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Preface

Laurent Lepaludier



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Preface

Laurent Lepaludier

- 1 Whether fiction focuses more on the ordinary or on the extraordinary would be a matter of endless debate, for examples of the two trends in literature abound. The form of the short story certainly allows the extraordinary to be represented – for instance in heroic, gothic or fantastic modes – but the genre can also underscore the quotidian – modernist and post-modernist writers have often focused on it. It seems that if the focus on the everyday can do without the extraordinary, the exceptional can only be perceived in relation to the ordinary. The poetics of fiction often explicitly set the extraordinary in the context of the everyday. Or else – as is sometimes the case in the marvellous mode or in science fiction stories – the narrative appeals to the reader’s implicit knowledge of the everyday. The theme of this special issue of *The Journal of the Short Story in English*, the everyday in the Canadian short story, raises the question of the nature, forms and functions of the quotidian in fiction. The purpose of this issue is not so much to define the characteristics of a typically Canadian quotidian life – whatever it may be – as to approach its treatment in the Canadian short story.
- 2 Linguistic forms of the quotidian can certainly be identified. The everyday is represented explicitly by iterative¹ time indications. Semantic, modal, verbal, adverbial or adjectival iterative forms indicate an everyday or usual occurrence. A few examples taken from different short stories by Jane Urquhart will illustrate this. “Every night I danced *La Sylphide*, creating my reputation with them as ‘the daughter of the air’”.² The iterative adjective “every” obviously defines a quotidian habit. “The Death of Robert Browning” provides us with a similar example: “He took a cold bath each morning and every afternoon insisted on a three-mile walk during which he performed small errands from a list his sister had made earlier in the day.”³ The plural indicating frequency is used in another story of hers, “Italian Postcards”: “The room she lies in on weekdays, when she has managed to stay home from school, is all hers.”⁴ In this sentence the present tense also conveys the idea of the usual. The use of the present is not rare in Jane Urquhart’s stories – or in Alistair McLeod’s – as the following example shows: “Sometimes what you are running away from and what you find when you stop running and arrive somewhere else are almost the same thing – variations on a ghostly theme.”⁵ If in this case, one could argue that the adverb “sometimes” does not apply to

the everyday strictly speaking, the linguistic forms will nevertheless be the same. Because most stories are told in the preterite, it is not surprising that the iterative forms of the preterite – would, used to – should be more commonly employed. Such forms are often – but not exclusively – found at the beginning or at the end of a story. Each example given above is actually part of an *incipit* and contributes to creating a background to the story. In fact, even at the beginning of a story, explicit references to the quotidian are by no means the most frequent forms of the everyday.

- 3 Narratives depict the everyday with the simple past. The beginning of “Boys and Girls” by Alice Munro clearly conveys the idea of the quotidian: “My father was a fox farmer. That is, he raised silver foxes, in pens; and in the fall and early winter, when their fur was prime, he killed them and sold their pelts to the Hudson’s Bay Company or the Montreal Fur Traders.”⁶ One could argue that the preterite can linguistically express a habit, but narratives can do without specific linguistic forms to convey a sense of the quotidian. Thus a description of a familiar setting or domestic objects, common activities in the home or at work, the mention of traditions, a simple time indication such as “in the morning”, an ordinary character – especially when presented as a type or named in a way which suggests it – implicitly refer to the everyday and call upon the reader’s inferences and knowledge (Umberto Eco’s “encyclopaedia”) of the quotidian. Most articles in this issue are based on this assumption, whether they are written by scholars who are Canadian, have been to Canada, know or imagine what daily life can be or was in Canada.
- 4 Is there such a thing as a Canadian everyday? Canadian fiction doubtless reflects historical, geographical or cultural characteristics of daily life in Canada in the past or in the present. However, the local and the universal often undermine the Canadian dimension of a story. Does “Post and Beam” by Alice Munro focus on a Canadian couple, on their life and experience in Vancouver, or more generally on human relationships? On all three, certainly, but in different ways. The deepest emotional impact of the story will – arguably – depend on its universal appeal. In the same way, “The Closing Down of Summer” by Alistair McLeod is not just a story about Canadian miners and their daily life during the holiday season. It is also – and more typically – about Cape Breton miners of Scottish descent. But it also exemplifies the life of a community of men – akin to the experience of the community of fishermen in my French native village – and powerfully deals with universal issues such as work, death and social rites. This raises the question of the functions of the representation of the everyday in fiction.
- 5 The mimetic interest of a story cannot be denied, the representation of the everyday being part and parcel of its aesthetics. The effect of verisimilitude often depends on it. Fiction does not however simply imitate life: it gives it significance. The everyday is shaped by the narrative, the plot, descriptions, dialogues and other literary devices so that it becomes a meaningful form. It is schematised and turned into an aesthetically meaningful form. Its narrative and dramatic functions must be mentioned too. If, for instance, the representation of the everyday in an *incipit* provides the story with the creation of a background on which the action will take place, its situation in an *excipit* will be understood as an outcome of the events of the plot. In addition, the quotidian is not devoid of ideological interest. It may trigger reflections on gender stereotypes or social habits and rites. The everyday may also have a psychological function if it appeals to the reader’s delight in the familiar – the regressive pleasure of enjoying what is well known – or to a voyeuristic fascination with the daily life of others – the

characters. Finally, an aesthetic function of the representation of the quotidian will involve the creation of images with familiar objects and setting and a work of symbolisation of the everyday. Thus the mundane will acquire an aesthetic dimension and escape triviality. The role of fiction, as indicated by the identification of all these functions, is to transcend the everyday whether by miming it, or turning it into an object of reflection or beauty.

- 6 In this collection of essays, Mirosława Buchholtz and Afra Kavanagh emphasise two different aspects of the quotidian. Studying Sinclair Ross's "Cornet at Night", Mirosława Buchholtz focuses on experience and growth in a context of "quotidian drudgery" while Afra Kavanagh shows how Marian Engel, dismissing "kitchen sink realism" and using Surrealist strategies, underlines the "magic of the ordinary". In a study of Alistair MacLeod's "The Closing Down of Summer", I try to analyse how the construction of the everyday evokes transience rather than stability and suggests that transcendence is partially achieved through the community's rituals and myth-making. Three contributions focus more particularly on the poetic role of quotidian objects. Marta Dvorak examines the treatment of objects in Carol Shields's stories and their transformation into signs, "symbols or emblems of an ontological stance". Among the various everyday objects mentioned in both Héliane Ventura's article on Alice Munro's "Pictures of the Ice" and Christine Lorre's study of Madeleine Thien's "A Map of the City", photographs are seen as ways of transforming ordinariness into transcendence and ways of knowing the others or the self. Hopefully these articles will contribute to a better knowledge of Canadian short stories and of the way writing explores and transcends the quotidian.

NOTES

1. . Genette defines the iterative as telling once what happened several times (« raconter une seule fois (ou plutôt : *en une seule fois*) ce qui s'est passé *n* fois »), *Figures III*, Paris : Seuil, Coll. Poétique, 1972, 147.
2. . "Artificial Ice", in *Storm Glass*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2000, 101.
3. . *Ibid.*, 3
4. . *Ibid.*, 139.
5. . « John's Cottage », *ibid.*, 21.
6. . Alice Munro, « Boys and Girls », *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1968, 111.

AUTHOR

LAURENT LEPALUDIER

Université d'Angers