Dividing Life into Manageable Parts; the Fiction of Diane Schoemperlen

The new and soon to be widely called postmodernist American fiction of the 1960s often depended on the extent to which the presentation of life was restructured or fragmented and the language demystified. Writers such as Donald Barthelme, William Gass, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon or Walter Abish, to name just a few, did not record or mirror life but created, or negotiated, visions of reality in which daily events were reduced to random, or playfully arranged images, while elusive narrators, frequently confined to voices, modes of consciousness, or methods of composition, parodied, negated, or annihilated themselves rather than prevailed as character presences.

In Barthelme’s fiction, for example, the authorial persona was replaced by a disassembling voice, a non-bodily articulation fervently orchestrating collaged myths and social stereotypes too tangled to be rendered through a conventional language. In Walter Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa* (1974), chapters contained only words beginning with letters which had been alphabetically designated (for example, in chapter „B” the words all start with „a” or „b”); consequently, characters had to wait until their letter came up, while the first-person narrator could only speak in chapter „I.” James Kunen derided his own *The Strawberry Statement* (1969) by saying: “The best, truest way to read this book would be to rip it up and throw the scraps all over the house”. He further teased and thwarted the reader suggesting we might pick up the pieces and read them in any order we wanted because “It was spread all over, but so is my mind” (Kunen, 6).

Such fascination with fragmented, incomplete and oblique representation, frequently with pastiche and collage, became in these and other early similarly „rigorous” metafictional works a creative cul-de-sac, an obsessive addiction to the purity of means that utterly thwarted the enquiry into the condition of being a character, or a writer. Personality was not embraced, lives were devoid of inner existence, flattened, confined to elusive identities, turned
into types, linguistic entities, symbols. They remained as fragmented and jumbled as the prose that sustained them. Social and cultural backgrounds were impoverished, or meaningless though a sustained, sometimes almost perverse fascination with contemporary life was frequently indicated. Imaginative and verbal structures led to more imaginative and verbal structures, not to analysis of everyday existence.

Other, or later, representatives of literary postmodernism, writers like John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut or Philip Roth, were less stubbornly attached to metafictional narrative. Without abandoning radical self-reflexivity and formal experimentation, they employed characters that resembled conventional literary figures, or actual persons (frequently the writers themselves) who lived in, and often referred to the contemporary North American scene. Doing so, they insisted on functioning not only as literary magicians and tricksters but also as re-interpreters of reality. In *Democracy* (1984), a novel by Joan Didion, another realism-conscious postmodernist, the narrator, who introduces herself as Didion, acts as a classifier and interpreter of what fills people’s thoughts: elements of visual imagery derived from films, advertising, print, and TV. She tries to arrange the broken fragments by which her characters briefly reveal themselves. She says she is an investigator, an assembler of the American society jig-saw puzzle. Her material, she claims, is „players”, „versions”, „performances”, „tricks”.

Diane Schoemerlen (1954–), a short story writer and novelist, one of Canada’s most stylistically innovative and irreverent authors today, takes up both the early, exuberant, today largely used up tradition of metafictional experimentation, and the later attempts to weave constructs of metafiction into factuality, and fills them with a new sense of creative imagination and witty social and cultural commentary. Blending a reliance on illusion and a search for new techniques of realism, vacillating between what might be called 3G (third generation) metafiction and biographical factuality, she provides the Canadian fiction of the late 20th and early 21st centuries with fresh and exuberant possibilities. She aspires to re-formulate the rules of existing literary conduct and perception, suggests that linguistic experiments, or games, practiced by earlier postmodernists should not be forgotten because they have not gone far enough, or have not been exploited sufficiently. She strives, comically, often in an ostensibly trite and repetitious manner, to achieve some new mental-literary optics for her times which she wants to capture in fluid and imaginative, constantly reworked patterns of fiction. At the same time she shows how the flaunting of technique and playing with
common speech can bring one back to realistic representation and meaning, in fact to attempts to order or explain some of the emotional and mental chaos of contemporary life.

