.

into a black hole, I'm sorry to say" (101). As Reta absorbs Westerman's feminism, she becomes more regretful about that "black hole."⁷

Although Reta hesitates to consider her translations as creative writing, Westerman insists, "translation, especially of poetry, is a creative act. Writing and translating are convivial [...], not oppositional, and not at all hierarchical" (3). Here Shields invokes the traditional hierarchical relationship between creation and translation, which, in turn, raises the connection between translation and gender issues. Just as "strong" rhymes are labeled "masculine" and "weak" rhymes "feminine," so women and translators are both deemed subordinate: "translators are handmaidens to authors, women inferior to men" (1), as Sherry Simons explains in her study of how translation has been "feminized." Thus, the "fidelity"⁸ of translation has both a literal and a sexual connotation. Yegeny Yevtushenko's adaptation of a French proverb—"Translation is like a woman. If it is beautiful, it is not faithful. And if it is faithful, it certainly is not beautiful"—illustrates this concept well. A female translator, like Reta Winters, it necessarily follows, is doubly inferior. Recent feminist theorists of translation attempt to valorize translation as equal, not inferior, to creative writing on the literary ladder—a view that Shields appears to support. So Reta is persuaded to consider "translation as an act of originality," especially as "the act of shuffling elegant French into readable and stable English is an aesthetic performance" (6), she realizes. With the money Reta earns for translating Danielle's text *Eros: Essays* into English, she takes the family to the village of La Roche-Vineuse, halfway between Cluny and Macon in southern Burgundy, where Danielle grew up, and where the Shields family bought a home.

⁷ Shields's reference to a "black hole" may be an in-joke, as it is the name of the theatre at the University of Manitoba where Shields viewed numerous plays and where her first full-length play, *Departures and Arrivals*, was first produced in 1984.

⁸ *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies* affirms, "fidelity in translation has been consistently defined in terms of gender and sexuality" (93).

Reta then translates Westerman’s memoirs: the first volume, *Pour Vivre*, she translates simply as *Alive*. Reta’s interventionist translation is slammed as “clumsy” in *The Toronto Star*, but Danielle dismisses the reviewer as “*un maquereau*,” which, Reta explains, “translates, crudely, as something between a pimp and a prick” (6). Could this be Shields’s revenge on reviewers who slighted her work as “women’s writing,” hardly *écriture féminine*? Just as Reta Winters is dismissed by a reviewer as “bard of the banal” (243), Andrea Curtis labels Shields a “bard of the boring” (68), and Barbara Amiel calls her writing “smaller than life” (quoted by Dvořák and Jones 4). Until Shields was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The Stone Diaries* in 1995, her fiction was frequently dismissed as domestic fiction or “women’s writing.” Perhaps that dismissal inspired her to write *Happenstance* and *Larry’s Party* from the male perspective, and to compose the male voice in *A Celibate Season*. Shields has been dubbed an “alchemist of the everyday” as she celebrates the quotidian and the domestic, transforming the ordinary into the extra-ordinary, as Marta Dvořák and Manina Jones explain in their introduction to *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary* (4). Shields, however, does in fact practice women’s writing in the sense of *écriture féminine*, as described by Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in both *The Stone Diaries* and *Unless*, as well as in numerous essays, because, as she explains in her 1997 essay, “A View from the Edge of the Edge,” “I am interested in writing away the invisibility of women’s lives, looking at writing as an act of redemption” (“View” Dvořák 28). In her “Playwright’s Note” to her play *Thirteen Hands*, she affirms her interest in the “redemption of women artists and activists” and asserts, “*Thirteen Hands* attempts to valorize those lives” (xi).

Reta translates the second volume of the memoirs, *Les femmes et le pouvoir*, as *Women Waiting*, for “Women possess power, but it is power that has yet to be seized, ignited, released” (8)—Shields’s feminist thesis in *Unless*, which, Reta says, is written in “women’s ink” (308).

