

STRANGELY STRUNG BEADS: WAYNE JOHNSTON'S STORY OF BOBBY O'MALLEY

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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.

—Wayne Johnston, *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*

In keeping with the *künstlerroman* tradition, Wayne Johnston's *Story of Bobby O'Malley* (1985) portrays a sensitive, young protagonist endeavoring to come to terms with both the world around him and the medium (language) he inherits to express his unique relationship with the world. One of the most striking features of Johnston's tale of a boy growing up in Kellies, Newfoundland, during the sixties and early seventies, is the way the story continually turns in upon itself, examining itself as narrative. Indeed, the reference to "the telling" in the first sentence of Bobby's first-person narration (quoted above) gives us an early signal of its self-reflexive orientation. In a wider context, Bobby's awareness of his story as an art form, combined with his sense of the absurd and parodic nature of experience clearly exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon calls the Canadian postmodern, in its "tendency towards self-reference as a way both of engaging with its own past, usually through irony and parody, and also of engaging with its audience."¹

Bobby's story of his past abounds with double meaning and parody. The verbal irony, for example, in Ted O'Malley's labeling of his son as a "nightmarish baby"² suggests, on one level, simply the nightmares Bobby had as an infant, but on another level, the nightmare of Ted and Agnes O'Malley's relationship which was only consummated once, "the night they made Bobby" (167). Ted O'Malley's theory of reversed

intelligence—that we begin life as infant-geniuses and grow increasingly stupid—parodies the idea of childhood as a golden age from which we fall away set forth in Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode," while simultaneously asserting the Romantic poet's "child as father of the man" theme. Bobby is, in many ways, his father's father. The movement of sewage through the O'Malley's septic system parodies an epic journey, and Ted's attempt to unblock the pipes is heralded, on the back cover of the novel, as the most humorous episode in the story, "likely to become a classic of its kind."

The primary means by which Bobby O'Malley's story "engages with its audience" is through humour. Indeed, nearly all the reviewers of the novel cite its humour as its central strength, noting as well, however, the presence of something darker—what Stuart Pierson, in his review, called a "horror show"³—beneath the comic surface of the story. Humour is also a central medium through which Bobby as storyteller engages with his own past in an attempt to make sense of it and, I think, redeem it. Ultimately, Bobby O'Malley's story is a testing ground for the power of art and the limits of narrative art, specifically, as a meliorating agent in world of isolation, loss and misery.

The self-referential orientation of Johnston's novel about a storyteller attempting to determine the potency of his art through the process of telling is corroborated by Richard Paul Knowles who suggests that "the processes of memory, dream and narrative, processes through which mind tries to connect with world . . . how memory is shaped, the difficulty of telling, and the artificiality of ending"⁴ constitute central concerns in the novel. Knowles' comments are augmented by the opening paragraph of the novel, quoted earlier. Thus Bobby's story begins with an image of narrative itself.

In this initial, key passage, Johnston presents us with a deceptively simple idea of narrative and its relationship to experience: a life like strung beads. 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. And despite the initial image posited of narrative as a simple sequential order, "strange" becomes an increasingly important word in Bobby's story, undermining the "strung beads" metaphor for narrative. The strangeness in Bobby's opening sentences emerges through the image of

reversal (oldest/youngest) and the implied difficulty of telling. The inversion that Bobby casually presents as a kind of universal curiosity—"strange that our oldest memories are of the days when we were youngest"—anticipates a world turned upside down (weather becomes anti-weather, for example), which is the dystopian image that runs as a counterpoint to the pastoral world of childhood.

What the string of beads metaphor reflects, then, is a certain wish-fulfillment 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. The storyteller who assumes an absolute control over his story like a Prospero figure working his artistic magic and making everything come out right, absents himself, in *Bobby O'Malley*, even before the story begins, but not without a wistful, fleeting glimpse of the story that might have been. In a world as strange as Bobby's, the artist who believed himself to be thus empowered and who believed that experience could be marshalled into a neat narrative string must confront his own dishonesty and the limitations of his illusion of beadlike symmetry.

Bobby presents his art, his story, as an illusion that doesn't quite work. But almost. The appearance of Bobby's parents in the pages of his story has a magical quality to it, as Bobby tells us that "I will watch [my father] from across a room and almost remember the way he was before he became a part of me. I will not, but almost, remember how to step back and see him, strange and real" (23). The operative word, of course, is "almost." There are numerous references to magic and illusion throughout the novel, but there is usually a subsequent disenchantment or exposure of the illusion, with the exception, perhaps, of Mattie, the seventh son of a seventh son who does possess some aspects of authentic folk-wizardry, although he has been firmly indoctrinated into the capitalist system with his "no money, no miracle" stipulation (96). After the visit to Mattie at the end of Book One, Chapter Four, however, Bobby is never visited by the hag of his nightmares again. But we might question whether Mattie's was a "real" miracle or what Agnes O'Malley, Bobby's

mother, would call a "sordid miracle" (13), a phrase she uses in reference to her husband Ted's tricks.⁵

Bobby's story does have a shape, but it is more of a continual looping back or recursive reversal than a linear string of beads. Although reading the story does involve a relatively straightforward progression as we follow the O'Malleys from one house to the next, from one bead on the string to the next, from one humorous episode to the next, the anti-narrative of silence or nullification is continually in tension with the "beads" configuration of ordered narrative.

