

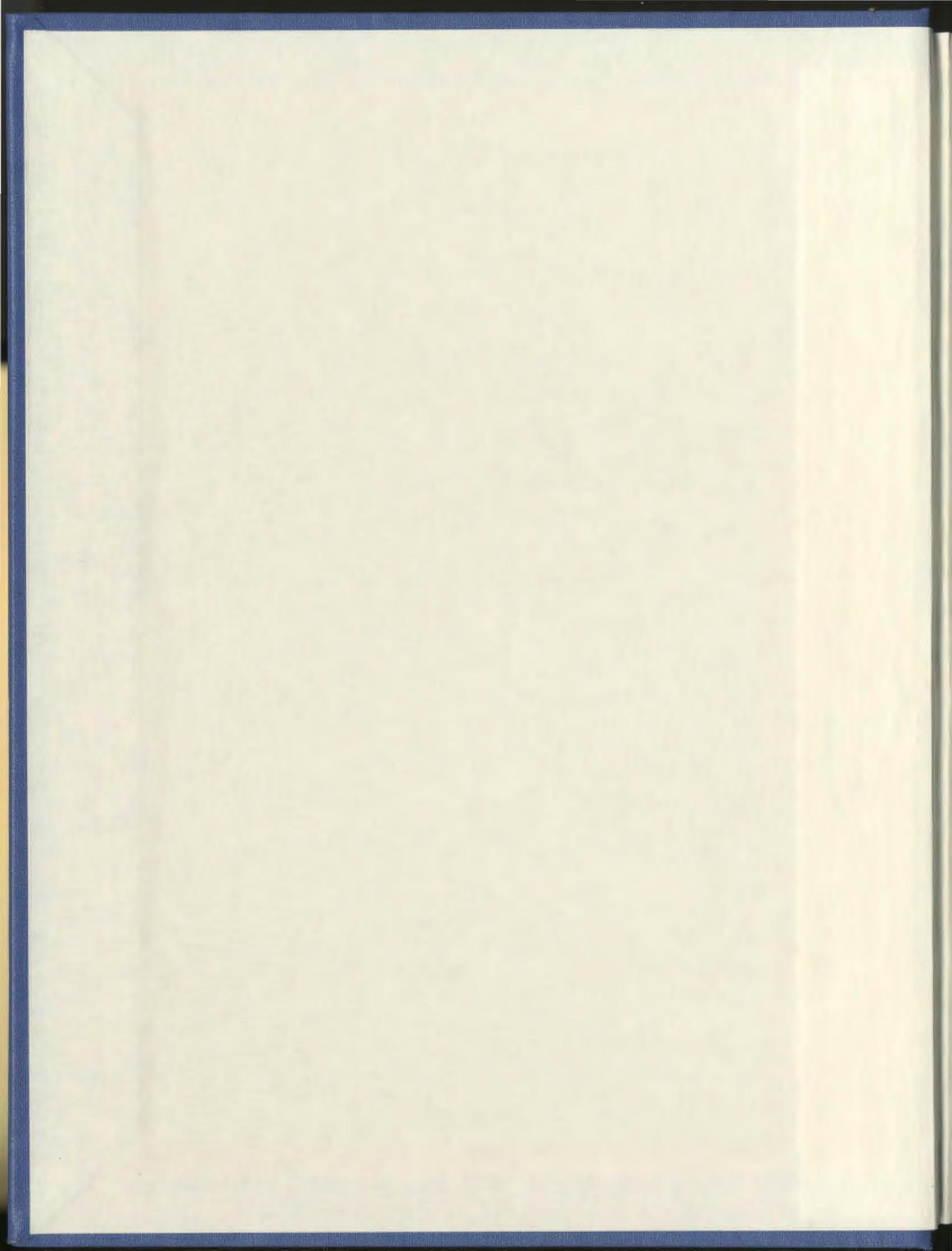
WRITING HOME: REGIONALISM, DISTANCE,
AND METAFICTION IN FOUR NOVELS BY
WAYNE JOHNSTON

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**WRITING HOME: REGIONALISM, DISTANCE, AND METAFICTION
IN FOUR NOVELS BY WAYNE JOHNSTON**

by

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in partial fulfillment of the
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Abstract

Even in the 1990s, much research on literary regionalism in Canada manifests a discourse of cultural centralization. The appearance in literature of content and forms particular to one region is conceived either as a negative literary development or as a necessary means to some more universally pleasing end. Many of those critics who do argue in favour of regional art depict the region as the passive recipient of a marginalizing discourse. For critics such as Joan Strong, Newfoundland and regions like it are subject to a power discourse which issues from "an illusory elsewhere" (11).

This analysis of Wayne Johnston's four novels focusses instead on those relations in which the region reinforces its own marginalization. As the site of one such relation, television shapes the very identities of both the centre and the margin. Yet television also provides a telling model for the regional narrative, as its inherent capacity for distance allows resistance of that broader cultural hegemony which confronts the writing subject from within the region as well as without. Finally, this concept of distance is applied to language, as the distinctive forms of the region are set against those of the established centre. At the level of metafiction, Johnston lays bare the artifice with which these forces affect the writing subject, as well as the techniques of narrative resistance which are at the regional writer's disposal.

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Introduction

When *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* won the W. H. Smith / Books in Canada First Novel Award, Wayne Johnston told reporters, "I was surprised I had won, not because of the merit of the book but I thought other people might think the book had only regional appeal" (qtd. in May 17). Indeed, the tendency among critics is to identify Johnston and his books with a specific locale, as do such mainland headlines as "First novel prize to Atlantic writer" and "Newfoundland novel a plain tale, well told" (Adachi B7). Meanwhile, there is a tendency within Johnston's home province to claim his work on behalf of the region, as shown by headlines such as "Local author wins second national award."

Such local or regional associations can do more harm than good in what Donna Bennett calls "a cultural hegemony within Canada resulting from the historic centralization of academic, publishing, and other cultural activities in Central Canada (Ontario and Montreal) and increasingly in Toronto" (177). Accordingly, regionalism often is seen as a negative development in Canadian literary history. This pessimistic approach is epitomized by E. K. Brown's infamous statement that "regionalist art will fail because it stresses the superficial and the peculiar at the expense, at least, if not to the exclusion, of the fundamental and universal" (25).

A common response to this position is to "universalize regionally or culturally specific characteristics" (Moyes 29). Robert D. Chambers, for example, promotes a regional art which "transcends our sense of region, drawing us on to know and to feel the

historical development of Canada as a whole" (33). Yet Chambers' defence overlooks the intrinsic value of regional particularities, for his region is significant in so far as it leads to something more universal, even normal. For all his intended optimism, Chambers comes perilously close to Brown's identification of regionalism as "a stage through which it may be well for it [Canadian literature] to pass" (25).

As opposed to such Canadian universality, this thesis advocates what Lynes and Wyile summarize as a postmodernist and poststructuralist "revaluing of the margins," which "tends to privilege discontinuity and heterogeneity" (123). In effect, I align myself with Janice Kulyk Keefer, who writes, "we must conceive of Canadian literature in a pluralist sense -- not as the offshoot of one homogeneous mythos but as a variety of ways of experiencing and articulating a shared world" (31). Wayne Johnston's novels expose the forces which threaten such pluralism, while, at the level of metafiction, they pose strategies of resistance for the regional writing subject.

In investigating these aspects of Johnston's four novels to date, this study shifts attention from direct interaction between the centre and margins of Canada toward a power discourse which also operates from within the margins. In *Acts of Brief Authority*, Joan Strong advocates a similar focus, as she writes:

A strong desire on the part of Newfoundland communities for social control -- usually intertwined with a need for economic power -- is also expressed. This latter desire sometimes results in self-sufficiency, but more often in the self-destruction of these communities. (10-11)

Strong acknowledges the region's capacity for internal subjugation, but the phrase "need for economic power" suggests that power is a transferable commodity which is wielded over a certain Other. The Newfoundland of Strong's analysis is simply subject to "power located in an illusory elsewhere" (11).

Unlike Strong's study, this thesis subscribes to Michel Foucault's assertion. "Power is not something acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away" (*History of Sexuality* 94). From this perspective, the cultural centralization which informs regional relations in Canada is seen to both issue from and act upon all levels of Canadian society. My approach to Johnston's novels focusses not on "power located in an illusory elsewhere," but rather on reproductions of the subjugating discourse from within the region itself. Accordingly, each of the following three chapters focusses on one arena of discourse by which the region is imbricated into its own marginalization.

Chapter 1 considers television not just as a medium between the centre and its various margins, but also as a shaping force within each of these factions of Canadian society. This chapter considers all four of Johnston's novels, with substantial focus on *Human Amusements*. Even though Johnston's latest novel to date is far less 'regional' than its predecessors, it better presents both ends of the television continuum. As a possible *mise en abyme* for the Canadian novel, television illustrates the various ramifications of distance, which remains a key concept throughout this thesis.

Chapter 2 turns more exclusively to marginalizing forces that act within the

region, resulting in the monolithic, parochial image which is largely responsible for marginalization of Newfoundland culture and literature. This chapter limits its focus to *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *The Divine Ryans*, which self-consciously present the narration of the Newfoundland novel within this restrictive milieu. The concept of distance again arises, for while the distancing of Others within the region lends itself to a homogeneous setting, the more moderate distance of the narrator from his own subjectivities makes for an open, pluralistic narrative.

Finally, Chapter 3 applies the concepts of distance and Othering to language in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *The Time of Their Lives*. Set in rural areas of Newfoundland, these novels pose vital questions for the role of dialect in Canadian fiction, as the act of narrating the Newfoundland novel becomes the site of a struggle between various factions of Canadian English. Inevitably, this chapter is somewhat more pessimistic than those which precede it, as it subscribes to Mikhail Bakhtin's presentation of language as the product of ideological and social forces (271). Language therefore manifests an all-too-deeply imbued movement against regional language forms and illustrates those hegemonic trappings from which no English Canadian writer, including Johnston, is fully exempt.

Through these explorations of television, social and historical homogenization, and language, Johnston provides an in-depth, metafictional treatment of the challenges facing the prospective Newfoundland novelist. Together, the four novels serve a double function, exposing the artifice behind the marginalization of the region and posing

alternatives to these tendencies via the effective use of narrative distance. Even in those instances when Johnston is not perfectly successful in overcoming marginalizing tendencies, he at least lays them bare before his reader, accounting for the limitations of any text in a nation caught between pluralistic identity and arbitrary values.

Chapter I

Distance 'Via Media': Television, Identity, and Narrative Perspective

Any attempt to discern a theory of regional fiction in Wayne Johnston's novels should consider the influence of television, which is a preoccupation throughout Johnston's work. In *The Divine Ryans*, Johnston focusses on the consumer of television, as the CBC's *Hockey Night in Canada* becomes an active cultural force in the lives of viewers from the region. The figure of the television watcher is also central to *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, in which it is further complicated by the contradictory existence of Bobby's weatherman-father. As Ted simultaneously appears on television and at home. Bobby's coming of age is partly characterized by an ongoing conflict between close contact and the more distantly issued television image. In both novels, television plays a shaping role in the subject's perception not just of the Self, but also of the Other, as each is located within culture by the unique characteristics of the medium.

Johnston further explores this relationship in *Human Amusements*. Set in Toronto, Johnston's latest novel to date is far less overtly regional than the others. But its relevance to the issue of regionalism should not be understated, for it gives a rare glimpse of those cultural centres which Joan Strong labels as "an illusory elsewhere" (11). As its characters produce as well as consume television, *Human Amusements* examines both sides of the television continuum in a society defined by the dichotomy between centre

and margins.

Although references to television are less frequent in *The Time of Their Lives*, it is here that the regional significance of the medium is most pronounced. Johnston presents television not just as an essential link between the centre of Canada and the more marginal regions of Newfoundland, but also as uniquely ubiquitous among other media in Canadian society. In *The Time of Their Lives*, television even reaches Andrew "Grandfather Dad" Dunne, the violent anti-Confederate who vows "I'm never gonna be no Canadian" and refuses to accept many of the technologies and modern conveniences introduced after Confederation (46). Even when Grandfather Dad still professes a disbelief in "the very existence" of airplanes, he does gradually accept television (73. 128-29). The novel establishes television as the consummate study in centre-margin relations, as it infiltrates even the most remote and resistant levels of Canadian society with unprecedented speed and thoroughness.

This chapter contemplates Johnston's response to television in order to draw attention to that badly neglected relationship between regionalism and television. While much ink has been spilled considering each issue separately, little if any research has delved into the special significance which television holds for cultural and literary regionalism. In a 1980 interview, Northrop Frye merely acknowledges television's role in creating a "uniform international way of seeing and thinking," which arises out of the broader "fact that everybody is involved in the same technology" (8). For Frye "regional developments are a way of escaping from" the mass formulae promulgated by centralized

television (8-10). The trouble is that in his optimistic portrayal of regionalism as the solution to television's pitfalls, Frye underestimates the special potency of television for the regional subject position.

Similarly, most cultural studies of the television phenomenon badly neglect the issue of regionalism. In his book *Television Culture*, contemporary British communications scholar John Fiske provides one of the more influential and in-depth examinations of television, with a wealth of emphasis on such viewer subject positions as gender and economic class. Once again, however, the trend is toward optimism and underestimation of television's power, for in omitting the subject position of region from his discussion, Fiske overlooks the site of television's utmost significance. Furthermore, in focussing perhaps too much on consumers and the variable pleasures of watching, he does not consider the physical distance which is so vital a part not just of regionalism itself, but also of television's technological form. As this chapter will explain, such distance provides an inextricable but most often overlooked link between the two concepts of television and regionalism.

The tendency among critics to overlook this relationship is especially conspicuous considering that the current socioeconomic trend in Canadian television is toward a crisis along regional and national lines. Most notably, government cutbacks plague the country's chief agent of public broadcasting, the CBC, which since 1995 has faced "the largest cuts since the public broadcaster was created 60 years ago" (Winsor and Harris A1). Not surprisingly, the hardest hit by such cuts is regional programming, which in

1996 faced a forty-four per cent cut, twice that experienced by network programming (Harris C2). According to Newfoundland programmer Judy Squires, "the latest cuts have gutted television production in this province," making it "virtually impossible to maintain any quantity or quality" (qtd. in Vaughan-Jackson 4).