Women Waiting is a significant rewriting of Westerman's title, because it emphasizes that women are still powerless. Reta asserts her own female power through her interventions in her translations, asserting her right to place her ideological stamp on the translation—not merely to translate it, but also to rewrite it.⁹ Although Boris Pasternak opined, "Translation is very much like copying painting," Thomas Bailey Aldrich judged, "True art selects and paraphrases, but seldom gives a verbatim translation." Reta's title also has autobiographical or metafictional value, because it is the title of a short play by Shields.¹⁰ The concept of *igniting* is crucial, not only to the self-immolation of the "Muslim woman" (117), but also to the transformation of Norah as a result of participating in her fate.¹¹

Westerman, "poet, essayist, feminist survivor, holder of twenty-seven honorary degrees" (63), becomes Reta's moral mentor: "She is the other voice in my head, almost always there, sometimes the echo, sometimes the soloist" (152). "Would Danielle approve?" (108) Reta asks herself: "I had acquired a near-crippling degree of critical appreciation for the severity of her moral stance" (80). She worries about "being in Danielle's shadow, never mind Derrida" (7).¹² Ultimately author and translator develop a symbiotic relationship: "You are my true sister," Danielle tells Reta—"Ma vraie soeur" (8). Clearly, the traditional hierarchy between author and translator has been equalized. "We're two women, *au fond*," Danielle claims, who share a belief

⁹ Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere preface *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* by affirming that "Translation is of course a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society" (vii). Shields's aim in *Unless* is clearly to influence the evolution of literature and society with regard to its estimation and treatment of women. Simons summarizes, "Von Flotow names and describes three practices of feminist translation: supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and 'hijacking'" (14)—that is, appropriating a text for the translator's own feminist agenda, thus rendering translation a political act. Simons judges that "[t]he feminist translator affirms her role as an active participant in the creation of meaning" (29). Barbara Godard refers to the feminist translator as "*womanhandling*" as she manipulates the text (91), because she takes the view that "translation is not a 'carrying across,' but a reworking of meaning" (1995, 73).

¹⁰ *Women Waiting* won first prize in the CBC Annual Literary Competition and was produced in 1983.

¹¹ The word "igniting" comes from *ignis*, the Latin word for "fire."

¹² Derrida is an appropriate reference here, given his interests in language, ethics, and politics—all issues with which Shields is concerned in this text.

in “the right word perfectly used” (103). Reta taps into Westerman’s “vein of language” when she translates the third volume of her memoirs, *The Middle Years* (15).¹³

“Translation is the art of failure,” Umberto Eco opined, however. Perhaps conscious of Eco’s dictum or Sir John Denham’s maxim—“Such is our pride, our folly, or our fate, / That few, but such as cannot write, translate”—Reta transforms herself into a creative writer, composing a book on *Russian Icons*. Thus, Shields suggests the connection between the processes of creation and translation. As Jeremy Munday explains, “The creativity of translation is a growing theme, and the crossover between translation studies and creative writing has begun to be explored” (150). Reta then becomes her own translator, rendering her English text into French for a press called “*Encyclopedie de l’art*” (6), recalling Jorge Luis Borges’s maxim, “The original is unfaithful to the translation.” Reta becomes so engrossed in her creative writing that Danielle, discouraged because Reta is neglecting the translation of the fourth and final volume of Westerman’s memoirs, becomes her own translator (319). Thus, Reta and Danielle exchange occupations in this ironic, chiasmic structure with its emphasis on the complex relationship between creative writing and translation.

Shields opens *Unless* with the concept of translation “from French into English” (40), but then extends the concept from the literal to the figurative, extending it from literature to gender politics. After all, translation, especially of poetry, begins with interpretation, and interpretation is central to *Unless* because Reta’s eldest daughter, Norah, has suddenly dropped out to sit on a Toronto street-corner with a begging bowl and a sign around her neck reading “GOODNESS”

¹³ *The Middle Years* is an appropriate title here, as Dvořák and Jones claim Shields has been “acclaimed for her minute exploration of ‘middle class, middle-aged and middle of the road’ characters” (4). Shields told me in a May 2003 interview in her Victoria home that she admired Margaret Drabble’s fiction and that, when she saw a review of *The Ice Age* labeling Drabble “the chronicler of our times,” she thought to herself, “I can do that.” In a poem she writes, “Time’s tenanted chronicle fills me full,” a concept that she reiterates in “Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard.”