Believing that the recording of reality can be authenticated by the resuscitation of textual fragmentation, montage, enumeration, or various other structural and verbal conceits, Schoemperlen fills her stories with listings of well recognizable products and appliances, activities or ideas, contents of meals, ingredients of recipes, wardrobes or houses, or indexes of memories and dreams. They may be accompanied by word definitions, or other forms of classification, elucidation and illustration. In fact anything in language may be picked up and reworked through its various permutations or associations. In the story called “Rules of Thumb: An Alphabet of Imperatives for the Modern Age”, in *Forms of Devotion* (Schoemperlen 1998), each paragraph begins with the next boxed and illustrated letter of the alphabet. In “Red Plaid Shirt”, a woman’s life is reconstructed through a detailed discussion of several pieces of clothing she has been wearing at different stages of her life. The story “This Town” sounds and looks much like a tourist guide arranged into sections called “General Information”, “Climate”, “Accommodation”, etc. In “None of the Above” the life of a couple, David and Belinda Boyce, is shown as if it were the subject of a multiple choice examination in which one chooses one of five possibilities. A probable line of events emerges, so does a gradually solidifying, multileveled image of contemporary life with its seemingly varied but in fact limiting possibilities. In “Tickets to Spain” the narrator, who is planning to go to Spain, persists in quoting conversational phrases from a Spanish phrase book. A piece called “A Simple Story”, similarly, looks like a series of writing exercises with paragraphs called “Describe the City”, “Describe the Dreams”, etc. In Schoemperlen’s first novel, *In the Language of Love* (1994), subtitled *A Novel in 100 Chapters*, chapters’ titles are words (table, dark, woman, house, stream, window, boy, etc.) taken from the 100 words of the psychological test devised to study insanity almost a hundred years ago. In a collection of stories *Forms of Devotion* (1998) Schoemperlen includes old illustrations, wood engravings and line drawings to complement the meaning of the stories rather than explain them, thus creating new, fresh and intriguing associations.

Shoemperlen stresses, as she often explains in interviews, that her “literary gimmicks”, as some critics dismiss them, are not her primary consideration, or aim, that in her writing the form is meant to emphasize the workings of the minds of her narrators, to reflect, however tentatively, the confusion and
vulnerability of life today. “I make lists as a way to get things done and to feel I’m in control – even though I’m not. It’s a way of getting along [...] of surviving”, explains the writer and the strategy seems to be useful for the women she writes about (Scanlan, 11). Joanna, the heroine of In the Language of Love, a woman engaged in an endless search for moral and esthetic coherence in her life, often worries that “the contents of her own memory” reflect “disorder verging on chaos”, and hopes that memory “may well be the only vessel in which this disorder can be contained” (Schoemperlen 1996, 226).

The fragments of life and slivers of memory Schoemperlen collects and reshuffles for us form a vibrantly kaleidoscopic yet curiously cogent view of the life of the contemporary Canadian woman involved in an endless task of having to re-assess the verbal and visual patterns imposed on her. Joanna, in In the Language of Love, feels that her life is experienced as if “in sections, as separate pockets of time and affiliation”, its various stages are “like marbles set side by side”. Being, appropriately, a collage artist, she assembles the random cubist fragments of her own past. They are reworked by her memory, mediated and attached, sometimes repeatedly, to other memories, thus forming an endless trail of the mind’s screenings, filters and associations. Like her heroine, Schoemperlen suggests that we all look at life in distorting and selective ways – “we can never see things as they really are” (Schoemperlen 1998, 118), take it bit by bit, “divide it into manageable parts”, as one critic called it (Scanlan, 11). We do all this rather mechanically, or accidentally, come across an event or situation, penetrate its many mysteriously and quizzically ramified contexts, then hold on to some of them to re-process them again, or to redefine their connotations and ramifications, and so on and so forth. The past and the present thus grow out of each other as one is not more important than the other. The memories that nourish us change and evolve as we do since “all memory is revisionist, all stories are apocryphal, all photographs hang suspended in the present tense. As if in aging, a photograph changes meaning according to how the viewer has aged and changed and yet remained the same” (Schoemperlen 1996, 207). Alice Munro seems to agree. She acknowledges, on the novel’s jacket, that In the Language of Love “has an unusual, but natural, structure, circling and overlapping in a way that brings you close to the rhythm of memory”.