This near extinction of original television programming on national as well as regional levels has been accompanied by the emergence of American cable television in even the remotest parts of Canada. As just one cable company which serves Newfoundland, Cable Atlantic "provides service to 75,000 households in 13 service areas throughout the province -- and boasts a 90% penetration rate" ("Dynamic Growth" 33). Quite clearly, the developments of the last seventeen years have done little to fulfil Northrop Frye's projection that "as a culture matures, it becomes a native manufacture, and eventually it's an export" (15). For the marginalized regions of Canada, culture thus far is becoming less and less a "native manufacture," as television increasingly imports culture, morality, and politics from the centre of Canada, or alternately, from the centres of American culture. Perhaps Frye's optimism was justified in 1980, but the socioeconomic climate of 1997 has brought the dramatic decline of a more regionally diverse or even a more distinctly Canadian alternative.

The CBC crisis suggests that the time is here to consider the relationship between television programming and cultural regionalism. Yet the problem with television runs deeper than statistical measures of regional program content serve to illustrate. The present chapter avoids the exclusive emphasis on program content which plagues much

television criticism and instead focusses on those unique technological aspects of television which make it especially menacing in the area of regionalism. This focus draws upon two critical premises, neither of which is by any means new to poststructuralist criticism. The first is Marshall McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message." The second is Michel Foucault's contention that the workings of our more concrete technologies have a way of infiltrating all levels of our social functioning, structuring society itself (*Discipline and Punish* 208-09) . But rather than simply echo familiar tenets, I will enlarge on them to show the selectivity with which society absorbs disciplinary functions. Thus although this chapter builds from McLuhan's emphasis on the form of the medium, it does not always accept his optimistic appraisal of television. While the medium of distance does possess certain positive potential for the subject, that potential is manipulated by the regionalist exploitation which dominates much cultural discourse even in the postmodern, postcolonial age.

Finally, there is yet another fallacy in mainstream criticism which this chapter seeks to refute. Much of the work on literary regionalism in Canada does not consider television on the grounds that the medium has little or no relevance to literature. Johnston's work allows us to repair this gap, as television figures into his theory of fiction as a potentially positive influence for the regional writer. For much of Canadian society, however, this potential is lost in the regionalist discourse which socially predetermines the viewing process. It is at this level that content acts, diverting viewers from the form which enslaves them to the marginalizing discourse.

The disregard for regionalism in television criticism begins with an excessive emphasis on the content of the medium. Marshall McLuhan advocates a different focus, asserting that the technological form behind any medium is itself a message, as the mechanical or electronic processes involved directly shape the cognitive and social patterns of those exposed to them (8). Television technology in particular actively engages viewers in a way that far surpasses either radio, cinema, still photography, or the printed word. In contrast with the film screen, television projects its own light, so that the viewer becomes the screen. McLuhan explains:

The TV image not a *still* shot. It is not a photo in any sense, but a ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger. The resulting plastic contour appears by light *through*, not light *on*, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture. The TV image offers some three million dots per second to the receiver. From these he accepts only a few dozen each instant, from which to make an image. (313; McLuhan's emphasis)

For McLuhan's television viewer, the act of watching is an ongoing task of selecting and reconstructing the components of the image, giving the final sense that the image is the viewer's own creation. The suggestion is of a certain amount of autonomy on the part of the viewer, or at the very least, a feeling of autonomy.

In *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, Johnston also considers the reconstruction of the television image. Ted O'Malley's all but nonsensical account of the television process

replaces the figure of the viewer with that of the electronic "receiver," but the basic process is not that different from McLuhan's. Bobby recalls his father's explanation of his own appearances on television:

My father said the man on TV wasn't really him. Who was it, then. I wanted to know. He was "an aggregate of microdots," my father said, "unscrambled by the receiver, having been sent at random wavelengths, on a fixed frequency, from a transmitter some distance removed." (16)

By introducing "the receiver" into this discussion, Johnston moves from the viewer's living room to the wider field of television transmission. Meanwhile, McLuhan's analysis of the viewing process helps us to draw the analogy between the viewer and the receiver of Johnston's account. As one such viewer-receiver, Bobby O'Malley must select from the seemingly incomprehensible number of random "microdots" in order to arrive at an image of his weatherman-father. In doing so, he becomes a "receiver" not unlike those local antennae and satellite dishes which unscramble messages sent "from some distance removed" (16).

For McLuhan, the entire process of television and the "automation technology" which it exemplifies are "decentralist in depth" (8). By allowing viewers to construct images from a seemingly endless array of light emissions, McLuhan's model of television does seem to offer a decentralizing force, as the viewer is free to mould the image on the basis of his or her own presuppositions. There would appear, then, to be some validity to John Fiske's faith in the endless array of social subjectivities that "pluralizes the meanings

and pleasures that [viewers] find in television" (63). Yet a careful reading of Ted O'Malley's explanation suggests that the deeper levels of the viewing process are not as liberating as either McLuhan or Fiske suggests. Rather than create the image *ex nihilo*, the viewer draws upon and is therefore limited to what McLuhan himself delineates as "three million dots [of data] per second" (313). Although Ted O'Malley's references to "random microdots" could imply a pre-Genesis chaos, they are sent "on a fixed frequency" (16). The constant figure of frequency gives a predictable shape to the physical operations underlying the television transmission, and by determining this constant, the producers of television have final authority over the otherwise independent image creations of the consumer. To the everyday consumer who watches Ted's broadcasts and listens passively to his explanation of the phenomenon, the daily "aggregate of microdots" appears random, leaving it up to the local receiver to unscramble the message at will. In actuality, the aggregate is always proportionate to one variable, which is "fixed" at the source, "some distance removed."

As those receivers, the regional viewers are directly imbricated into their own subjugation, creating in accordance with predetermined patterns the discourse responsible for that subjugation. By restricting much of his focus to that space between the viewer and the screen, McLuhan gives rise to a myth of interactivity, as the viewer is presented as creator of the television image. Johnston shifts our attention to a broader arena, allowing us to better consider the transmission centre which McLuhan's decentralizing model largely neglects.

Nor can such formalistic underpinnings be divorced from the regionalist discourse which often infects the surface content. At both levels, television reminds Johnston's region dwellers of the physical and cultural distance between their locales and the purported centres of Canada, North America, and the world. Distance is essential to the very concept of television, for as Johnston reminds us in *Human Amusements*, "The Greek word *tele* means 'far off'" (3). Through Ted O'Malley, Johnston shows how this distancing helps define the very workings of television technology. As the phrase "some distance removed" reveals, the viewing process consigns the consumer to receiving stimuli which, by the very definition of the medium itself, are sent across some considerable distance. Thus television becomes a unique ally for the regionalist discourse that informs much of Canadian culture. The case of television suggests that regionalist discourse is not simply a matter of passivity and defeatism on the part of the region. While the region dwellers no doubt accept the centrality of the televised content image, they have been trained to actively gather stimuli sent from a faraway centre and from these to recreate the centre for themselves.

These powers of subjugation are especially ominous in light of television's ability to define the centre and its margins, as Johnston illustrates in *The Time of Their Lives*. For many characters in the novel, television is their sole exposure to mainland Canada, albeit a daily exposure. John Foley recalls what Canada meant for him as a child:

. . . I had only the vaguest notion of what it meant to be from somewhere else. Louise, we were told, was from "Canada" -- not Toronto, not

Ontario, but "Canada." We youngsters knew nothing of Canada but what we had seen of it on TV -- for us it was in that nebulous television space that also included the Ponderosa and the Big Valley. (106-07)

The fact that "Canada" is defined for these Newfoundland characters solely in terms of its television images shows how little they know of the country, while the identification of Ontario as "Canada" quickly establishes the country as Other than Newfoundland. Such othering of Canada itself speaks volumes about the content which the medium of distance conveys. Indeed, it is the unique character of the television form which is responsible for the regional dichotomy between the image and its viewers. Throughout Johnston's work, the overall gap between image and viewer elevates the content image to a mythical status, which in turn reinforces the distance that defines the form. One manifestation of this tendency is the superhuman quality assumed by those who appear on television in Johnston's novels. Even Ted O'Malley, weatherman for a St. John's television station, is deemed "both shaman and scapegoat" by viewers who believe that he "not only forecast the weather, but somehow controlled it" (22).

Given this sometimes foolish tendency to elevate the television image, one is hardly surprised by John Foley's perspective on the purported centres of "Canada." As the references to "the Ponderosa and the Big Valley" show, television is set in glamorous locations far removed from the viewer in space as well as time. Because it is part of this milieu, the Canada of *The Time of Their Lives* is "nebulous" at best and untouchable at worst. By broadening the perceived gap between Newfoundland and mainland Canada,

television assigns the latter a transcendent position. Even more disturbing is the fact that this transcendent place is John's first conception of "somewhere else" (106). As the sole constitutional outside by which John defines his own location, the "somewhere else" of "that nebulous television space" serves to establish the local region as inferior overall. Television is therefore instrumental in creating that assumption of Ontario's inherent superiority to Newfoundland which is evinced throughout *The Time of Their Lives*. The recognized superiority of the transmission source is an ideal which the region cannot hope to achieve, and so the best that characters such as Murchie Dunne can aspire to do is move to the centre. By accepting television content as a cultural form, the characters in *The Time of Their Lives* subscribe willingly to a nationally pervasive discourse which places their region in the subordinate position. Even when Johnston's characters are aware that they are watching images sent from elsewhere in Canada, they are somewhat less aware that the very process of the broadcast has trained them for continuous acceptance of the hegemony.

Not only is this distance between the television image and its viewers accepted by those viewers. Johnston shows how for many viewers, the conspicuous Otherness of the television image is the focus of attraction. In *Human Amusements*, the mystique of the rich and famous depends largely upon the myth that they are distant and inaccessible to their viewing public. Henry observes that among the tabloid paparazzi who hound his family, "Photographs that seemed to have been taken without the subject's knowledge, that were sufficiently blurred and obstructed to suggest that someone had gone to great

lengths to get them, were a favorite" (53). Seclusion is naturalized as evidence of fame, as public figures are adored for their inability to 'descend' to the level of their public.

This tendency to glamorize on the basis of distance is far from benign, for in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, the more distant image prospers at the expense of the more familiar or local. Bobby recalls how his father's image is eventually rejected in favour of "that nebulous place we called the other channel" and the daily feature known to some viewers as the "Weathergirl" (53):

She did the weather on the CBC -- which channel, by this time, we were able to get quite clearly -- and did it, Rennie said, better than my father; or, at least, looked better doing it. My father wondered what she had that he hadn't. "Good legs and go-go boots," Rennie said. Not to mention a skirt which, when she reached for Whitehorse or Rankin Inlet, left those legs and boots a paling pace behind. (52)

Admittedly, it is the sexual Otherness of the Weathergirl -- made explicit here by continuous flashes of thigh -- which attracts Rennie and eventually Ted himself to her forecasts. For them, the Weathergirl is never more than a *Weathergirl*, as they define her unilaterally in terms of her sexuality.

Yet sexuality is not the only subjectivity by which the Weathergirl is differentiated from these viewers. As a broadcaster for the CBC, she is also an agent for the most centralized mass medium in Canada. This role is illustrated in Bobby's recollection of her forecasts, as she forcibly extends her reach to forecast the weather of

such remote locations as Whitehorse and Rankin Inlet. By doing so, she takes responsibility for that subgenre which Seamus Heaney identifies as "The General Forecast" (10). For the viewer, this "general survey of the overall conditions function[s] as a mere precursor" to that main event known as "The Regional Forecast," while for the producer it establishes the relationship between the broadcast centre and the region-dwelling viewer (Heaney 10). In the case of Johnston's *Weathergirl*, her apparently omniscient perspective on the national weather scene establishes her as privileged over her viewers, with their more locally confined perspectives. By reaching out to the extremities of Canada and by following broadcast standards set by CBC headquarters in Ontario, she becomes the veritable voice of the centre. In trusting the regional forecast which follows her pan-national sweep, the viewer submits to "a harking towards an elsewhere," as individual or local "personality concede[s] its autocracy" (Heaney 10).

To this point, analysis of the *Weathergirl* echoes Heaney's account of centre-margin relations via the mass media, for like those in Heaney's essay, Johnston's margin dwellers blindly accept the words of some faraway speaker. However, the case of the *Weathergirl* also features sexually arousing visual stimuli which upstage the regional subject position. As McLuhan would have it, such distracting stimuli in the program's content are partly responsible for the medium's infiltration of viewers' perceptions by obscuring those formalistic aspects which best allow the medium to affect its viewers. McLuhan describes content's role as "the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind" (18). In a world of sacramental chastity and

homogeneity, the 'watchdogs' of Rennie's and Ted's minds are especially ravenous for that piece of meat to which they reduce the Weathergirl. Moreover, in listening to the words which accompany her visual image, they blindly submit to centralized broadcasting at the expense of the more locally produced image.

For McLuhan, television content is ultimately a distraction which facilitates the more direct effects of the medium's form. *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *Human Amusements* concede that not all viewers accept the medium without giving some thought to its form, not that this really threatens the mythology which has been built around television. On the contrary, Johnston illustrates how the unquestioned exaltation of television's content is simply applied to the processes behind it. For Bobby, Ted's appearance "inside that black box" can only mean that his father is a figure of magic (16). Ted attempts to deflate the magic image comically with his matter-of-fact account of "random microdots", but this explanation is itself credited with magic properties. Bobby reminisces, "I thought the phrase, as an explanation of magic, was itself magic, an incantation, a chant, and I would not profane it" (16).

Nor does this inflation of the form depend on anything so blatant as belief in magic. Johnston shows that when viewers scrutinize the scientific processes responsible for the television phenomenon, many lack the technical knowledge necessary to understand them fully. As one who is involved in the production of television content, Henry Prendergast is less likely to take that content for granted. But the workings of even the almost obsolete black and white television confound him nonetheless. He concedes:

I could not even begin to understand how all those tubes and wires worked together to produce the picture on the screen. The picture tube, to which the glass screen was attached and which was shaped like a loud speaker, was the masterstroke. It seemed to me, Philo had come up with it first, then built his television set around it. It was a kind of funnel for electrons, except they came in through the narrow end, and at the same time as they were being mysteriously restored to their original configuration, they were dispersed evenly across the screen, by what means I had no idea. (98-99)

Unlike Bobby O'Malley, Henry is aware from the outset that he is not actually inside the television set (21). But even if the figure "inside that black box" is not magic, the processes responsible for its creation are certainly mysterious to the layperson. From his own research attempts, Henry has gathered that the picture tube is an inverted "funnel for electrons," but his understanding stops short of the nature of those electrons. In short, he understands only enough to ask questions which he cannot answer. Final authority for the transmission rests elsewhere, with those extraordinary figures who actually understand television's underlying properties.