(12). The question is Why?¹⁴ *Unless* is thus a novel of interpretation—how to interpret Norah’s “unreadable immobility” (26). Each member of Reta’s *kaffee klatsch*—a feminine Greek chorus—has a theory: “A phase, Annette believes. A breakdown, thinks Sally. Lynn is sure the cause is physiological, glandular, hormonal” (120). A psychiatrist diagnoses it as “a behavioural interlude in which she is either escaping something unbearable or embracing the ineffable” (214), but he cannot say which. Tom, Norah’s father, a medical doctor addicted to “the idea of diagnosis and healing,” the “rhythmic arc of cause and effect” (264), proposes a scientific interpretation: Norah is suffering “post-traumatic shock” (163); if they can identify the trauma, the remedy will be apparent. Reta cannot believe in “the thunderclap of trauma” (269), but Norah’s sisters agree with their father: “What terrible thing happened to her?” they ask; “There has to be a *thing*” (214). Reta hopes that Norah is simply in “a demented trance”: “she’ll snap her fingers and bring herself to life” (105)—a Sleeping Beauty who can kiss herself awake. At the end of *Unless*, the fairy-tale ending of Reta’s wishful thinking comes to life: Norah becomes not only a Sleeping Beauty, but also a “Snow White,” as the family clusters around the sleeping girl “like curious dwarves” (301).

Danielle thinks Norah is responding to the powerlessness of women in patriarchal society: powerless to achieve everything, she chooses to embrace nothing. “Subversion of society is possible for a mere few; *inversion* is more commonly the tactic for the powerless, a retreat from society that borders on the catatonic” (218), Danielle writes in *Alive*. “Norah has simply succumbed to the traditional refuge of women without power: she has accepted in its stead complete powerlessness, total passivity, a kind of impotent piety. In doing nothing, she has claimed everything” (104), Danielle theorizes. Reta asks her to repeat it in French, and she does:

¹⁴ In “Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard,” Shields recalls seeing a young man sitting on a pavement in France with a sign around his neck saying, “*J’ai faim*” (19)—the inspiration for Norah’s situation, perhaps.

“Norah s’était tout simplement laissée aller vers ce refuge traditionnel des femmes qui n’ont aucun pouvoir. Elle avait ainsi fait sienne cette totale impuissance, cette passivité absolue. Ne faisant rien, elle avait revendiqué tout” (104-5). The importance of the novel’s central concept is emphasized not only by the technique of repetition, but also by articulating it in both of Canada’s official languages. Echoing Westerman, Reta reflects, “Forbidden greatness, reserved for men, Norah pursues goodness. [...] Norah took up the banner of goodness—goodness, not greatness. Perhaps because there was no other way she could register her existence” (310).¹⁵ Westerman is such an ardent feminist that she questions Reta’s cohabitation with a man, asking how she can accept “the tyranny of *penetration*,” a word she does not acknowledge to exist in English (103).¹⁶ *Unless*, which focuses on “the ‘woman’ question” (100), is filled with explicit references to feminism, such as Helen Reddy’s song “I Am Woman” (57) from the early sixties, when “[f]eminism was in its chrysalis stage” (59), as Reta recalls. Reta practices the art of “bean-counting” (136-8)—that is, noting the all-male lists of the world’s greatest thinkers and writers—“the testicular hit-list[s] of literary big cats” (164).¹⁷ Reta writes six letters of protest, signed with pseudonyms, including Francophone names, such as “Rita Orange d’Ville” or “Xeta D’Orange” (221, 249)—including one in which she objects, “Women writers, you say, are the miniaturists of fiction” (247)—but does not send them. If Reta is afraid to publish her views on gender and power, clearly Shields is not: she tells Eleanor Wachtel that it is important to “blurt bravely” (Wachtel 179).¹⁸ “Reta” is a suitable name for a brave blurter, as it derives from the Greek word meaning “speaker.”

¹⁵ Shields explains, “She’s shut out simply because she’s a woman” (Wachtel 155).

¹⁶ George Steiner employs the “male-oriented image of translation as penetration” in *After Babel* (Munday 129).

¹⁷ Shields comments, “I seem to be bean counting all the time” (Wachtel 159).