Once textual devices and verbal games become commonplace and obvious, and therefore unobtrusive, Schoemperlen emerges not as a manipulator of language, a wizard of metafiction, but a rather well-focused and shrewd
observer of the social and cultural actuality. From behind her literary constructions unfolds a coherent reality, a vast panorama of contemporary working and middle class, small town Canada. Her main characters, almost invariably young or middle aged women, talk of their childhood, parents, physical and mental maturation, love affairs and children. They are telling us what it means to be sensitive and imaginative in a world claimed by men, controlled by consumerism, imbued with paradox and terror.

When Joanna, in *In the Language of Love*, thinks of the past, the life in the working-class household of her parents, she sees it as being largely mundane and unattractive. Though gentle and good-natured, she was regularly rebuked by her mother, an oddly bitter and opinionated woman*. She will be angry with her, her morbid secrecy and aloofness, also with the father’s impassiveness, for the rest of her life. When Joanna leaves her parents’ home and is on her own, she is dismayed by the blandness of daily existence. She is depressed by the falsehood of human relations, the silliness of cultural pretensions, and the semi-friendliness of modern urban manners, has a need to defy them, or parody. Knowing she has to adjust because there is no chance of changing things, gives her a sense of guilt, and also a touch of rigidity in dealing with others.

Similar disappointments recur in other Schoemperlen’s fictions. In a short story called “The Gate”, a twelve year old girl taken to the funeral of a distant relative realizes that bidding farewell to a kinsman is an elaborate and grotesque spectacle of social pretensions and evasions. In “Losing Ground”, a sensitive young girl is witness to a callous and prejudiced treatment of Indians in Manitoba. Her family see them as being permanently demoralized rather than mistreated, the parts of cemeteries in which they are buried are neglected.

Complaints about the limitations imposed on women are frequent. In the story called “What We Want”, a voice representing women in general declares: “we want to get savage and leave the whole sad world behind us, hanging by a thread”, and adds: “What we want is a getaway car [...] What we want is a change of style” (Schoemperlen 1990, 38). Myrna Waxman, in

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* Complaints about mothers recur in other Schoemperlen fictions. They add to the already noticeable trend in current Canadian literature, for example in the novels of Nancy Huston, Margaret Atwood, or Jane Urquhart, of presenting the mother in a negative way.
“How Myrna Survives”, finds her life as a single woman at the age of thirty two spiritually burnt out, “unremarkable” and “muddied”; she sometimes feels she “just wants to scream and then sleep” (Schoemperlen 1990, 76-78).

Good life and professional stability do not satisfy the Schoemperlen women, they mock middle class values, also in themselves, and hate themselves for agreeing to participate in social rituals and pretensions because they tend to destroy spiritual sophistication, love and fulfillment. “Rules of Thumb: An Alphabet of Imperatives for the Modern Age”, a playful list of suggestions about how to behave in today’s society, is a bitingly ironic indictment of middle class values and snobberies:

Be ironic whenever possible [...] Never be naïve or sentimental unless you can do so in an ironic way [...] adopt a revisionist stance toward your own history. Your goal should be to make everybody believe that you have always been as virtuous, sophisticated, and affluent as you are now (Schoemperlen 1998, 200-205).

In Our Lady of the Lost and Found (2001) the social satire is given a bold and unusual setting. The narrator, a protestant woman, takes the Virgin Mary, who comes to her for a short vacation before the busy month of May, to the Mall. Not unlike other Schomperlen heroines, Mary confesses to the narrator that she is tired of doing what is expected of her. She would like less piety and fewer formalities, longs for the simple life, chatting over coffee, relaxed shopping and walks in comfortable running shoes.