From the adults of Bobby O'Malley's world, less inclined to believe in magic or to explore the television phenomenon on the level that Henry Prendergast does, Ted's random microdots incantation elicits only "puzzled worried expressions" (16). As representatives of the masses, these characters illustrate the extent to which technology can muddle society. According to Jeannette Lynes, Ted's explanation of television and

the adult responses to it evince an identity crisis that is wrought upon subjects in the postmodern, technological world. Lynes asserts that "the scientific jargon" of Ted's speech communicates "the utter meaninglessness of human life" (145). Such meaninglessness is partly due to the uncertainty suggested by "random wavelengths," but as Lynes fails to emphasize, even those processes which are shaped by "a fixed frequency" seem shapeless and unintelligible to the layperson who suddenly confronts them. Because shape and simplicity cannot be found at the level of form, the everyday viewer must seek these qualities from the realm of content. From a regional standpoint, this simplicity is a dark fulfilment of television's medial function as identified by Raymond Williams. In a cautiously optimistic tone, Williams writes that television is supposed to "close the gap to a familiar connection" (14). As we have already seen, a televised culture reinforces rather than diminishes the fact of distance. Nevertheless, Williams' definition of the television's function holds merit within the sociocultural sphere. The periphery merely closes the gap culturally, approaching the centre through emulation of its forms and identity and curtailing much of that individuality and local diversity which might threaten the simplicity of a homogeneous culture.

In *The Divine Ryans*, for example, Draper Doyle's consciousness is so badly colonized by the Montreal Canadiens that when they lose the Stanley Cup, he almost believes that "there would be no next week" (209). While Draper Doyle is acknowledged in the novel as a "fanatic" whose preoccupation with the game is "not normal," his character deftly illustrates what can happen when centralized cultural forms are given free

rein (79). On the more immediate level, the iconography of the NHL becomes the language by which Draper Doyle comes to understand the facts of his father's lifestyle and death. His father's funeral first emerges from his subconscious as the funeral of late hockey great Howie Morenz (133-36). When Draper Doyle at last uncovers the family secrets in the final dream sequence, he does so dressed as a goalie, as the iconography of the more distant culture fortifies his consciousness against the more localized forces of repression and suppression. Joan Strong describes this iconography as the "unlikely tools" by which Draper Doyle and those of his generation emancipate themselves from the "religious manifestoes and power politics" of an older generation's culture (177).

But even though these so-called imagistic tools do facilitate recovery on one level, they also comprise a second layer of obscuring symbolism through which Draper Doyle must sift in order to discern his own experience. Significantly, it is not until the end of the dream that Donald Ryan's face appears in the Morenz casket, emerging from a veil of hockey imagery as a ghost of the funeral which, unlike that of Morenz, Draper Doyle actually has experienced. The pattern of the local experience emerging from that of another place is maintained until the climax of the novel, as Donald's suicide note is found amidst a vast potpourri of hockey scores (224). Earlier in the novel, we are told that the scores are listed according to the names of the team's cities, such as Montreal, Toronto, and New York, establishing the scores as a rough history of struggles between various candidates for the central role in North American hockey culture (82). The truth of what took place on Fleming Street in St. John's, Newfoundland is recovered, but only

once it is fished from a quagmire of more centralized concerns.

Even more drastic than this obscuring of the past is the fact that hockey can displace Draper Doyle's physical setting in the present tense. This displacement is evinced subtly at first, as Draper Doyle elatedly refers to the Montreal Canadiens as "coming home to the Forum" (81). The word "coming" denotes that Draper Doyle is at the Forum, or at the very least in Montreal. While physically he is in St. John's, Newfoundland, Draper Doyle's consciousness is very much located in Montreal. In another instance, a sleepy Draper Doyle confuses the present situation of a rigorous Mass with memories of "the play-by-play of both Danny Gallivan and Foster Hewitt," creating the illusion of a "hockey liturgy" (90).

Yet the most prominent symptom of the NHL's encroachment on Draper Doyle's personal and cultural life comes in the form of a second hand identity which exerts little positive force on the world around him. The external focus of Draper Doyle's life lay in emulating Gump Worsley and other great goalies of the Montreal Canadiens, as a wall poster establishes his alter ego as "Draper Doyle, Goalie" (10). This identity is clearly detrimental to Draper Doyle at the emotional level, for there is no way that he can equal Worsley's goals against average of 2.65 (19). Thus, as Joan Strong points out, "Draper Doyle exists in a world where he cannot possibly live up to his own expectations" (173). For the region, Strong's statement implies standards which cannot be applied realistically to all levels of society. As one region dweller, Draper Doyle is a failure relative to heroes whom he has centralized in order to fill in the mysteries of life. With its discrete number

of rules and closed rink surface, hockey offers definition and simplicity unattainable in a world where locality and individuality clash with the incomprehensible concept of the world beyond. The problem is that as a form of escape, hockey does not allow Draper Doyle to confront his problems on any tangible level, diverting him to struggles which take place outside his own sphere of influence.

In *Human Amusements*, Johnston's presentation of the devoted viewer takes a step back to regard viewers *en masse*. Together Draper Doyle and the Philosophers give Johnston's readers before and after pictures of television viewing at its absolute worst. For all his fanaticism, Draper Doyle is defined in rounder terms, as we also see that individuality which television threatens. The Philosophers' cult provides an eerie reminder of that more total loss of individuality which Draper Doyle narrowly escapes. While Draper Doyle must grapple with his relative inferiority to Gump Worsley, the Philosophers' personal identities are deemed so worthless relative to that of Philo that they are dispensed with altogether. Imitation becomes more than flattery at the Philosophers convention, where fans not only dress like their favourite television characters, but also mimic entire episodes in unison. Henry explains the "say-along":

Each Philosopher carried several props to be used throughout the say-along. When, on screen, Philo crumpled up and threw in the air a piece of paper, the Philos on the floor did the same, thousands of balls of paper going up in unison. When Philo lit a bunsen burner, the Philos flicked their lighters and held them aloft. Each time Philo spoke, his voice was

drowned out by the Philo faction speaking his lines with him, as were the other characters' voices drowned out by their factions. The effect of this mass chanting of my mother's dialogue was to make even lines like "Here's Philo now" sound deeply significant, profound. (272)

The Philo cult reaches its climax as the mass imitation ritual gives the show unprecedented charisma of the more sinister kind. The newly "profound" nature of Audrey's Philo is gained only at the expense of individuality, as the Philosophers' verbal and non-verbal idiosyncracies are totally eradicated in order to effect full unity of speech and gesture. Such unquestioned reproduction of the television script finalizes its dogmatic authority and reasserts Philo's omnipotence, for the imitative act places all others in the subordinate position. No imitation is a perfect evocation of the original object, as in the example of the cigarette lighter which is used to imitate Philo's bunsen burner. Meanwhile, the Philosophers are constantly reminded by the television show on "the Magni-vision screen" of the ideal which at best they are imitating imperfectly. The Philosophers are by definition inferior versions of Philo himself, whose god-like status is grounded in the sudden appearance of so many devotees.

The examples of Draper Doyle and the Philosophers illustrate complete cultural and personal submission to the words and images of the centre. Moreover, this submission is made possible by a myth that television is an interactive medium in which viewers determine the content. Traces of this mythology go back as far as McLuhan's essay, where he puts forth the notion that viewers construct the television image and that

all content must accord with their cultural orientations (311). Admittedly, evidence does exist in Johnston's work suggesting that viewers can affect the message of the medium after and before the fact of watching. Viewer responses to Ted O'Malley's mistakes do help lead to his eventual dismissal, and Audrey Prendergast is at least stirred into action by the wishes of her public. But Johnston takes the interaction myth considerably farther to show how it shapes the moment of watching itself. In *The Divine Ryans* and *Human Amusements*, he advances the lightly held belief among viewers that the objects of television are watching them. In addition to the "theory that a team's fortune depended on the mood of their fans," Draper Doyle believes that "unwatched team will never win" (87, 206). By subscribing to such theories, Draper Doyle not only commits himself to consuming the broadcast regularly, but also alters his own frame of mind to suit what he sees as the needs of the televised object. Thus, his wearing of the Habs jersey during *Hockey Night in Canada* is more than just imitation for the sake of adoration. It is a deliberate attempt to reproduce an inner spirit at the command of the television image.

A less subtle version of the interaction myth is advanced in *Human Amusements*, and it is here that the more chilling potentialities of the mythology are evinced. In the "'I see' segment" of Rumpus Room, Miss Mary claims to "go into her clairvoyant trance," which allows her to "see" certain children who are viewing the show from their homes (27-28). According to Peter Prendergast, this feature is somewhat more than a friendly gesture:

Miss Mary was a reminder to the children that, as he put it, "Big Mother is

watching." Miss Mary, he said, was Big Mother, every child's own mother, writ large on the screen. There she was, their own omniscient mother, watching them, naming them, seeing everything they did, their own mother, from whom they could keep no secrets. No wonder the phrase "I see so-and-so" seemed to have such an effect on them. (29-30)

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the omnipresent, omniscient figure of "Big Brother" is used to ensure adherence to the moral and behavioural code of the dystopian Oceania. Peter's allusion to the novel ascribes the same function to Miss Mary, as her apparent ability to see children's misdeeds deters them from following the pathway of Bee Bad and ensures imitation of the behavioural norm established by Bee Good. The overall suggestion on Johnston's part is that like Orwell's Big Brother, the producers of television create the illusion that they are watching the margin dwellers, thereby driving them in the direction of centralized culture. Draper Doyle can no more affect the outcome of the Stanley Cup Playoffs than Ted O'Malley can stimulate the Weathergirl sexually by watching her broadcasts. Nonetheless, tendencies to believe otherwise sustain the interest and involvement of the watchers, and at the very least, this diverts them from action which is truly consequential.

Even worse, the interaction myth ensures that viewers will follow television's hidden curriculum of imitation and subordination. In the case of television, cultural and personal imitation always places the viewer in the subordinate position simply because he or she can never imitate the television image perfectly. The very process of viewing

assigns the image a distant, transcendent position, and the viewer is not permitted to forget this positioning. Just as Draper Doyle is reminded that Gump Worsley's "goals against average" is astronomically better than his own, the Philosophers are reminded of that superior rendering of Philo by "the Magni-vision screen" (*Divine Ryans* 19; *Human Amusements* 272). By imitating these transcendent figures, the imitators willingly become inferior versions of the valorized originals, and if steps are later taken toward self-discovery, they will discover a sense of inferiority.

However, not all imitation is presented in Johnston's work as necessarily detrimental to the subject, regional or otherwise. In some cases, imitation is the first step in reasserting the authority of the self, for as a comic writer, Johnston makes use of parody. As Wenche Ommundsen explains, parody is but a form of imitation which accentuates the metafictionality of a text:

Parody is a particular form of intertextuality much favoured as a means of raising reflexive concerns. Imitating, but also distancing itself from its model, the parody on the one hand invites the pleasure of recognition, on the other critical appraisal. (10)

Johnston also allows a careful separation of parody from pure mimesis. Whereas mimesis expresses the Other at the expense of any sense of self-worth, parody restores the active role to the imitating viewer. In the parodic reading or parodic viewing undertaken by Johnston and some of his characters, the initial production issued by the Other is reshaped to express the agenda of the Self. In *Human Amusements*, Peter performs

obvious parodies of the works of "Western Literature's best one hundred writers" in such tales as "Fatty Rumpo and Spinach Cook" and "Moby Baby" (44-48). In doing so, he epitomizes what Jeanette Lynes describes as the tendency of Johnston's characters "to forge community" through shared laughter (128). Certainly Peter's parodies of Cooper and Melville are intended immediately to make Henry laugh, but they also form a united front against Audrey's attempts to control the family's reading habits. The titles on "The Lifetime Reading Plan" are turned directly against the original intent of cultural interference, as subversion is found within the forms of domination itself.

Up to this point, Ommundsen's definition of parody rings true in every detail, as Peter's parody distances itself from the original literary tradition. In *The Divine Ryans*, the objects of parody are televised versions of popular cinema, and with the focus turned once again to the medium of television, the notion of distance becomes more loaded. The "endless succession of corny movies" which characterize "[t]he weeks leading up to Christmas" are yet another transmission from the distant centres of Canadian and United States culture, and by "featuring priests and nuns and orphans," they also serve the vaticanized and equally centre-seeking agendas of Aunt Phil and her cohorts (*Divine Ryans* 93). For all their centripetal orientation, these cultural forms are quickly deflated by Uncle Reginald and the children. One parodic technique recalled by Draper Doyle involves stretching the original sentiment beyond credulity for even the most idealistic viewer:

I often played Tiny Tim to Uncle Reginald's Scrooge, or Uncle

Scrooginald, as he called himself. "Please Mr. Scrooge," I'd say,
 "something to eat for my little sister."

"I will give you," Uncle Scrooginald would say, "in exchange for
 your wheelchair and your sister's crutch, and all the clothes that you and
 your sister have on your backs, one cup of lukewarm water." (94)

In addition to exaggerating the Christmas sentiment of Dickens' tale, thereby making its fictionality all the more transparent, the parody allows Reginald to claim a certain amount of authority in the piece, as he renames Dickens' character to express his own identity. Another parodic technique used in the novel is the rephrasing of iconic references in order to convey more sordid content, as when Uncle Reginald lightly offers to "make pudding" of Draper Doyle's "plums" (95). Both examples rewrite the distantly issued cultural form in a way that inverts the distance. Whereas Draper Doyle's watching of *Hockey Night in Canada* involves *receiving* the transmission, the Christmas parody actively transmits a more creative, less subjugating form of the signal from within the living room. Thus even though parody does offer distance from the original tradition, in the case of television, it is tempered by an inversion of that distance which characterizes the form. For the small community which shares in the parody, the factor of distance is finally removed from the television program, allowing the local viewer to take a short step into the fictive act and experience its artificiality for him or herself. Ultimately, the heavily moralistic and commercialistic sentiment of the holiday is demythologized at the expense of Aunt Phil, the local cultural figurehead.