¹⁸ Shields comments, “Reta writes letters all the time, venting her rage, mainly her feminist rage [...] Particularly in literature, I think, women have been given very minor roles, not taken seriously” (Wachtel 155-7). Alex Ramon claims “*Unless* is a self-evident metafiction which expands Shields’s concerns regarding critical diminishment of

But the word “Unless” offers hope: “*Unless* is a miracle of language and perception,” Westerman writes in “The Shadow on the Mind,” Reta recalls: “It makes us anxious, makes us cunning. Cunning like the wolves that crop up in the most thrilling fairy tales. But it give us hope” (225). Reta notes, “If you add a capital *s* to *unless*, you get *Sunless*, or *Sans Soleil*” (224). Shields comments on the title of her novel: “I thought [unless] was a wonderful word. This kind of provisional word that can change everything. It offers possibility to me” (Maharaj 9). One can imagine Shields’s oncologist warning, “Unless a miracle cure is found, cancer is terminal.”¹⁹ Reta reflects: “Unless you’re lucky, unless you’re healthy, fertile, unless you’re loved and fed, unless you’re clear about your sexual direction, unless you’re offered what others are offered, you go down in the darkness, down to despair. *Unless* provides you with a trap-door, a tunnel into the light, the reverse side of not enough. *Unless* keeps you from drowning” (224). Thus, “Unless” offers the possibility of an escape from a dismal fate. The chapter titled “Unless” is the centrepiece of the novel. Reta reflects on this pivotal conjunction: “*Unless* is the worry word of the English language. It flies like a moth around the ear, you hardly hear it, and yet everything depends on its breathy presence. Unless—that’s the little subjunctive mineral you carry along in your pocket crease. It’s always there, or else not there” (224). She emphasizes the concept by employing the trope of translation: “Ironically, *unless*, the lever that finally shifts reality into a new perspective, cannot be expressed in French. *A moins que* doesn’t have quite the heft; *sauf* is crude” (225). But, in fact, “unless” *can* be expressed in French, as Reta demonstrates; moreover, *sauf* suggests *save*, so crucial for the despairing Norah.

her own writing into a wider discussion of the dismissal of women novelists as ‘the miniaturists of fiction’” (*U* 247) (165).

¹⁹ Shields plays with the word *terminal* in her story “Flitting Behaviour” and in her play *Departures and Arrivals*, set in an airport terminal.

The concept of translation forms an ideal introduction for *Unless*, for translation in the broad sense of transference is at the heart of this novel. Although she ceases to focus on literal translation after the opening section of the novel, Shields extends the concept of transference to her subject matter. Initially, Shields wrote *Unless* in response to her devastating 1998 cancer diagnosis, but then jettisoned the idea because it was too autobiographical.²⁰ “I got this book off on the wrong foot, writing about breast cancer because I had all this information. But it was just making me sad. I had to pick the book apart with jeweller’s tweezers—which always breaks your heart a bit. But now it feels like I’m soaring,” she commented to Anne Dowsett Johnston (49). She translated her grief over the loss of her breast into mourning for a lost child, reflecting the situation of one of her doctors, as she explained to Maria Russo (34).²¹ Johnston observes, “Cancer is the thread Shields dropped in writing this novel, one she replaced with the estrangement of Norah” (50). Thus, *Unless* allows readers to witness the artistic alchemy by which Shields transforms fact into fiction, as the missing daughter mystery replaces cancer to provide a more womanist focus for the narrative as it emphasizes the mother-daughter relationship. “The whole sense of sadness, of the end of things, of the broken vessel—everything is there,” Shields remarked in May 2002 to Lev Grossman, who called *Unless* “a graceful coda, an arabesque performed over an abyss” (61).

Shields is able to unite both sides of the coin in this novel: she explains, “this idea of fiction and ‘reality’ is something that has always interested me and certainly did while I was

²⁰ Shields said she wanted “to change the quality or cause of the unhappiness from one thing to another so that you’re not forever writing your own autobiography, which is the last thing that most of us want to do” (Wachtel 151). Rachel Cusk observes that, “Like Jane Austen, Shields is a mysterious presence in her own fictions, a sort of shaded figure, and it seems to me that, with this remarkable novel, her narrative has finally turned to that figure and unveiled her” (47).