The men the Schoemperlen women meet frequently turn out to be selfish, duplicitous and unimaginative. They do not appreciate their female lovers’ witty candor or poetic hunger. “They have no sense of humor, none of them”, says Myrna, in “How Myrna Survives”, and she knows what she is saying – she has been, like other Schoemperlen heroines, through several failed love affairs (Schoemperlen 1990, 90). Other women feel that men are strangely inferior, underdeveloped. The narrator in The Man of My Dreams, a female writer, realizes there is a difference between the dreams she or other women dream, or write about, and the ones that men dream. Men’s dreams are escapist rather than imaginative: “In the stories I write, I take it for granted that these men snore and roll over forty-seven times a night while these women beside them wander and moan, commit adultery, murder, and magic” (Schoemperlen 1990, 2-3).
Similarly, the language men use simplifies and trivializes, it does not contain the complexities of women’s ideas, or their rich body language. Consequently, relationships turn out to be superficial, tedious, unsatisfying. Even when a man is more perceptive and sympathetic towards a woman, as is the male character in “Body Language”, he understands her only when he sees her, and he is able to think about one part of her body at a time, “the language of her ankles, elbows, that small bone protruding at the wrist”. When she is away, he is not able to imagine her as a complex identity, “the heart of the matter is no longer visible to his naked eye” (Schoemperlen 1998, 48-49). In “Count Your Blessings”, a story subtitled “A Fairy Tale”, a woman blessed with a handsome and rich husband, pretty children and an impressive house, is unfulfilled, depressed. She secretly misses “all the things she could be doing [...] [like being] constructive, creative”. It does not help to know (in “Count Your Blessings”) that other women’s lives are far more unaccomplished, that there is “a stampede of unhappy women demanding to be heard” (Schoemperlen 1998, 184, 192). Tired of imperfect love affairs, afraid of further emotional scars, some women, for example Myrna, in “How Myrna Survives”, prefer to stay away from male companionship, or sex.

Even though relations with men frequently turn out to be inadequate, Schoemperlen’s women sooner or later seek love again, for them a vehicle for survival in an increasingly lonely and frightening world, an emotional addiction. In “Clues” an adolescent girl desires a friend’s husband whom she makes “seem so desirable, so serious and important, so perfectly male, the only male worth having.” When she sees him one day in front of a bar, embracing an unknown woman, “just drunk enough to be expansive and flirtatious”, she discovers that she is susceptible to such a species, that he is “the first in a long line of those handsome charmingly doomed men who would inhabit my life for a time – those lovely lazy men who could get away with anything [...]” (Schoemperlen 1987, 43, 46). In In the Language of Love, Joanna needs many years to free herself from the memories of her love for Lewis, a married man with whom she had a prolonged and passionate affair, and who treated her like a toy.

Schoemperlen’s women clearly desire an existence that is more rewarding than what they are faced with. They want relationships based on sensuality and sophistication, a fuller sense of psychic liberation and self-realization. They would like to balance trite rituals of housework and marriage with fantasy and playful invention, to free themselves from gloom and commonness, or miserable love affairs, by living out life’s imagined
alternatives, fantasies or dreams. Naomi, the young woman in “Mastering Effective English” acts out her fantasies, or imagines she does, on exotic islands she flies to every year. She suffers no feelings of guilt or sin there, the condition which, she knows, “animates the remains of the real world”. She enjoys being where “all time passes in its own good time”, where love, colors and passions are honest and straightforward, as if they were cleansed of the biases of Western culture (Schoemperlen 1990, 223, 225).