Two apparent points emerge from this discussion. First, television is seen manipulating the concept of distance in order to bolster an already rampant centralizing cultural uniformity. Second, autonomy of the viewing subject rests in neutralizing the distance, as the example of parody serves to illustrate. Given all the malignant potentialities on the part of television and distance, one is easily tempted to embrace literature as an ark of diversity and originality amidst a daily televised flood of subjugation. Wayne Johnston himself acknowledges this movement in the character of Peter Prendergast, who avows that television can affect the role of books neither positively nor negatively (34-35). But as Johnston is careful to show, the literary world is by no means above the cultural problems which can arise from the television medium. The proponent of television in *Human Amusements*, Audrey, is able to penetrate the literary realm to some degree, through either her own so-called writing of *The Television Prendergasts* or her somewhat pathetic attempts to promote the "classics" of literature via "The Lifetime Reading Plan" (44-45). By fixing the number of the so-called classics at one hundred books, The Plan itself subordinates individual readers' pleasure to a cultural standard that is arbitrarily determined by a distant Other. The reader is freed to reconstruct the purported nucleus of Western literature and philosophy, but just as the television viewer is limited to a "fixed frequency" and a finite number of "microdots," the literary nucleus is predetermined by the finite number of texts which orbit it.

Overall, Johnston problematizes the separation between the low culture of

television and the purportedly higher literary culture. The problem in Canadian society is not so much television as it is any perversion of distance which makes self-discovery inaccessible to the reading or viewing subject. Peter rejects television and "The Lifetime Reading Plan" because neither focusses on the self in the way that his book supposedly does. Peter believes that the reader should compile his or her own canon based on the inwardly localized needs of the self.

Even if it were possible to create an utterly non-distant, inward-turning literature, such a form would serve the subject no better. This becomes apparent once the factor of distance is removed from the television transmission. As troubled as Henry Prendergast is by the visibility and magnification that comes with stardom, he is more troubled by the visibility and magnification that is effected for his own eyes. Henry's elocution lessons from Mrs. Madgett involve watching his own facial features "eerily magnified and isolated" on a giant video screen, resulting in an awkward self-consciousness which brings him close to tears each day (102-03). Such excessive self-consciousness leads to anything but positive self-discovery, and if anything, is less productive than those moments of escapism which he enjoys while watching himself on the Gillingham (*Human Amusements* 105). While the Gillingham represents the distancing of the self-image, the watching of Mrs. Madgett's screen shows what can happen when that distance is taken away. Significantly, Henry refers to the screen as "video" rather than television, inadvertently exposing the very important difference between the two. Even if the technical processes of the camera and the screen are much the same as those involved in

television production, the video "transmitter" is not "some distance removed," as the video image of Henry's face is photographed and watched simultaneously, in the same room.

Even parody, which reclaims authority from a distant transmitter, retains distance in the form of social space, writing across the social subjectivities to reach both outsiders and insiders of the parodic community. In the case of Henry and Mrs. Madgett's screen, the key word is "isolated," as the screen shows Henry devoid of interaction with the social world. Just as there is no space between the producer and the viewer, so too is there no room for the interactions which define a character's subjectivities. Henry cannot profit from viewing himself in a vacuum simply because he does not exist in that way. Rather, he exists in accordance with its relationships with others, even when Henry's relationships are low in number. Distance, then, may be more positively defined as that space which exists between any two parties, as the social connection requires some distance which it can traverse.

In *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, Johnston suggests that the very distance imbued by television can be advantageous to observing a subject's place in society and in time. In considering the character of his father, Bobby uses television as a means of seeing Ted from outside their father-son relationship:

He seemed, not so much strange and separate, as insignificant. When you see someone you know on TV, it is easy to see them as strangers do, to render them general, to fancy that they mean nothing more to you than to

everyone. It was frightening to think my father did not fill the place in everyone's universe he filled in mine. Watching him reminded me that one day he would die. (117)

Bobby himself interprets this realization in negative terms, but there is also a positive discovery available here. By viewing the character from a distance, Bobby recognizes not just the vast multiplicity of subject positions by which his father is defined, but also the mortality which defines the edges of Ted's place in time. In effect, television provides the narrator with a possible model for self-exploration, allowing for a self-image that is neither isolated nor impermeable.

This still does not assuage Bobby's stress at the discovery of his father's impermanence, but as *Human Amusements* illustrates, Bobby's stress is small compared to that more destructive stress caused by a completely inward turning perspective. By omitting the exterior subjectivities, the closed circuit image at Mrs. Madgett's is not simply incomplete; it is actually damaging in that it dwells upon the undesirability of superficial details. The giant screen in this episode serves only to magnify Henry's flaws, giving them a false significance and permanence by omitting from the scope those social subjectivities which have brought Henry in front of Mrs. Madgett's camera. In short, Henry sees his physical characteristics but not the fictionality of that cultural discourse which devalues them.

Not unlike Henry's trips to Mrs. Madgett's, Peter Prendergast's novel is also a would-be voyage of discovery that ends in a sense of personal failure. As a commercial

failure in postmodern, television culture, Peter's book audibly harkens back to Wayne Johnston's own concession that he is "writing and reading in a television-dominated era, writing about TV to an audience that probably won't read what you have written" (LeBlanc B2). Traces of this dilemma abound as Peter's inability to find a legitimate publisher is set against Audrey's escalating success in television. In effect, Peter achieves little direct involvement in the preservation of "good books" from obsolescence, which he identifies as the mandate of the contemporary literary author (35). Indeed, the argument can be made that Peter's book fails because it does not appeal to the perspective which television has created among his would-be reading public, as evinced in *Human Amusements* by the instantly successful *The Television Prendergasts*, an apparent hack job done overnight by a ghost writer (179-80).

The failure of Peter's novel runs deeper than lack of commercial success, for in addition to not finding a publisher, the book is never exposed to readers of *Human Amusements*. All we know of Peter's book is that it is "about a man like him in what he called 'different circumstances'" (153). In effect, Peter ends up writing for his eyes only a book in which clear components of his identity fail to traverse any conceivable social space between text and reader.

As a consequence of this complete lack of distance, Peter fails to acknowledge the fictionality of his Self as it is written by the social world. That is, he carefully distinguishes the "different circumstances" that make the work "a piece of fiction" from the protagonist who he concedes to be him (153-54). As members of a linguistic society,

our social existence is completely dependent upon the language by which we reach one another. By virtue of its metaphorical, semiotic nature, language is quintessentially an ongoing fiction; a signified never perfectly recreates the signified, as social determinants act in that space between the two. To be fictional is therefore to be subjectified, to be human in a social world. By not acknowledging his own identity as fictional, Peter fails to properly acknowledge his very existence, establishing himself as a non-entity. Within *Human Amusements*, this empty existence is twice represented, first through the "man like him" whose narrative we never read, and second through Peter's actual departure from the novel. *Human Amusements* ends with the uncertainty of Peter's return, as he is simultaneously there and not there, existing only within a self which is at best obscured by the apartment door. At the end of the novel, Johnston's readers are given full responsibility to construct either the presence or the absence of Peter, as he himself fails to make clear evidence of either and ultimately relinquishes authority over his own placement.

As a readily available means of viewing one's own fictionality, the narrative of distance uniquely enables the subject to discover fully his or her own existence. This is not to say that distance is the unconditional answer to all the problems of self-identity, but rather that a balance is necessary between distance and proximity. Johnston shows that in the practice of television watching, the distance between viewer and image exceeds the point of balance where social interaction is possible. In effect, television often offers negative distance, so that the viewer either ignores the Self in favour of the transcendent

Other or assumes the futile task of mimetically rewriting the Self in the Other's terms.

But the narrative of distance does not have to reproduce the current subjugating codes. The key is to free television's potential as a conveyer of distance from the regionalist discourse which exploits the form. As a possible *mise en abyme* for the writing subject, tele-narration allows each individual to become his or her own transmitter, rewriting distance as social diversity. The next chapter will expand this concept to investigate how Johnston's narratives of distance work when applied to a broader sociological scope. In *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *The Divine Ryans*, Johnston deals not just with the plurality of subject positions which exist in the regions of Newfoundland, but also with the homogenizing forces by which they are suppressed. It is here that we find the ultimate testing grounds for tele-narration, as transmitting the stories of multiple social subjectivities risks subjugating those subjects in the way that television subjugates many of Johnston's characters.

Chapter 2

"The World from the Window:" Memory, Distance, and Pluralism in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *The Divine Ryans*

In the previous chapter, the case of television is used to show how the subjects and experiences of faraway centres are valorized at the direct expense of the more regional or local. Yet television, with its unique capacity for manipulating distance in the minds of viewers and producers alike, cannot be blamed totally for the marginalization of regions such as Newfoundland. According to Raymond Williams, there has for decades been a widely acknowledged assumption that all things "regional" are less universally significant than their counterparts elsewhere. Williams baldly states, "The life and people of certain favoured regions are seen as essentially general, even perhaps normal, while the life and people of certain other regions, however interestingly and affectionately presented, are, well, regional" (230).

In the case of Newfoundland, the sources of this assumption are readily apparent in the popular mystique which surrounds the province. Observing the overall trend in Canadian regionalist representation, Lynes and Wyile assert, "stereotypes profoundly at odds with the reality of life in a particular region continue to be used -- in Canada and elsewhere -- to 'market place'" (Lynes and Wyile 126). That is, the region is reduced to what sells, and in the case of Newfoundland, the hottest sellers display what Terry Whalen labels as a "stoic bias" (35). Whalen decries this bias, which he locates in *The*

Rock Observed, Patrick O'Flaherty's landmark study of Newfoundland literary history.

Whalen explains:

It is a quality of strong and humble stoicism in both the land and
 mindscape, a subdued and at the same time epic tenacity. . . . It is a
 Northern quality and a Canadian one, but also one particularly emphatic to
 the region of Newfoundland. O'Flaherty does not put it in that way, but I
 think it is cumulatively implied. . . . It is a very credible view as a shaping
 one, but there is little room in it for either more spring-footed views or for
 less epic ones. (35)

For corroboration of Whalen's criticism, one need only look to the more successful writing about Newfoundland, most of which portrays the region's sociopolitical culture as a dialectic between hardy fisherfolk and a cruel maritime landscape. This is as true of works by Newfoundlanders as it is of those written by outsiders. Of the former category, some of the more popular titles as of late include Otto Kelland's *Dories and Dorymen* and Joan Rusted's *Tolerable Good Anchorage* ("Best-selling Newfoundland Books" 38). American E. Annie Proulx presents a similar Newfoundland in her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Shipping News*. Although the novel is set at least as late as the 1980s, most of its characters can either "eat fish or die" and would "rather fish than anything else" (74, 83). This is not to suggest that *The Shipping News* is intended as a work of realism, but the images depicted in the novel do lend themselves to what Newfoundland novelist Kenneth J. Harvey summarizes as "the stereotypical rubber-boot-type Newfoundland sou'wester"

(qtd. in Merrill 5). Inevitably, the commercial success of all such images reinforces the popular notion that the regional experience is parochial and insignificant relative to a more pluralistic, postmodern society, for fishing stories centre on one type of protagonist, the white, heterosexual male.

At the immediate level, Wayne Johnston might seem to fall into this trap of homogenizing, as he too narrates each novel from the majority standpoint of a white male. The problem with such majority voices in literature about Newfoundland rests with readers from the region, who after years of seeing their own culture marginalized, instinctively grab for that to which they can relate in terms of their own subjectivities. In effect, any widely recognized 'Newfoundland voice' would be that of the majority subject positions, with "few spaces . . . for a culture of difference" (Kelly 33). In recent years, women such as M. T. Dohaney, Bernice Morgan, and Lisa Moore have published successful fiction detailing the feminine subject position across several social and historical contexts in Newfoundland. But as Kelly rightly observes, even this does not change the obvious fact that women authors are "historically underrepresented in the writings of Newfoundland," with writing by people of colour or aboriginal descent conspicuously absent even today (33). Other subject positions which might be added to Kelly's list are that of the homosexual, the physically challenged person, and any number of others.

Quite clearly, Kelly is calling for a Newfoundland literature in which previously silent subject positions are better represented, a more than admirable project which

unfortunately depends upon a social and cultural evolution of many years or decades. Furthermore, even if works by the authors cited above represent stages of this evolution, they are by no means exempt from the problems of homogenization. Each has the potential to reproduce homogenizing gestures of the patriarchy from within the feminine subject position at the exclusion of race, sexual preference, and other positions.

Johnston's unique response to this problem is to work within the majority subject positions to present a more heterogenous view of certain regions of Newfoundland. As writing subjects, Bobby O'Malley and Draper Doyle Ryan are potential sites of harsh, exclusionistic dogma on one hand and an emerging pluralism on the other. Each narrator's society reproduces from within that marginalization of the region explored in Chapter 1. In either situation, distance is a crucial factor. While the distance of television leads the region to elevate the centralized Other at the expense of the Self, the social distance of the minority subject allows for reduction and eventual exclusion of that disenfranchised Other. Distance is further manipulated across time, as the past is too often subject to the sort of "stoic bias" which Whalen discusses. Admittedly, this bias does not have to take the fisher-culture forms delineated in much popular literature, but the basic homogenizing effect is the same.

For Bobby and Draper Doyle, then, the greatest metafictional conflict lies in transcending those subjectivities which have been constructed by those around them. While the exposure of other subject positions is one crucial stage of this project, another is the concession that the Self is indeed fictional. In order to do so, each narrator must

arrive at some more productive use of distance, in both synchronic and diachronic terms. The overall result is a literary voice which responds on several levels to regionalist marginalization, accounting for its own limitations and exhorting its readership to listen for all potential voices.