²¹ One fragment of Shields’s “breast cancer” (309) novel remains in Reta’s outrage against the character that is repelled by the sight of a mastectomy brassiere (308).

writing [*Unless*....] I think of fiction as the other side of reality” (Wachtel 147-8).²² Shields transfers the reality principle to fiction and vice versa in this metafictional text. Reta, like Shields, sees life as a novel. Shields, in her “Afterword” to *Dropped Threads: What We Aren’t Told*, said cancer was not the end of her life story, but “a chapter on its own” (347). In her 1996 convocation address to the graduates of the University of British Columbia, she said, “Most of us end up seeing our lives not as an ascending line of achievement but as a series of highly interesting chapters.” Reta takes a similarly novelistic approach to her daughter’s defection: “How did this part of the narrative happen? We know it didn’t arise out of the ordinary plot lines of a life story” (13). Reta views Norah’s withdrawal as a deviation from the script, “a detour from ‘the story thus far’” (162). Her goal is to discover the plotline Norah is tracing. The question is this: Is it a tragic or a comic arc?

Reta writes, “My heart is broken” (67) on a washroom cubicle, draws a heart bisected by a jagged line, and says aloud, “*My heart is broken*” (68), externalizing her grief by illustrating and uttering it.²³ The heartbroken mother is driven to create an alternative reality through fiction: “This matters, the remaking of an untenable world through the nib of a pen; it matters so much I can’t stop doing it” (208). She transfers her real-life situation to her creative writing, employing fiction to rewrite reality. Writing is “a strategy for maintaining a semblance of ongoing life, an unasked-for gift, *une prime*” (109), she discovers. Shields implies in interviews that the composition of *Unless* had the same value as an antidote to her illness as the creation of Reta’s creative fiction has as a distraction from her depression over her daughter’s dereliction.

Reta’s quest for Norah is a literal *and* a literary quest, then. As an antidote to Norah’s defection, Reta creates a sequel to her successful first comic novel, *My Thyme Is Up*, calling it

²² Cervantes is credited with observing, “Translation is the other side of a tapestry.”

²³ “My Heart Is Broken” is the title of a short story by Mavis Gallant.

Thyme in Bloom—“reserving *Autumn Thyme* in the event I decide to go for a trilogy” (140). She recalls, “I meant to write a jokey novel. A light novel. A novel for summertime, a book to read while seated in an Ikea wicker chair with the sun falling on the pages as faintly and evenly as human breath. Naturally the novel would have a happy ending” (14). Shields is clearly parodying the comedy of manners and satirizing “chick lit.” While the ironic pun in the title of the first novel suggests an ending, the title of the sequel suggests renewal.

Thyme In Bloom provides a metafictional parallel to Reta’s personal quest: chronicling the romance of her creatures, Alicia, a fashion magazine editor, and Roman, an Albanian trombonist with the Wychwood Symphony (Reta says she was fiddling with a paper clip, called *un petit trombone* in French, while deliberating about what kind of work to assign to Roman [266]), it reflects Reta’s own dilemma. “The first sentence is already tapped into my computer: ‘Alicia was not as happy as she deserved to be’” (15), recalling Reta’s own unhappiness described in the first sentence of *Unless*: “It happens that I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now” (1).²⁴ She concludes the first chapter: “This will be a book about lost children, about goodness, and going home and being happy and trying to keep the poison of the printed page in perspective. I’m desperate to know how the story will turn out” (16).²⁵

Unless provides a clue to Reta’s metafictional quest: “The conjugation and (sometimes) adverb *unless* with its elegiac undertones, is a term used in logic, a word breathed by the hopeful or by writers of fiction wanting to prise open the crusted world and reveal another plane of being” (314). She discovers, “I can squeeze my eyes shut, pop through a little door in the wall, and stand outside my child's absence” (109). In fact, Reta signs one unsent letter from

²⁴ Shields comments, “Maybe I was deeply unhappy myself when I started this book.” She adds, regarding the first sentence of *Thyme in Bloom*: “I was deliberately echoing my own opening sentence” (Wachtel 150, 152).

²⁵ This prediction reflects a central concept in her study of Jane Austen, where she argues that “every novel is in a sense about the fate of a child” (9).