For Myrna, in “How Myrna Survives”, soul-inspiring ideas come from between waking and sleep, and as such are at times called upon, or reworked into literary visions. Myrna, a single, intelligent but melancholy woman is happiest when is writing and thus fulfills her own promise to “rescue/ resurrect order out of chaos/value out of worthlessness/or the tidal fear of it”. In the act of writing, even lasting a few minutes, “everything makes sense” (Schoemperlen 1990, 85-86). A desire to escape to a culture, or a state of mind that is unlike Canadian actuality is expressed by Miriam, the heroine of “Tickets to Spain” who, like her boyfriend, is planning to go to Spain, but unlike him, imagines that country as being full of vivid and colorful possibilities and passionate people who, “rich or poor, large or small […] cling together and take a profound interest in each other’s lives” (Schoemperlen 1990, 66). Joanna, in In the Language of Love, tries to rework her many existential questions and fears, or unpleasant memories, into paper collages. Like other Schoemperlen women, she wants to find fulfillment and joy in activities that aesthetically go beyond the obvious.

Yet successful spiritual escapes do not last long, or turn out to be elusive. Boring, empty, mechanical existence re-possesses the lives of Schoemperlen’s women. Told to rectify themselves, to adjust, to re-count the blessings they are supposed to enjoy in life, her sensitive heroines turn inward, become listless, the hostages of doubt. Fear creeps in, terrorizes in various ways, also in dreams which are vividly remembered and dutifully analyzed. Yet such anxiety is never too far from laughter, farce or quixotic parody. Aware that happiness, which their culture taught them to believe in, is largely unattainable, these women learn that experiences become real when they are rooted in playful imagination and verbal game, that humor, irony and teasing attitudes satisfy and protect, that one should distance oneself from actuality and tap into the comic delights of language and culture rather than reflect for hours on the intangible nature of love, luck, time or history. The narrator of Our Lady of the Lost and Found observes that people are led astray by their collective tendency to equate facts and truth, logic and reality.
Creating such a sensitive and persuasive vision of a woman’s place in today’s urban reality, Schoemperlen, like her postmodernist predecessors, stresses the need to destroy traditional barriers between biography and fiction, to combine the celebration of the creative self with the reconstruction of language and text. In story after story she displays much humorous and inventive self-reflexive virtuosity as she observes, comments on, or reworks the textual rules of her own craft. Engaging in both she makes herself sound eloquent and sagacious, but also awkward and hesitant. In “Stranger Than Fiction” she playfully confronts the writer-heroine (who resembles Schoemperlen) with that of Sheila, a character in the story Sheila is writing. She does not mind making her alter-ego uncertain and confused, “what’s a good story without a little angst?”. When, however, Sheila becomes uncontrollable and starts acting strangely, as if “threatening to rewrite her whole life, not to mention the story”, the writer-persona intervenes, “struggles to keep her on the right track” (Schoemperlen 1990, 148). When a real person called Sheila shows up and speaks about her husband’s death in a car accident the dread turns on the story-maker. She imagines herself dying in a similar accident, or being the driver who causes it. As in other writers’ self-reflexive fictions, exuberant imagination and inventive authorly transformations are shadowed here by doubts and fears reflecting a fragile writing self.

In Didion’s Democracy, the narrator compares herself to a tightrope walker, an “aerialist” who reminds herself to avoid looking down. Concentrating on her feat (or feet) she is aware of the tenuousness of both her performance and her existence as artistic possibility. “You see the shards of the novel I am no longer writing, the island, the family, the situation. I lost patience with it. I lost nerve” confesses Didion early on in Democracy and the echoes of her frustration reverberate throughout the novel (Didion, 29-30). Schoemperlen is a tightrope walker who thinks that the writer’s feat, even though his themes are somber, needs to be treated lightly and ambivalently. She enjoys being comically suspended between the tedium of contemporary culture and the extravagance of the mind, between concern with the human condition and the desire to engage in further quirky games and fabulations. Yet she is able to do what the masters of early self-reflexivity and fragmentation were, by and large, unwilling, or unable to achieve – she combines unconventional textual strategies with concern for tradition, or social or historical background, probes and explains what is happening to literary characters, tries to comprehend the forces that entangle them, to hold a comprehensive vision of society. Her fiction, on the surface an exuberant celebration of stylistic
imagination, is above all a Canadian woman’s penetrating view of the changing patterns and restrictions of life and culture.

Works Cited