In *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, the challenge of narrating one's own social world is complicated by the temporal space that exists between the narrator and his content. The opening passage considers the challenge of narrating from memory:

Strange that our oldest memories are of the days when we were youngest. By the time I was sixteen I had lived in eight houses and I can remember all but the first -- my life like strung beads, but convenient, as it makes the telling easier. And yet it was not so much the houses as the world from the window that changed, as if all those years our one house was slowly turning. (6)

The first sentence clearly outlines the paradox which underlies the autobiographical process, establishing memory as a strange, chronological inversion of life itself. Faced with such strangeness, the narrator must restore order through whatever means possible. According to Jeannette Lynes, the illusory nature of this order is what constitutes Bobby's biggest challenge:

Bobby is actually sending us two conflicting messages here: one is of order, of neat multiples (sixteen, eight), and straightforward narrative sequence. The other is of strangeness. . . . What the string of beads

metaphor reflects, then, is a certain wish-fulfilment on the part of the storyteller that suggests a "wouldn't it be nice if experience could fit into a neat narrative pattern, could be ordered and subdued through art" idea, in conjunction with an implied admission that experience does not suggest an order or shaping principle at all, or, at least, certainly nothing as shapely or obviously ordered as a string of beads. (141-42)

The convenience of this narrative lies in its simplicity, as the content is limited to a homogeneous string of carefully chosen beads or subjects. Lynes suggests that throughout his life Bobby discovers that simplicity does not always exist in a 'strange,' pluralistic world (142). For Lynes, the strangeness of life is an important reality which will be overlooked if the narrator gives in to the myth that a life narrative can be simple and sequential.

The problem with Lynes' analysis is that it goes too far in separating the world of narration from Bobby's 'real world' experience. The purported 'realness' of Bobby's life experience is compromised by the reference to the window, as synchronic analysis of Bobby's early life shows an all too prevalent shaping principle. Throughout all the changes of setting in the novel, the one remaining constant is the narrator, whose position is defined here as the story's original point. The world unfolds itself before this singular viewpoint, suggesting what would seem like a simple, straightforward narrative universe. The "world" for Bobby is a social text written by the successive moves of the O'Malleys throughout the region, so that watching "the world from the window" appears as

analogous to watching various programs on the television screen. Contrary to Lynes' arguments, Bobby's childhood experience is "ordered and subdued through art," for the novel lays bare those strategies by which Agnes attempts to limit the number of subjectivities which are visible through Bobby's own personal "window."

This process often involves erasing threats to the homogeneous ideal, as shown by Agnes' response to Protestantism. When the O'Malleys move into a house that was last occupied by a Protestant family, Agnes has "the priest come and bless the empty rooms," an act which Ted describes as "chasing the heathens out with holy water" (100). Although the past cannot be changed, the priest's blessing denies its existence symbolically, so that "the world from the window" remains a Catholic utopia in which Protestant trace does not exist.

Nor is Agnes alone in her bigotry. When full erasure is not possible, many of the Catholics in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* simply increase the distance between the Other and their own perceptual 'windows.' In Kellies, Protestants are "unofficially segregated," so that the "so-called Protestant part of town" is "a kind of ghetto . . . where the Protestants, and people of other outnumbered persuasions lived" (*The Story of Bobby O'Malley* 100). At such distances, only the most distinguishing subjectivities are visible, and this fact serves only to further the distancing process. So marginal are the Protestants in Bobby's community that their only really visible presence is in the Hamiltons, a family of strawberry blondes. Consequently, "[o]range hair, pale skin, and freckles" are designated by Johnston's Catholics as "the marks of a Protestant" (100). Eventually,

freckles are recognized as "Sin-spots" acquired during a corrupted upbringing, or alternately, as the result of "dirt clogged pores" (101). With little in his world to correct these fallacies, young Bobby quickly perceives Protestants as "Heathens . . . who went wild when the sun went down," and he therefore struggles to distance himself from this orange-haired menace (103). Sectarianism is acknowledged here as a self-reinforcing fiction based on the limited observations of the Self. Protestants are driven increasingly far from the "window" of Bobby's subjectivities, leaving them little opportunity for self-definition and subordinating them to the dogmatic power discourse.

As the phrase "other outnumbered persuasions" suggests, such marginalization and silencing is not limited to anything so blatantly ideological as the sectarian subject position, but rather is open to any subjectivity which threatens Agnes' utopia. In the case of the racial subject position, the typical response in the novel is less conscious but equally marginalizing, showing how deeply rooted and automatic these homogenizing tendencies are. Bobby recalls the fate of black people in a society dominated by Irish and Anglo-Saxon origins:

In Kellies, blacks were accorded the kind of irony often reserved for midgets -- as if blackness was an unfortunate, but highly comic, accident of birth. A kind of good-natured prejudice was extended toward them. The generally held Christian view was that Negroes were God's children too, and deserved as much happiness as, by keeping to themselves, they could acquire. (118-19)

For the Gullivers, the only black family in the novel, the implications of this "Christian view" are all too real. Mr. Gulliver is very much aware that discrimination leads to exclusion, as shown by his quip, "Too bad dis snow's not black. We could make it feel inferior and it might go away" (118). Mrs. Gulliver is somewhat quicker to accept the segregation which her neighbours have handed her, staying mostly indoors and carrying "an expression, if not of terror, then certainly of watchfulness" (119). True to her husband's prediction, she "go[es] away," feeling at least threatened, if not actually inferior.

The more monolithic view of Newfoundland alluded to in the introduction to this chapter thus emerges as the product of that careful art of reducing and excluding Others. Yet the shaping efforts manifest in the worlds of *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *The Divine Ryans* also extend to that sexual 'strangeness' which helps the individual's subjectivities. Even when complete abstinence is conceded to the saints and the clergy, the barely acceptable level of passion in "the modern Catholic family" is to be "restrained, respectful" (*The Story of Bobby O'Malley* 110). In *The Divine Ryans*, characters such as Aunt Phil regard "child-bearing" as "one of the sacramental duties of marriage" and "the marriage bed" as a burden from which one is freed at death (43, 176).

However, sexuality is most significant in these novels as the one subjectivity whose suppression characters actively resist. Bobby O'Malley, for example, practices "the basic right hand jerk job" in response to the lack of actual sexual encounters. Similarly, when his mother removes lingerie ads from the home, he invents "the eclectic

lady," a collage of body parts that features "Caucasian calves and thighs from Ethiopia, a Nubian belly, a breast from Bora Bora and a head from *Homes and Gardens*" (135). Finally, when Agnes replaces an attractive young housekeeper "with a middle-aged woman named Mrs. Hiller," Bobby makes "the best of it" by looking "up her dress" from "under the back step" (136). Bobby's earliest discovery of his own sexuality follows directly from Ted's active reclaiming of his sexual identity, as a chance sighting of Ted and Paula naked in the woods leads to what is apparently Bobby's first wet dream (64). Quite inadvertently, Bobby's newfound knowledge evokes that subjectivity which Agnes denies. More significantly, the narrator Bobby chooses to make such initiations part of his life narrative, which is suddenly anything but the chaste, genderless account which Agnes would have him give. The dream episode parallels the appearance in the novel of the Gulliver family as an acknowledgement of those otherwise neglected subject positions which make for a more heterogeneous narrative.

The dream is also important in *The Divine Ryans* as the medium through which the narrative emerges more explicitly from suppression and repression. At the level of conscious suppression, the narrative blatantly defies the taboos which Aunt Phil places on so many subjects. This is especially true of Donald Ryan's homosexuality and suicide, which for Aunt Phil, are too abominable to be articulated. Draper Doyle reports, "she dared not force me to tell *her* what I knew, dared not bring the family secret even so close to the light of day as to make me say it" (228; Johnston's emphasis). In sharp defiance, Draper Doyle's narrative describes his father's sexuality in graphic detail and names the

newly freed subject position, as he dubs his father's old hockey team "The Gay Blades" (201). At the same time, *The Divine Ryans* triumphs over repression, represented in the novel by Draper Doyle's "missing week" (198). The contents of the missing week emerge slowly, piece by piece, like invisible hockey scores from the cover of *The Cartoon Vergil* [sic] (81-82). First, he remembers only his father "bending over one of the teletype machines" and "the soundless tantrum he was throwing" amidst the din of the machines (78-79). Later, there surfaces the fuller picture of Donald "bent over as if to read the teletype, with the other man bent over him, their pale and strangely naked bodies pressed urgently together" (200). Suddenly, his father's strange motions are defined as varying stages of ecstasy and embarrassment over an act which Draper Doyle's chaste society will not permit him to understand. By bringing this silent homosexual subject position into the light of his own narrative, Draper Doyle ultimately grants Donald a posthumous emancipation from the proverbial closet. For Draper Doyle, telling roughly equals remembering, as uncovering observable facts from the not so distant past ensures bargaining power with Aunt Phil and resists the generally advanced monolithic view of Draper Doyle's milieu.

While this exposure seems beneficial to the previously neglected subject, for the narrators themselves, such active resistance does not lead to full understanding or growth as long as they are within the original circles of domination. In a family situation where sex and pubescence are not discussed, Bobby O'Malley's first wet dream poses more questions than it answers, and his reaction at the time is the shocked inference that his

"pee had, overnight, turned thick and changed its colour" (64). The experience evinces that strangeness which the dogmatic world suppresses, but without an understanding of the underlying processes and causes, it is anything but a positive one for Bobby. Similarly, much of the process of remembering in *The Divine Ryans* finds meaning in strangeness, such as the new sensation of semen which somehow triggers the memory of finding Donald's body (222). Such memories liberate Draper Doyle in the physical sense from the closed world of Aunt Phil, but as long as he is still a part of that world, his mind cannot be fully liberated. Like Bobby O'Malley as a child, he has "no idea" what his first wet dream actually is, and he labels it a "strange innovation" on the part of his "bud" (222). In other words, while a no doubt potent memory does occur, the subject has little if any understanding of the things involved in the memory process. Thus, in addition to the excessive distancing of certain subjectivities, these narrators face the added challenge of homogenizing agents that are not distant enough.

As troubling as the proximity of certain subjectivities is for Bobby and Draper Doyle, distance is by no means an unconditional solution. Johnston also shows how excessive distancing of the not so recent past can have a subjugating effect. Like the television image discussed in the previous chapter, the excessively distanced past of Aunt Phil's heritage provides a fictional ideal to which her actual Self is not permitted to contribute. The past for Aunt Phil is a closed case, an idyll "harking back to the old days, when horses were still used," as she represents the Ryan ancestors as stoic Catholic knights labouring incessantly to build the family empire (25). Her father, for example,

purportedly "worked himself to death," as Aunt Phil declares "more boastfully than otherwise" (30). In keeping with such hero worship, her dining room is a "gallery of grandfathers" (29):

Uncle Reginald called them "our four fathers" and swore that their portraits were intended to stir the family into action, to shame us into preserving what they had handed down to us, and for which they had obviously suffered much. Grandpa Stern, Grandpa Cross, Grandpa Grim, and Grandpa Disapproving, he called them. . . . I came from a long line of undertakers, and I might end up one myself if I wasn't careful. (29)

These portraits provide flat, reductive characterizations, with little visible variation between the ancestors, as even the adjectives by which Uncle Reginald separates them are all roughly synonymous. This very sort of reduction is characteristic of the way many Newfoundlanders view their ancestral history, resulting in the sort of "stoic bias" discussed in the introduction to this chapter (Whalen 35). The example of the Ryans suggests a more general application of the bias beyond the fisherfolk stoicism of Newfoundland's popular literature, as Aunt Phil's stoic tradition follows from a more urban, capitalist agenda. But even though this stoicism is prompted by a different set of social stimuli, the same basic process is at work. Stoicism is so deeply imbued historically on the Newfoundland consciousness that eventually, it no longer depends upon those external stimuli from which it originated. Thus, well after the physical toil of the horse and wagon days and the necessary caution of the sectarian wars, Aunt Phil

continues to shape life as a response to such conditions.

For Aunt Phil herself, the result of an excessively distant past is the total marginalization of her own subjectivities. Her days as a married woman, for instance, are placed so far behind her that her deceased husband is relegated the role of the family spook (7). Even then her womanhood cannot be denied altogether, especially before a world which "preferred to think that a man was in charge" (24). Despite Aunt Phil's actual management of the Ryan dynasty, then, the Ryans establish Reginald, whom they regard as the family buffoon, as a false "figurehead" (24). Aunt Phil must work without recognition, exercise power from the margins, and reinforce the very mythology responsible for her own marginalization. In years to come, it is Uncle Reginald's portrait and not hers which is likely to hang among the patriarchs in her dining hall.

Even more daunting is the realization that by controlling the past, Aunt Phil's ideology also guarantees a future in which the many subjectivities of even male family members are marginalized. Once Uncle Reginald becomes the subject of a dining room portrait, for instance, the fun-loving character whom Draper Doyle delineates will cease to exist. Similarly, Draper Doyle's dreams of a hockey career are driven further beyond his reach by the family's vocational traditions. While Draper Doyle does not wish to be an undertaker, he does concede to the ancestral influence when he says, "newspapers might me more my line" (29). His future, like the past, has been neatly tailored by Aunt Phil to meet the needs of the stoic, patriarchal hegemony.

Given the potential confusion which *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* attaches to the

act of narrating the past, one is easily daunted by the challenge of refuting these historical biases (6). One way of seeing beyond such diachronic bewilderment is to first consider a more synchronic model, which Johnston provides in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*. Here, the "stoic bias" is illustrated by Agnes' reaction to the physically challenged individual. Gabriel, who like other subjects in the novel, is seen but distantly from the majority subject's "window" to the world. As Agnes herself will not allow us to forget, this segregation follows from the all too apparent fact of Gabriel's wheelchair:

"He's got no-one, Bobby," she said, "and he's such a nice boy. No-one understands him, that's all." She said people were afraid of the wheelchair. It was the chair that blinded everyone to the real Gabriel, that made them think he really was the awful little wretch he seemed to be. (36)

From Agnes' words, one would assume that Bobby's uncomplimentary portrait is a surrender to the reduction and exclusion that for once Agnes bemoans. However, there is a clear irony in Agnes' defence of Gabriel's character. The closest she actually comes to interacting with Gabriel directly is watching from the driveway as Bobby begins "to push the brave little half-ton boy half a mile uphill to school" (36). At such distances, Agnes is like those people whom she condemns in that she can see only the chair, so that for her, Gabriel becomes nothing more than the poor, unconsenting recipient of a disadvantage. Agnes' unsubstantiated defence merely contributes to the reduction of the outsider to his most obvious subject position. Just as she can see a Protestant as nothing more than a misguided infidel, so too does Agnes deny Gabriel the autonomy of character to develop

into anything other than the victim.