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“Wychwood City,” placing herself in her fictional town (166).²⁶ Fiction can function as escapism, but it must do more than that: “Novels help us turn down the volume of our own interior ‘discourse,’” Reta reflects, “but unless they can provide an alternative, hopeful course, they’re just so much narrative crumble. Unless, unless” (224). She realizes that fiction must offer the reader a sense of possibility. Thus, Norah leads Reta to rethink the arc of a novel:

I thought I understood something of a novel’s architecture, the lovely slope of predicament, the tendrils of surface detail, the calculated curving upward into inevitability, yet allowing spells of incorrigibility, and then the ending, a corruption of cause and effect and the gathering together of all the characters into a framed operatic circle of consolation and ecstasy, backlit with fibre-optic gold, just for a moment on the second-to-last page, just for an atomic particle of time. (13)

Reta realizes that her romantic vision of fiction does not correspond with reality, causing her to rethink the form and function of the novel, especially the structure of *Thyme in Bloom*. Reta’s metafictional confection forms a comic counter to her tragic narrative, just as the disappearance of the daughter provided a fictional alternative to Shields’s severed breast. Reta says, “This kind of shallow invention this particular genre demands is as healing as holy oil” (109). A reviewer of *My Thyme Is Up* charged the author with “being ‘good’ at happy moments but inept at the lower end of the keyboard” (107). Reta’s editor, Arthur Springer, warns, “As the no-longer-quotable Woody Allen once put it, the writers of comedy are always asked to sit at the children’s table” (284). Margaret Atwood, however, said of Shields, “Because she’s a comic writer and genuinely funny, early on, she was put in the ‘sweet’ box, where she does not belong. The fact is, there’s a dark thread in everything she writes” (Russo 35). *Unless* is inextricably interwoven with that dark thread.

The question of how to protect Alicia’s independence without damaging Roman’s ego catalyzes Reta’s epiphany: “Not one of us was going to get what we wanted. I had suspected this

²⁶ Wychwood is the name of an exclusive Toronto enclave north of Davenport and west of Bathurst—not far from the street-corner where Norah begs.

for years, and now I believe that Norah half knows the big female secret of wanting and not getting. Norah, the brave soldier. Imagine someone writing a play called *Death of a Saleswoman*. What a joke” (98). Reta suspects this “female secret” may be the source of Norah’s depression: “I am more and more persuaded that she is reacting—morally, responsibly, the only way she can—to a withholding universe. What she sees is an endless series of obstacles, an alignment of locked doors” (220). Shields explains, “Certain so-called classics—Hemingway, to a certain extent Conrad—refused to open up to me because they projected a world in which I did not hold citizenship, the world of men, action, power, ideas, politics and war” (“View” 22). Whether or not this realization is the source of Norah’s catatonic state, it is clearly the root of Reta’s malaise. She fears she has “projected my own fears and panics onto Norah” (134).²⁷ Reta’s reflection on fiction is transformed into a feminist manifesto. She theorizes:

the world is split in two, between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. (270)

She insists, “I need to speak further about this problem of women, how they are dismissed and excluded from the most primary of entitlements” (99). She argues, “We’ve been sent over to the side pocket of the snooker table and made to disappear. No one is so blind as not to realize the power of the strong over the weak and, following that, the likelihood of defeat” (99). Now Reta is dropping into her own “black hole” of depression and defeatism.

Reta’s new editor, Arthur Springer, has a different perspective on the problem, however. Dismissing Alicia as *good*, but not *great*, he insists on “Roman being the moral centre of this

²⁷ Shields explains, “Reta’s rage is projected onto Norah’s” (Wachtel 156). Alex Ramon argues, “Reta’s attempt to construct a feminist metanarrative to ‘explain’ Norah’s withdrawal is not entirely supported by the text” (171).