In exposing the lechery which lurks beneath the more obvious aspects of Gabriel's physical appearance, Bobby restores some of this autonomy and draws a character far more complicated than the bravely enduring cripple seen from Agnes' "window." Beyond the chair which one first sees, he is free to become as lecherous and cruel as he chooses and to socially exploit the mythology which society builds around him. Bobby's ability to see these potentialities depends upon his proximity to Gabriel, as their daily encounters expose him to the swearing, plotting, and violence which Agnes does not see. Paradoxically, this proximity to one aspect of Gabriel's social existence serves to distance Bobby from another. Because he is "allowed to see the strings on his [Gabriel's] puppet of fun," Bobby becomes an outsider from that myth-making community which builds itself around Gabriel. For the children who follow the chair-ridden oracle, there is a certain pleasure to be had in believing the Gabriel myth. As one who knows better, Bobby is deprived of such rewards and thereby "exempted" from the school yard cult (39). By virtue of his simultaneous inclusion in and exclusion from various levels of Gabriel's world, Bobby, even at this early age, is able to discern not just the child's more detestable characteristics, but also the fictionality of those social relationships which he exploits.

Bobby's overall experience with Gabriel shows synchronically how some balance between distance and proximity is necessary for a larger, more open picture. Yet a heterogeneous narrative is still not fully possible within the temporal confines of the

original experience. Just as his first wet dream is initially a disturbing mystery, so too does eight-year-old Bobby interpret the Gabriel experience solely in terms of his own subjectivities. When Bobby wishes to be "free of that damned chair forever," he blatantly interprets the wheelchair as his burden rather than Gabriel's (42). As an adult narrator, he confesses, "It was having to push I held against him," for the job posited him as "the wheels of Gabriel's chair . . . essential, but uninteresting" (37, 39). It is only once Bobby is free of the chair and distanced from the subjectivities which it created for him that he sees their effect on his character and better empathizes with Gabriel. The result is an evocation of Gabriel's position which transcends the flat characterizations posited by Agnes, the school children, and the child Bobby:

How could I know that life in that chair was life encased in one-way glass? He could see out, but not get out -- and no-one could see him. Having to climb the wall like a treadmill to make it move, needing always a push to get started, someone to roll you along -- that must have been how it was. And not the Equalizer. not obscene boasts nor loud lies could break that glass. (42)

The effectiveness of the passage lay in its acknowledgement of not one, but three separate fictions. Gabriel's life, as Bobby now recognizes, was neither the courageous fight portrayed by Agnes, the mythical status painted by Gabriel and his "Equalizer" in the school yard, nor the annoying sights and sounds which plagued Bobby's daily life. Rather, it was and is the pathetic combination of all these viewpoints, along with a

claustrophobic situation which, as Bobby acknowledges above, is incomprehensible to anyone outside of it.

Bobby's interaction with Gabriel and the mythology surrounding him provides a telling *mise en abyme* for the relationship between narrator and protagonist in the story. At the diachronic level, Bobby's double function of narrator-protagonist is made more effective by placing him simultaneously outside and inside the loop of his own past experiences. The more mature Bobby O'Malley is equally adept at evoking his childhood subjectivities and dealing with them from a detached, critical stance. Moreover, it is such critical detachment from the past which Draper Doyle explicitly and implicitly promotes near the end of *The Divine Ryans*. At first, Draper Doyle seems to promote the very repression and suppression which buried his father's secrets, as he states with relief. "I knew the pucks were still in place and my father was still downstairs where he belonged" (232). Similarly, he places *The Cartoon Vergil* inside the walls of the old house and years later muses, "it may still be there, rotting like some skeleton between the walls" (230). But as much as Draper Doyle attempts to close the experience of his father's death, the closure is not intended as that permanent closure attempted by Aunt Phil. When the paper note attached to Donald's souvenir hockey puck is lost forever, Draper Doyle points out, "the words my father had written were still there, faintly engraved in the puck so that I could shade them in when I wanted" (230). The crucial idea here is encapsulated by three words, "when I wanted." While Draper Doyle is within the suppressive domain of the Ryan household, memory surfaces involuntarily, placing Draper Doyle at the uneasy

convergence point of two opposing forces. In the above passage, however, he alludes to a future in which he is free of Aunt Phil and her restrictions. The past will be placed safely behind him, but that will not stop him from evoking his father's "missing year" and all the suppressed subjectivities contained within it. Even if Draper Doyle cannot understand his father's sexuality during his departure from the Ryans, he acknowledges that more distant point in time when understanding will be possible.

Time, then, is recognized as a uniquely positive source of distance. The autobiographical narrative allows the writer to close the past temporarily, to package it for the purposes of detached observation. Evidently, it is closure which Ted O'Malley seeks in the writing and subsequent "flushing" of *Our Memoirs: A Story from Family History*. Early in the novel, the toilet is established as a symbol of mortality and of time itself. Bobby recalls, "My father told me to remember that I got older every time I flushed the toilet," and the family even measures time by units of septic tank drainage (15). By flushing the pages of his autobiography, Ted allows his life experiences to be consumed by the swirling vortex of history, whose capacity for closure intimidates the claustrophobic Bobby (15).

But Ted's question, "What can be more final than flushing the toilet" is ultimately ironic, for as his own experience ought to show, flushing is anything but final. Early in the novel, the family's previously flushed effluent burst out of the pipes and is sucked into "the Shit Machine," an event which becomes a public spectacle (11-15). The underlying idea is that if toilet flushing is not final, which it evidently is not, than nothing is.

Narration depends upon a closure which must be recognized as artificial, as Bobby does near the end of his narrative:

This story goes on past these pages. I can say that my mother and I are friendly the times I visit Kellies, but that is no ending -- more like a beginning, I should think. As for the rest:

A year later I went away to school. Most importantly, I went away. For often since, the pier at Port aux Basques receding, the land assuming shapes and lines, I've thought that only by leaving did I learn to live here.

(190)

That the "story goes past these pages" denotes a more macroscopic version of the window motif, as the regional milieu of the novel at last unfolds to reveal the various neighbourhoods of the world at large. It is important to note, however, that this does not suggest the movement described by Chambers, in which the regional novel gives rise to that which is more universally Canadian (33). On the contrary, what Bobby sees through the window of his narration is not a homogeneously significant universe, but rather a cultural pluralism which denies full definition from any one subject position or any one region. Rather than close the novel as such, Bobby merely stops narrating with the acknowledgment of a world beyond the scope of himself or any other narrator.

Bobby's departure from the region is not an ending, as he himself points out, but a beginning of a more worldly narrative, as well as of his own ability to see the region with its "shapes and lines." By leaving the region, he is able to temporarily close it, to package

the subjectivities it created for him and view them from a broader, more detached scope. For Bobby, "learn[ing] to live here" means an awareness of the region's role as the original point in a more infinite universe. Growth, then, is defined as a combination of distance from one's original point and recognition of the home region's authority as that original point. In exposing the artifice by which any such singular perspective is determined, Johnston makes for a more pluralistic narrative than that which the current hegemony concedes to the Newfoundland subject.

Chapter 3

Toward a Regional Avant-Garde: Dialect and Discourse in

The Story of Bobby O'Malley and The Time of Their Lives

One of the most widely recognized tenets of twentieth century literary criticism is Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the novelist genre as that which presents "the internal stratification of any single national language" (263). While English in Canada is no doubt one such national language, published scholarship on the role of dialect in Canadian literary fiction remains scarce, and what little does exist is more apt to approach the literary text as a linguistic case study. As one example of the latter tendency, Graham Shorrocks and Beverly Rodgers catalogue various dialect usages in Percy Janes' *House of Hate* in order to locate them historically and geographically (131-33). Despite the unique English dialects which occur in much fiction from Newfoundland and other regions, few scholars consider the actual relationship between spoken culture and distinctly literary developments.

This neglect even pervades the recent emphasis on metalanguage as social discourse. According to Patricia Waugh, one symptom of the postmodern age is "an unprecedented cultural pluralism," which for the literary world means "the absence of a clearly defined avant-garde 'movement'" (10). Faced with problems "in identifying and then representing the object of 'opposition,'" metafictional writers must turn inward to their own language, which represents "naturalization of dominant power structures"

(Waugh 10-11). Resistance then occurs within the form of the novel, as the more individualistic utterance, *parole*, is set self-reflexively against *langue*, the system of language conventions (Waugh 11).

The issue of regionalism problematizes Waugh's faith in cultural pluralism, as there is a very explicit opposition in Canadian culture and literature toward that which is associated with a particular region. Moreover, the literary author need not turn too deeply inward to find manifestations of this tendency in language, especially if the writer chooses Newfoundland as his or her setting. In a review of *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, Philip W. Rogers describes the particular language forms of Newfoundland and the marginalizing forces which oppose them:

It is lexicon that, like many – perhaps most– regional ones have an uncertain future. Under the influence of the mass media with their homogenizing effect and of rapid and easy long-distance transportation, regional vocabulary, though not always pronunciation, tends to recede except in exceptional circumstances. (833)

For Rogers, the culprit in the potential extinction of regional dialects in Canada is the escalating advance of various medial technologies. But as the first chapter of this thesis explains, literature is not necessarily the champion of cultural diversity against homogenizing technologies. On the contrary, as critical response to Wayne Johnston's work shows, there is a decided movement among many Canadian literary critics against the very use of regional language forms in literature. Ken Adachi, for example, berates

The Time of Their Lives for "hickish characters" whose "dialogue reads like a country music ballad" (A17). Conversely, Moira Dann praises *The Divine Ryans* because it is narrated "blessedly without dialect" (C19). For any Newfoundland writer who considers narrating through dialect, cultural opposition is all too immediate, as the purportedly more standard English of central Canada is privileged at the direct expense of the regional.

Much of this prejudice follows from what Canadian linguist Ian Pringle identifies as a mainstream distinction between "mere dialect," with its oral variations from the written standard, and "real language" (101). Johnston problematizes this distinction, for in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *The Time of Their Lives*, the local dialects become standards against which all other forms are measured. This further complicates Waugh's notion of a metalinguistic avant-garde, as the conflict here is not so much between *langue* and *parole* as it is between competing conceptions of *langue*. But even this status does not emancipate the region from the marginalizing tendencies of the Canadian mainstream, as the distinctly Newfoundland *langue* emerges as a subordinate system.

Within this very complicated milieu, the problem quickly arises as to where to locate the regional writing subject. In an attempt to answer this very important question, this chapter will consider the various responses to the issue of a unitary Canadian English that are available to the narrators of these two novels. This will lead to a critical evaluation of Bobby O'Malley's and John Foley's own choice of language, in order to discern their distance from the linguistic communities that constitute their fictive worlds.

As we shall see, the issue of dialect versus unitary language underlies the writing of any so-called regional novel in Canada, as it orients the all too important relationship between narrator, text, and reader.

According to Bakhtin, a unitary language is not simply a discrete number of grammar rules, but rather a linguistic manifestation of centripetal forces which operate at the ideological level of society (271). Johnston's position on the issue of a unitary language is readily discernible in a comparison of Ted and Agnes O'Malley. The link between language and ideology is exemplified by Agnes, whose promotion of a white, Catholic utopia also forbids individualistic manipulations of language. Bobby describes her surveillance of his vocabulary:

My mother for my sake neutered the universe. She wove a web of conscience round my mind and, every day when she got home from work went one by one through the words it caught, wielding guilt like a fly swatter.

"Did you hear any new words today, Bobby?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Well. What's hole?"

"Hole? H-O-L-E?"

"I think so."

"You mean like a hole in the ground?"

"One girl said, 'Kiss my hole.'" The other girl said, 'Can't kiss a hole, can only kiss around it.'"

"*Mother of God* -- now Bobby, listen to me. That's a dirty word, a dirty, filthy word, and you're not to say it or think of it again. Do you hear me?"

"Yes." (49)

Just as she attempts to remove Bobby from external sexual stimuli, Agnes also attempts to ensure his priestly celibacy by removing the language of sexual difference from his vocabulary. Meanwhile, there is something even more basic than Bobby's knowledge of sexual difference at stake here. Closer attention to the school yard exchange reveals a wordplay which juggles several levels of meaning for the word 'hole.' To 'neuter' Bobby's vocabulary is to limit his words to very particular, literal meanings and deny him access to the free wordplay of which even young children are capable. These limitations ensure simplicity of expression, but only at the expense of individuality and creativity.

By making Agnes a school board curriculum specialist, Johnston is able to broaden his satirical treatment to the Newfoundland denominational school system and show what happens when dogma controls the learning of language and literature.

Not surprisingly, Agnes' ideas about curriculum emphasize standardized language, as she plans to use *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an example of bad writing. According to her proposed program, which is entitled "Without You Have Read -- Huck Finn Goes Back to School," students are "to rewrite certain passages, correcting the

grammar and spelling" (88). By setting Agnes up against Twain's widely cherished vernacular masterpiece, Johnston thwarts any potential sympathy for the subordination of dialect to standards set elsewhere.

In *The Time of Their Lives*, Johnston more closely applies his treatment of language to the context of Canadian regionalism. Here, the "illusory elsewhere" is defined as central Canada, as centripetal language forces follow from the naturalized assumption that any product of Ontario is inherently superior to its Newfoundland counterpart. Before he actually moves to Ontario, Murchie Dunne vows that he will "go to some place civilized," echoing his grandmother's dire generalization, "Any place is better than this" (20, 6). Even farming, the vocation from which Murchie fled to Ontario, takes on positive connotations for him when positioned in central Canada. "A farmer in Ontario, he said, was a man much respected – not like in Newfoundland, where he was known only for his peculiar-smelling clothes" (111). Similarly, after short visits to the mainland Canada and the United States, Jude propagates "stories of how the lobster there was better than Newfoundland lobster, the codfish tastier, the people, in a way that, somehow, you could not put your finger on, more friendly" (139). By privileging centres which are located elsewhere, such characters recall Agnes O'Malley and her naturalized privileging of Rome.

Also like Agnes, characters such as Murchie move toward the speech types associated with that privileged elsewhere. In order to emphasize his so-called success, Murchie adds an exaggerated Ontario accent to his usual airs and adopts words rarely

used by other characters in the region, such "domicile" (110, 113). Significantly, Murchie adopts these words before he fully understands their meaning, for he vaguely assumes "domicile" to be synonymous with mobile home (113). Murchie's blind allegiance to this vocabulary suggests that the important message lies not in the content of his speech, but in the forms by which he consciously distances himself from the purportedly inferior language of the region.

The character of Murchie allows Johnston to satirize the valorization of language forms that are more centrally located in Canada, but the same blatantly artificial attempts at standardization occur within the context of region dwellers' own speech. When Tom Foley struggles "not to make any slips of language or decorum" when "in the company of [educated] men," we can assume "slips of language" to mean slips into Newfoundland dialect, the linguistic form by which he is more frequently surrounded (87). Significantly, Johnston aligns language with the very arbitrary concept of "decorum," as Tom's "slips" into dialect constitute detours from a standard which is also arbitrary. Johnston's linking of this standard with "educated men" once again echoes Bakhtin, who asserts that standard language is "posited" rather than natural and "opposed to the realities of heteroglossia" (270). Already, Johnston has deflated the institutions responsible for education through Agnes O'Malley and her laughable school board curriculum policies. The standard speech which Tom struggles to observe is cultivated by an educational system which arbitrarily and perhaps foolishly excludes all manifestations of linguistic difference.

As one possible response to this privileging of far flung centres, Johnston presents the establishment more local standards for culture, ideology, and speech. For many characters in *The Time of Their Lives*, the tendency is to give self-expression a more regionally narrow focus. This impulse is discernible at the level of content in the "Meadows" rendition of "The Badger Drive." Whereas the original folk song was inspired by the Newfoundland logging industry, the Meadows version offers a decidedly more local theme, substituting "the life of a farmer" for "the life of a logger" (47). Even though this local emphasis stands in marked contrast with Agnes O'Malley's Vaticanism and Murchie Dunne's affinity for mainland Canada, the same overall process of homogenization is at work, as Murchie's relatives simply privilege a different centre. Because "The Badger Drive" does not respond to the local agricultural hegemony, they take liberties with the song's lyrics, reducing its content to that which conforms with their cultural boundaries.

Johnston's Dunnes and Foleys also enforce such homogenization at the formalistic level of language. Murchie's deliberate attempts at bettering the speech of his relatives is met with outright hostility, as he is accused of having "swallowed Toronto" (110). In other cases, the unfamiliar is a source of amusement. On visiting Newfoundland for the first time, Murchie's wife Louise unknowingly becomes the butt of the Foley and Dunne children's jokes. John Foley recollects:

... it was Louise's accent that most intrigued us. We gathered round her chair, asking her to say things.

"Say pop," Kevin said.

"Pawp," Louise said.

"Say Toronto." "Torawno," Louise said. She had us in stitches in no time, saying "aye?" and calling us "kids." "What's so funny aye kids?" she would say, and we would double over laughing. (107-08)

This scene avenges Tom Foley's embarrassment over his speech, as the local dialect becomes the standard and the voice of central Canada is said to have an "accent" (107). The more implicit theme is that the characteristic speech of Ontario centre is no more universally standard than that of Newfoundland, as the very concept of "accent" is relative to listeners' own regional speech patterns.

For the characters themselves, however, this relativism is often lost amidst adherence to the more local norm. May Dunne, for instance, sees the "baby-talk" spoken between Louise and her daughters as a failure on the girls' part to learn "a word of real English" (109). We might assume that for May, "real English" refers to her own speech types, which are exemplified by such ejaculations as "get off yer arse" and "They thought he was gone cracked" (66). Having seen little if any life beyond her particular region, May establishes the unique linguistic patterns of that region not simply as 'Meadows talk,' but as standard English.

That characters judge other speech types in accordance with their own suggests that within the context of the region itself, the dialect of Newfoundland has aspired to the status of a *langue* separate from that promulgated by the centres of Canada and North

America. Yet this separation does not free the regional speaker from the subordinate position. Because the local *langue* coincides in time and space with the more conscious recognition of the distantly issued *langue*, the marginalization of dialect is still guaranteed. As the example of Jude shows, many of those Newfoundlanders who practice the local *langue* believe ideologically in the superiority of Canada's more centralized locales:

"I'd no more live in Harbour Deep now Tom," Jude said, "than I'd go an' drown myself. . . . "Outports," Jude said, "sher it's only the university crowd likes outports, an' that's because they don't have to live in 'm." (94)

Jude's speech evinces a clear division between form and content, for whereas the content of this utterance valorizes more cosmopolitan centres, the form still obeys the local *langue*. Jude is therefore unable to achieve her own ideals, for while she calls for the physical abandonment of the outport, she is very much inside one linguistically. Thus evinced is a contradiction which inflicts the overall competition between *langues* in Johnston's Newfoundland. On one level, the region dwellers concede their inferiority, but in resisting new styles of speech or writing, many of them are permanently excluded from their own ideals. Newfoundland English emerges as a cruel paradox, languishing on a periphery of its own making.

For characters such as Tom Foley, the division of allegiance between two competing *langues* means that he cannot fully enter into either. Just as he is unable to perfectly cultivate the language of the educated, his imperfect attempts to do just that

make him an outsider from his native linguistic community. Even worse, this outsider status comes with a rigid 'no return' policy, at the level of form as well as of content. Consequently, his recollections of his days as a Harbour Deep fishermen are ineffectual to certain listeners:

With Raymond sitting across from him, smirking, winking at others in the room, my father would talk about going fishing with his father early in the morning. . . . 'If I could do that just once more," my father would say, "I'd be a happy man." A man who lives by the sea, he would say, never feels the need to travel, for he knows that, not a hundred feet away, lies a place more strange and mysterious than the farthest flung country of the world.

At this, Raymond would snicker. "Sounds good, doesn't it," he'd say, "sounds great. Actually doin' it now, that's another thing." (85-86)

For Raymond, Tom's narration fails because he is physically and linguistically outside that world which he is describing. Raymond's jeers represent an impulsive resistance to what has become an outside voice, as even among his own relatives, Tom's speech avoids those so-called "slips of language or decorum" exemplified by Raymond's word, "doin'." For all his efforts at evoking a sense of belonging to either of his two worlds, Tom is a speaker with no one sociolinguistic context which he can properly call home, an incongruence which no doubt contributes to his tragic depression.

With his narration of the outport past failing him in this context, Tom provides a disconcerting model for the narrator, who also looks back to his Newfoundland past. If

one were to take Raymond as a paradigm for Johnston's Newfoundland readership, the case is easily made that such readers will react with hostility if his narrators assume the role of linguistic outsiders. Whether or not this actually takes place remains to be seen, but unfortunately, a certain amount of Otherness does exist between the narrator of each novel and the sociolinguistic community which he delineates.

First, one could argue that the role of literary narrator itself makes Bobby O'Malley and John Foley outsiders from that oral community which cultural politics has created in their respective regions. Unitary language, represented in Johnston's work by such texts as the Rosary, requires strict adherence to prescribed form and content, with little room for individual passion or expression. The only possibility for embellishment depends upon the extralinguistic qualities of the human voice, such as volume and pitch. These provide the weapons for the cold war between Agnes' family and Dola's, as Bobby recalls:

My parents' room was adjacent to Dola's bedroom, and the wall between was paper thin. Saying the rosary, we would kneel to the wall, three of us on one side, the six of them on the other, and we would, with impunity, and under cover of code, speak our pent-up minds. The winner was that side which, in tone and volume of voice, managed to sound more sinned against than sinning. "Our father who art in heaven," my mother would say, lunging at Dola with the Lord's prayer. "As we forgive those who trespass against us," Dola would parry, with all the vengeance she could

muster. . . . Gradually as the rosary waged on, our voices would rise, until soon it became a shouting match. "Holy Mary, Mother of God," my father would roar, and Rennie would raise his voice accordingly, belting out a gloria for all he was worth. (45)

In *The Time of Their Lives*, the more frequent tendency is to abandon speech altogether, as characters often turn to body gestures for expression. Grandfather Dad, for instance, is often seen "looking at his hands, turning them over, examining them, as if they might explain his defeat (13). The efficacy of all these means of expression is clearly visible in the complex meanings which Bobby and John gather from them. Unlike these characters, however, the narrative personae of Bobby and John are completely dependent upon language to communicate their messages. By delving into a purely linguistic medium, each narrator waives his inclusion in that world seen above, which is substantially more than linguistic. No doubt this world is shaped by sociolinguistic forces, but the fact of writing itself distances the autobiographical narrator from his own world to the point of no return.

Even within the confines of language, there exists a clear otherness between Johnston's narrators and the linguistic communities which they delineate. Bakhtin identifies five basic "unities into which the novelistic whole usually breaks down," ranging from direct authorial narration to individual characters' speeches, as each character manifests his or her own style (262). According to Patricia Waugh, this multiplicity is one of the primary achievements of postmodern metafiction in an unstable

sociolinguistic world:

Metafiction flaunts and exaggerates and thus exposes the foundations of this instability: the fact that novels are constructed through a continuous assimilation of everyday historical forms of communication. There is no privileged 'language of fiction.' (5)

Metafiction thereby differs from realistic fiction, which subordinates all voices to "the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, god-like author" (Waugh 6). The trouble with Johnston's narrators is that they sometimes flaunt language difference too much, thereby subordinating the assimilated voices to their own. In many instances, the identification of difference is less deliberate and a simple matter of typographical convention. When regional dialect does appear in either novel, it is in quotation marks, the very form of which highlights the distinction between the literary narrator and the speaking character. Admittedly, quotation marks make for a more comprehensible narrative, but there is little necessity in the more conscious apologies with which Johnston's narrators frame their quotations. Bobby O'Malley is often too eager to separate himself from the utterances of his characters, especially when citing the eccentric word choices of his father. When, for example, he concedes being born into "what my father called 'a family of only children,'" the phrase "what my father called" urgently reminds readers that these are not Bobby's own choice of words (6). Similarly, he follows the citation with an explanation that begins, "What *he* meant . . ." (6; my emphasis). The self-conscious act of definition suggests the incomprehensibility of Ted's utterances to a 'normal' reader, while the phrase

"what *he* meant" questions whether this meaning is ever communicated beyond its speaker. The speaker quickly becomes the Other, as Johnston distances the character from both the narrator and his reader.

Such othering also takes place in *The Time of Their Lives*, where it takes on a clearly regional cast given the novel's more heavily dialect-laden dialogues. In those rare instances when he uses a word uniquely indigenous to Newfoundland, the narrator's impulse is toward definition, as in his reference to "toutons, balls of fried dough" (65). Johnston's definition is no doubt useful to a reader not familiar with the term, but by pandering to such needs, Johnston establishes as his audience outsiders from the culture of his speaking subjects. As a narrator, John Foley sounds like a former resident of the region trying his best to explain embarrassingly hickish relatives to a far more metropolitan listener. And as seen above, the Newfoundlander who becomes an outsider to his own culture is not so easily received by a Newfoundland audience.

Even aside from its distance from direct authorial narration, Johnston's transliteration of Newfoundland dialects in *The Time of Their Lives* is in itself reductive. That is, the status of Newfoundland dialect as an independent stratum of Canadian English is diminished as Johnston most often overlooks a key linguistic element of what G. M. Story, W. J. Kirwin, and J. A. D. Widdowson label "Newfoundland English." The rare example of "toutons" notwithstanding, *The Time of Their Lives* is characterized by a dearth of what Story, Kirwin, and Widdowson explain as

words which appear to have entered the [English] language in

Newfoundland or to have been recorded first, or solely, in books about Newfoundland; words which are characteristically Newfoundland by having continued in use here after they died out or declined elsewhere, or by having acquired a different form or developed a different meaning, or by having a distinctly higher or more general degree of use. (xii)

In all fairness, one could argue that Johnston does include in his dialogues words which "acquired a different form" in Newfoundland, but even then he is selective. He chooses words whose original forms are still highly recognizable, so that the Newfoundland words appear as no more than bastardized versions of everyday English words created by the omission or substitution of consonants and vowels. Accordingly, "thing" becomes "ting," "the" becomes "de," and so on. A brief sample of Johnston's characters' speeches reveals anything but a complete, independent stratum of language:

"What's da matter," they asked him, "don't ya like women or children, or is it only yerself ya likes."

Raymond would laugh at them. "I named 'er de *Raymond Dunne*," he'd say, "coz she's one fine frig of a boat."

"How's the *Raymond Dunne* floatin'," his father would ask him, "she's not so full of 'erself dat she'll sink is she?" (51)

For the most part, Newfoundland English is characterized in this passage as a negative departure from a recognizable standard. Many of the 'Newfoundland words' featured here have been created through loss, as the speakers drop a consonant from the standard

spelling and pronunciation in such words as 'er, 'erself, and floatin.' Again, typographical convention marks the deviant status of these forms, as the absence of -h and -g sounds is marked by apostrophes. In contrast, the linguistic style of Louise from Ontario is defined in more positive terms, as her "accent" is identified as the addition of such words as "aye" and "kids" (108). Superfluous though these words might be, they still constitute something which the more negatively defined dialect of Johnston's Newfoundland does not have. When compared to Louise, her in-laws emerge as lazy speakers, dropping consonants gratuitously and drawing from a more limited vocabulary.

Nor is the replacement of -th sounds with -d sounds, as in "da," "de," and "dat" presented as a truly autonomous linguistic pattern. In one instance, Raymond's father uses the word "the," reintroducing the supposed standard from which "da" and "de" deviate. This inconsistency, along with the interchangeable use of "da" and "de," suggests a language that is unsure of itself. The argument could easily be made that such inconsistency evinces a more pragmatic, individualistic utterance, but given the context of dialect's subordinate position, the reader is more likely to regard these deviations as random mistakes. One implication is that Johnston's speakers use "de" and "da" only when they forget to use "the," as readers are subtly reminded of the proper form.

The subordination of one *langue* to another is clarified somewhat by the example of the "baby-talk" used by Louise and her daughters. Within the context of their mother-daughter relationship, "baby-talk" provides a well-developed, agreed upon medium with its own distinctive formalistic markings, such as the omission of consonants from the

beginnings and ends of certain words. Only once it is torn from its context and placed in another household in another part of the country does their distinctive form become the subject of ridicule, just as Tom Foley's outportisms become a source of stress when he is among university graduates. Not even the most effective system can function outside of its original context, as the analogy of farming shows. Even Grandfather Dad concedes that Murchie's greenhouse methods work well in Ontario, but the application of them to the harsher climate and soil conditions of Newfoundland results in withered, runt produce (117). Returning to the issue of language, one can see that *langue* fails the individual largely because it is too dependent upon a given context, for once the individual is torn from that context, he or she cannot effectively function as a linguistic subject. The problem, then, may be considerably larger than the particular relationship that exists between language systems in Canada, as the very concept of a closed system is held as suspect.