book” (285), because “Alicia, for all her charms, is not capable of that role” (285). He believes Reta is writing a “pilgrimage” (283) about “Roman’s search for identity” (278): “A reader, the serious reader that I have in mind, would never accept her as the decisive fulcrum of a serious work of art that acts as a critique of our society while, at the same time, unrolling itself like a carpet of inevitability, narrativistically speaking” (286), he argues in Shields’s wicked parody of *criticspeak*. He wants to retitl *Thyme in Bloom* simply *Bloom*, recalling Leopold Bloom, the everyman hero of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and to rename Reta “R.R. Summers,” obscuring her female identity and recalling Ezra Pound’s renaming Hilda Doolittle “H.D.” Reta refuses, insisting on Alicia’s remaining the moral centre of the novel: “Because she’s a woman” (286). Norah’s response to Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* parallels Reta’s reaction to her editor. “Norah saw Madame Bovary as a woman blandly idealized by Flaubert, and then reduced to a puff of romanticism, and capable of nothing else but kneading her own soft heart,” Norah’s English professor explains: “Your daughter’s view, and it is a perfectly viable view, was that Madame Bovary was forced to surrender her place as the moral centre of the novel” (217)—just as Arthur Springer intends for Alicia. Thus, the mother’s quest for her daughter leads to Reta’s own discovery of the traditional disempowerment of women. Reta’s resolution to retain the feminist thrust of her novel is expressed by the repeated phrase, “Because she’s a woman” (287). Acting as an *Open Sesame*, the phrase magically leads to the recovery of Norah, for, the moment Reta says it, the telephone rings, and her husband tells her Norah has been discovered, hospitalized with pneumonia.²⁸ Tom was right in his diagnosis: Norah was burned, and traumatized, thrown into “an ellipsis of mourning” (309) after attempting to beat out the flames of the “Muslim woman” (117) who immolated herself in April 2000—perhaps in protest against the plight of women in Islam, although Shields leaves her identity and motivation a mystery—on the Toronto

²⁸ Coral Ann Howells terms the clause “Because she’s a woman” a “storm centre” (109).

street corner where Norah has sat ever since with her “silent tongue and burnt hands” (310) and her sign appealing for “GOODNESS” (12).²⁹ Shields suggests that, *unless* women’s voices are heard, *unless* women are accorded justice, human society can never achieve goodness in this fiction study of ethics and gender.

After contemplating Norah’s situation, Reta realizes, “my idiotic two-dimensional pop-fiction airhead, Alicia” (162), is vapid and vain: “such fatal vanity, such a lack of suffering” (172), she laments. Personal tragedy inspires Reta to revise the pattern of her comic fiction. Understanding Norah’s dereliction helps Reta rethink Alicia’s intended marriage: “Both Alicia and Roman want, both of them desire. Ridiculous word, *desire*. *Tu désires quelque chose?* Delete” (188). Reta sculpts “their life’s predicament—they long for love, but selfishly strive for self-preservation” (13)—the conflict between the individual’s destiny and the microcosm of marriage that sparks the deconstruction of the characters’ relationship and inspires Reta to reimagine her novel. Although “Happy endings are her specialty” (38), Reta realizes marriage may not be the happy ending after all. She recalls, “Norah, the most literary, the most mercurial of the three [sisters] mumbled that [*My Thyme Is Up*] might have been a better book if I’d skipped the happy ending, if Alicia had decided on going to Paris after all, and if Roman had denied her his affection” (81). Contemplating Norah’s feminist perspective in reality inspires Reta’s revolutionary realization in fiction:

Suddenly it was clear to me. Alicia’s marriage to Roman must be postponed. Now I understood where the novel is headed. She was not meant to be partnered. Her singleness in the world is her paradise [...] and she came close to sacrificing it, or, rather, I, as novelist, had been about to snatch it away from her. (172-73)

²⁹ Shields does not address the cause of the woman’s self-immolation or the relevance of her religion in *Unless*, but only the effects of witnessing the death on Norah Winters—presumably her despair at this shocking symbol of the powerlessness of women to make their voices heard. Reta and her friends discuss a “Muslim woman” who self-immolated, a Mozambique woman who was forced by a flood to give birth in a tree, and a woman in Nigeria “who got pregnant and was publicly flogged” (116-8), enabling Shields to extend her analysis of the plight of women beyond western culture.