If there is a more positive model for language and narration in either of these novels, it is in Ted O'Malley, who represents not just the centrifugal forces that act upon language, but also the largely oral-based culture of Newfoundland. Bobby tells us, "My father was 200 miles and 25 years from the south coast," his place of origin, so it seems logical that many of the speech patterns unique to that area would have disappeared from Ted's idiom (11). Vestiges of this dialect serve not only to distinguish Ted from the sociolinguistic community of Kellies, but also to exempt him from the various forces surrounding their *langue*. In most cases, this exemption merely allows Ted to amuse

himself at will. He is "still willing to drop and/or add an 'h,'" only "if he could thereby, and with impunity, make a word more interesting," as in the case of a cousin who becomes "a hairline pilot" (11). Ted's dialect also allows him to communicate content which the other characters cannot, as when he dubs the overweight cousin Ambrosia, "*Hambrosia*" (46; my emphasis). Perhaps more importantly, the humour which results from Ted's language does not demand an intimate familiarity with the area from which the language is derived. The Ambrosia/Hambrosia pun is as easily understood by a reader from Ontario or New York as by one from the south coast of Newfoundland. For all its regional origins, this comedy is universal in appeal, working on that elemental level which makes for an effective narrative voice.

Unlike that alternative and inevitably subordinate *langue* featured in *The Time of Their Lives*, Ted's dialect usage constitutes a true avant-garde to the dominant power structure, for it does not establish the south coast of Newfoundland as a linguistic centre. Rather, its distinctive language forms provide Ted with mere toys in his self-indulgent games, as his geographic and chronological distance from that particular region places him beyond its sphere of control. In contrast, the subordinate speakers of *The Time of Their Lives* are distanced geographically but not chronologically from the purported centres of Canada, as political, cultural, and linguistic centralization are very much characteristic of their present linguistic moments. For Ted, the extraneous or missing "h" sounds are not so much a concession to the southern influence as they are a frivolity, a verbal red herring thrown in for purposes of self-amusement like the "aggravated

microdots" and "rabid wave-lengths" that later adorn his account of television (16). The closest that Ted comes to compromising his self-indulgence is when he offers to share it with the broader community, as he does with his widely comprehensible "Hambrosia" pun. By refusing to recognize any centre, Ted is free of the incongruence that troubles Tom and Jude in *The Time of Their Lives* and independent of any single context. Unlike Louise with her "Ontario accent" and "Baby-talk." In effect, his language games represent the more individualistic *parole* which Agnes and others like her too often manage to suppress.

When set against his sexual exploits, Ted's utterances also posit a relationship between dialect usage and passion, which is observable throughout Johnston's work when the speeches of certain characters are measured across different contexts. When Raymond Dunne is at his most composed or his most pretentious, his language structures approach those of Canada's centre, as when he returns unwanted gifts with the written message, "Many thanks from me and mine for these kindnesses" (91). The process of writing allows for editing and careful deliberation of words, as even Raymond's rudimentary education allows access to the fixed linguistic forms of written culture. In speech, however, it is not so easy for Raymond to mask his passions. When he is placed on the defensive for the naming of his boat, his response is more spontaneous and far less emotionally neutral, as he interjects, "I named 'er de *Raymond Dunne* . . . coz she's one fine frig of a boat" (51). Raymond's passions directly manifest themselves in dialect, as the absence of dispensable consonants allows him to drive his words forward with a

quickness and fury unsurpassed in his written message.

Once again, then, the written form emerges as inferior to orality in expressing the inner passions by which language is prompted. But the case could also be made that oral language, in all its immediacy, lacks that detachment from the social context which one finds in Raymond's written notes. The curt fury of Raymond's interjections illustrates that he is still within the social situations at which the utterances are directed. Because it lives within these moments, the dialect of Johnston's characters is too often still at the mercy of those forces by which dialect as well as passion is suppressed. In what Bobby summarizes as a "rare lapse into the vernacular," the standard-mongering Agnes is driven by an insubordinate housekeeper to utter, "Now get out ye saucy ting, before I trows ye out" (19). Quite overtly, this "lapse" represents an incongruence for Agnes, for immediately thereafter, she begins crying (19). In the wake of this lapse, Agnes, like so many of Johnston's other characters, turns to silence. Bobby recalls, "from what I remember of that time, . . . there was often about the house the kind of silence that early darkness can create, winter Sunday silence" (19). Silence is presented here as a complete exile from the social moment, enforced as punishment for the excessively passionate connection which dialect provided between inner feeling and the external world.

Yet for all its punitive association in these novels, silence also offers a productive literary device in a culture where language is often a no-win situation. In the case of Raymond's written message, cultivated grace silences any overt expression of his feelings of insult. When set against the context of the returned gifts, however, the note allows

readers to reconstruct Raymond's state of mind for themselves even after he himself has arrived at that seemingly more permanent state of silence known as death.

As a more subdued, detached version of orality, Raymond's writing offers an analytical model for the style of Johnston's narrators, particularly Bobby O'Malley, whose style often accepts the silence which becomes Agnes' lot. His voice is characterized by detachment, displaying little malice, vulgarity, or jubilation at the linguistic level. Even his recollection of an abusive priest is emotionally neutral at first glance:

The priest was never more to me than a massive mound of vestments, from which there darted, now and then, a hand big enough to pick a boy up by the bum – but which, more often, was aimed for the back of his head. . . . There was no motive, neither malicious nor punitive, in any of this. It was done randomly almost unconsciously. . . . Asked to describe his character, I could not. (78)

Within the literal confines of the words themselves, Bobby's reaction to the priest is as hushed as the winter Sundays of his childhood. Bobby's overall tone is sufficiently wry to exclude his immediate emotional reactions to the priest's aggression, though to a more active reader, this emotional silence speaks volumes. Emotion and spontaneity do exist in Bobby's narrative, but they originate at points between writing, ellipses made visible by context. For instance, the noticeably unexplained reference to the priest "pick[ing] a boy up by the bum" invites endless questions as to the circumstances surrounding such an act. Similarly, the priest's very identity in Bobby's memory is as a negative presence, a figure

in black with little of either the good or the bad side of humanity. In short, the emotional content of the memory may be gleaned from Bobby's inability to describe it and his apparent repression of its immediate impact. The final image of the priest is that of a figure too awful for definition. His readers must themselves interpret his silences in the very same way that Bobby, interprets the silences of his mother. As seen in the discussion of parody in the first chapter, an active reader is able to retransmit the text from his or her own position. In effect, the constructive use of silence allows the reader to better assimilate the surrounding utterances into his or her own language. Bobby's distance from his subject matter not only frees him from the dominant sociolinguistic structures; it also situates the reader as the original point, so that the reader's own reconstructions of Bobby's life compensate for his distance.

As metalinguistic commentary, *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *The Time of Their Lives* present a number of responses to the movement toward a unitary language in Canada. The examples of "baby-talk" and the internally reinforced standards of the region both constitute alternative *langues* to a so-called Canadian English. But Newfoundland dialect can rarely win so long as it is opposed by the privileged *langue* of Canadian English. While Wayne Johnston no doubt does a commendable job of exposing this futility, the futility is also illustrated by his own evocation of the regional voice, which is ambiguously successful at best. That balance of distance and proximity discussed in the previous chapters is problematic in the arena of language, for in compromising their own inclusion in the linguistic communities of their subjects, both

narrators also compromise their appeal to readers from the region. The best that either can do is turn, like many of their characters, to silence and ellipsis for expression, allowing readers to write their own messages independently of any particular *langue*.

Conclusion

Wayne Johnston is very much aware of the special challenges facing any potential novelist from a marginalized region such as Newfoundland. Most notable is a naturalized sense of inferiority that is decidedly region-based. In recollecting his own early career planning, Johnston concedes, “[I]t seemed to me that you were about as likely to be a great writer from Newfoundland as you were to be an NHL hockey player from Newfoundland” (“A Time of His Life” 28). Even after the varied commercial and critical success of his four novels, Johnston’s own career evinces the influence of cultural centralization in Canada. Today, he identifies Toronto as home, a move which is largely attributable to the availability there of government funding and other resources that “just don’t exist” in his region of origin (qtd. in Sullivan A13). This movement is also evident in Johnston’s fiction, as his latest novel, *Human Amusements*, is set in Toronto and features the recognized centres of Canadian and North American television culture.

But as Johnston himself urges readers to note, none of this necessarily means that Newfoundland has lost an author, for “A Newfoundland writer doesn’t have to be defined as somebody who lives in Newfoundland” (“A Time of His Life” 16). On the contrary, as this thesis has shown, distance from a given setting figures into Johnston’s theory of fiction as a potentially positive device for the regional writer. As his novels so clearly illustrate, distance is detrimental to the regional writing subject only when it works within the regionalist discourse of Canadian culture to highlight the gap between the region and

the purportedly superior centre. In contrast, a more moderate distance from the subjugative relationship frees the narrative perspective from the limitations imposed by that relationship. By cultivating such distance in his writing, Johnston is able to more objectively and candidly divine the region's role within Canada and the world beyond.

Furthermore, his decision to set *Human Amusements* outside the marginalized region of Newfoundland augments this achievement, for it is only by turning to the centre that Johnston can fully question its status as such. The characters of *Human Amusements* are in actuality no more transcendent than those region dwellers of Johnston's previous novels, and Johnston's presentation of them deftly exposes the artifice behind their rise to cultural prominence. *Human Amusements* complements those novels set in Newfoundland by examining the other half of that subordinate relationship to which the region dweller is often too eager to contribute.

Ultimately, Johnston's physical and fictional move away from the region is anything but that which Val Ross identifies as the "trick" of "liv[ing] near the centre of the modern world, yet preserv[ing] one's perspective" ("Encompassing the Box" A12). Instead, there is in Johnston's work a clear statement of the validity of the region-based perspective, which, rather than 'preserved,' is unfortunately and unnecessarily sacrificed at the bidding of an artificially centralized culture. As just one of many in postmodern, Canadian society, the regional subject position can be and is its own worst enemy. It is only by outwardly acknowledging the arbitrary limits of any one subjectivity that the Newfoundland writer can hope to become more than an actor in the self-directed play of

Canadian cultural centralization.

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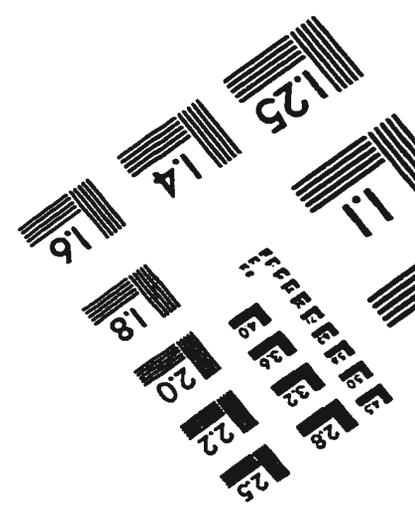
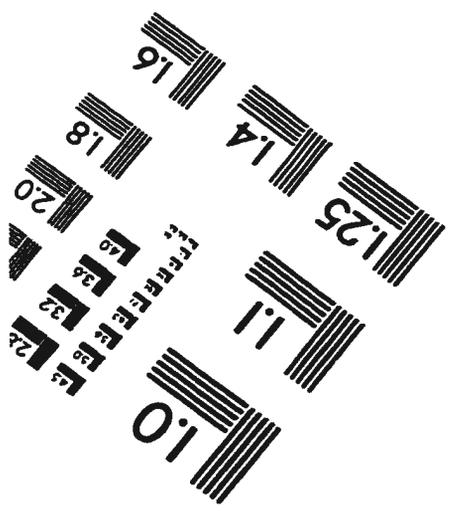
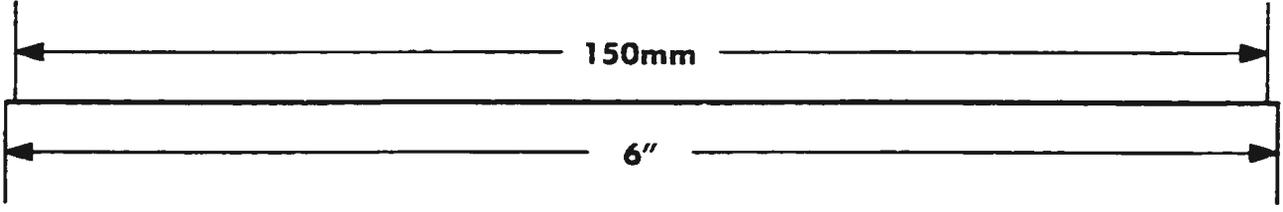
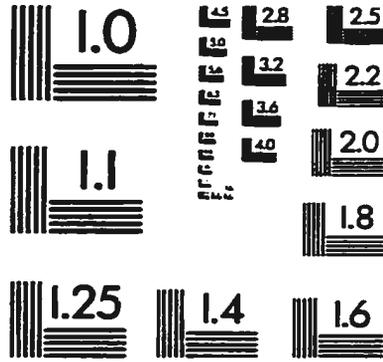
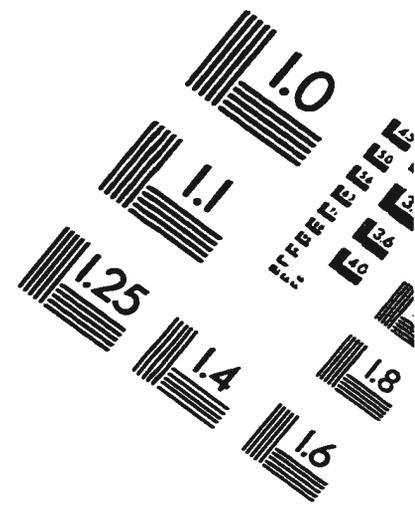
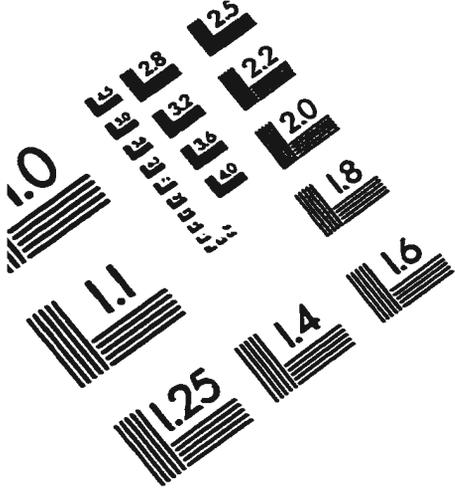
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