Ultimately, she decides to cancel the “doomed wedding” planned for *Thyme in Bloom*. So, although *Unless*, like most Shields novels, includes a wedding, *Thyme in Bloom* does not.³⁰

Reta determines, “The novel, if it is to survive, must be redrafted. Alicia will advance in her self-understanding, and the pages will expand. I’ll start over tomorrow” (173).³¹ Like Shields, Reta begins to challenge “all the orthodoxies of genre, and gender” (“View” 23). She announces, “I have brought *Thyme in Bloom* to a whimsical conclusion:” as Norah recovers, so, Reta says, “Alicia triumphs, but in her own slightly capricious way” (318). Ironically, *My Thyme Is Up*, which earned Reta the label “bard of the banal” (243), is “analyzed exhaustively” in “a surprise reappraisal and appreciation” for *The Yale Review* by an octogenarian academic who notes its “subversive insights” and judges it a “brilliant tour de force” (318) in a satire on academe that recalls her brilliant 1987 academic satire *Swann*. “Everything is neatly wrapped up at the end, since tidy conclusions are a convention of comic fiction” (318), although Reta does not inform the reader of her “tidy conclusion.” Instead, she espouses the “uncertainty principle” (318): “It doesn’t mean that all will be well for ever and ever, amen: it means that for five minutes a balance has been achieved at the margin of the novel’s thin textual plane; make that five seconds; make that the millionth part of a nanosecond” (318). Reta’s comic resolution is purely provisional: *Unless*, as Atwood observes, is “a hymn to the provisional” (“Soap” 141).

Meanwhile, Reta is already planning *Autumn Thyme*, the last novel in her *Thyme* trilogy, in which Alicia is metamorphosed into a true feminist heroine:

³⁰ Although Alicia remains single at the end of Reta’s novel, the end of the dramatic adaption of *Unless* says, as Reta’s family sleeps, “Alicia and Roman are curled up asleep, too” (85). I wish to thank Don Shields for sending me the stage adaptation of *Unless* composed by Carol Shields and her daughter Sara Cassidy in 2003.

³¹ Shields’s final message to her editor Anne Collins on 5 December 2001 reads, “I do hope I get the page proofs back for some very small engraving-on-glass I want to do, a sort of embeddedness for the astute reader—or maybe just for me.” I wish to thank Anne Collins for sharing with me the email correspondence between herself and Shields regarding copyediting *Unless*.

Alicia is intelligent and inventive and capable of moral resolution, the same qualities we presume, without demonstration, in a male hero. It will be a sadder book than the others, and shorter. The word *autumn* taps us on the head, whispering melancholy, brevity, which are tunes I know a little about. A certain amount of resignation too will attach itself to the pages of this third novel, a gift from Danielle Westerman, but also the heft of stamina. There you have it: stillness and power, sadness and resignation, contradictions and irrationality. Almost, you might say, the materials of a serious book. (320)

Unless, despite its comic resolution, is that serious book: coincidence and contradiction, ethics and aesthetics, paradox and possibility. Although Norah recovers, the woman who immolated herself does not. And, although Norah is restored to the bosom of her family, enabling the “Happy Families” ending that Shields favours, Reta remains disillusioned about the equality of women in the millennial world. Summers has been transformed into Winters. Just as Shields claims in *Jane Austen: A Life* that Austen’s genius centres on “the fusing of moral seriousness with comic drama” (26), so Shields’s “double vision” allows Reta to appreciate “the comedy of her tragic role,” as Shields writes in *The Republic of Love* (75)—to weep “comic tears,” as she puts it in her poem “Mark Twain” (*Early Voices* 35). Margaret Atwood judges, “This ability to strike such two different chords at once is not only high art, it’s also the essence of Carol Shields’ writing—the iridescent, often hilarious surface of things, but also the ominous depths. The shimmering pleasure boat, all sails set, skimming giddily across the River Styx” (“Soap” 139), is an image that reflects Reta’s “arabesque over the abyss” of her daughter’s disappearance. Thus Shields employs the concept of translation, literal and figurative, to connect reality and fiction and to critique the powerlessness of women in this feminist millennial novel.³² Rachel

³² Don Shields wrote to me in 2012 regarding this essay:

“Nora, your essay on French Translation and Female Power in Carol Shields’ UNLESS is powerful. I think it among the best pieces you have written. It was a both a pleasure to read and enlightening. Your insights and reflections on Carol and her work are commendable.

Thank you for this fine homage to my late wife.

I confess that I had forgotten just how much of a role the French language played in UNLESS. And I kept thinking about the serendipitous connection between Norah and Nora (you).

Best regards, Don.”

Nora Foster Stovel

Cusk cleverly concludes “My Heart is Broken” thus: “[*Unless*] is, in a strange way, a feat of translation. I want to call it a masterpiece—but I think I’ll leave that for a man to say” (48).

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