The anti-narrative force that continually threatens to sever the string of beads as a viable narrative model for Bobby's story is personified in the figure of Ted O'Malley, the father. Indeed, Bobby's story is as much about his father as it is about himself; the fact that the novel ends shortly after Ted's death suggests his significance as the actual protagonist. Bobby casts himself more than once into the role of fifth business—"essential, but uninteresting" (39)—and this is sometimes because of the all-pervasive presence of the father in the narrative. It is not difficult to see the kind of oedipal relationship described by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* between the father's project, *Our Memoirs: A Story from Family Memory* (which turns out to be silence, pages flushed, anti-narrative) and the son's work, *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*. But although the father artist-figure is "purged" or "flushed" (Bobby burns the video tape of his father's last forecast in the toilet) in a ritual symbolizing the son wresting himself free from his father's oppressive inventive tyranny, this exorcism does not make Bobby's story any easier to tell.

The difficulty of telling might be seen to arise from two main sources: first, the limitations of language, a problem any literary artist encounters, and one that is admitted early in Bobby's story: "I should introduce my father. How deceptive language is. Oxford defines 'father' as 'male parent' and adds the qualification—'one who deserves filial reverence.' The word is not quite adequate" (6). Telling is also difficult because of the extensiveness of human suffering inevitably discovered by any protagonist in his or her journey from innocence to experience. Bobby O'Malley experiences these two difficulties in rather particular ways determined, in part, by his time and place, the "nets" of environment, to recall Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*,

specific to growing up an only child, "a rarity in most parts of the Catholic universe" (6) in Newfoundland. The themes of both language and suffering in Bobby's story are inextricably bound up with the father-son relationship and more generally with the familial and social milieu portrayed in the novel.

As the father-protagonist, the character Ted O'Malley suggests other patriarchal figures in Canadian novels. William Dawe in Kroetsch's *Badlands* comes to mind, for example, especially in the similar annihilation of the father's words that culminates both the journey of the daughter (Anna Dawe) and the son (Bobby O'Malley) into the ultimately silent worlds of their fathers. Anna Dawe, however, appoints a "new" parent in the Indian woman Anna Yellowbird, solidifying a new parent-child relationship whereas Bobby O'Malley leaves, alone, on a ferry full of weeping people, for the mainland. This final scene of Johnston's novel is tragically ironic in that Ted O'Malley's theory that the only thing humans share is loss (expounded as the nicemare-nightmare-nomare theory, [67]) is proven, prophetically, to be true. It is appropriate, therefore, that Bobby leaves alone, with a boatful of others, each alone.

The prophetic abilities of the father, Ted O'Malley, the town weatherman who is constantly trying to predict the future and who is constantly tricked by nature might suggest another prophet-father-figure in the character of Laurence's Christie Logan in *The Diviners*. Certainly both men dwell on the fringes of society, and are, as Bobby describes his father, "both shaman and scapegoat" (22). But Christie Logan's prophetic ravings are underpinned by a genuine spiritual basis or mythos—an essentially Biblical one, as critics have often discussed—that bestows meaning on human endeavour. Thus Christie leaves behind a spiritual and artistic legacy to his adoptive daughter, Morag.

Ted O'Malley's radical rejection of Catholic dogma (problematized by his own wife's devoutness and attendant celibacy) and his movement towards silence leave Bobby with no such spiritual or artistic legacy. In fact, Bobby O'Malley's discursive universe, shaped largely by the discourse of religious dogma (the world of his mother and the church) and the nonsense discourse of his father, "blasphemous gibberish" (17), as Agnes calls it, is a complex and problematic one. Both types of discourse are limited: the mother's because it cannot, for Bobby,

explain the world with any degree of comfort or certainty, and the father's because it reduces the world and renders it absurd. Both types of discourse are "strange," and both are adhered to by each parent in an equally adamant and extremist manner. Furthermore, neither the language of Agnes and the church—the discourse of faith—nor the language of Ted—sometimes pseudo-scientific, sometimes nonsensical but in either case, ultimately silent—can meliorate suffering, any more than a narrative can explain a life as an ordered string of beads.

The conflict between the discourses of science and faith emerges most humorously in the "man on the TV" sequence, with the TV symbolizing an illusory, projected other self, resembling, perhaps, the self created through art, partly real and partly invented. Bobby tells us:

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 wave-lengths, on a fixed frequency, from a transmitter some distance removed." That was his phrase, word for word. He made me memorize it. At gatherings of relations and friends, he would turn to me and say, "Bobby, what is the name of the man on TV? Everyone would look at me and smile, expecting me to say something cute, like "it's you, Daddy," or, "the man's name is Ted O'Malley." Instead, I would stand up and, screwing up my face, recite: "the man on the TV is an aggregate of microdots, unscrambled by the receiver, having been sent at random wave-lengths, on a fixed frequency, from a transmitter some distance removed." In some circles, this might have gotten a laugh; not in ours. Everyone looked at my mother with puzzled, worried expressions, which, more often than not, caused her to cry and run to her room. (16)

What the audience of this performance really finds upsetting is not Bobby's failure to fall into the role of adoring child, thus evoking a picture of familial felicity, but the utter meaninglessness of human existence that the scientific jargon implies, especially in such phrases as "random wave-lengths." In other words, Ted's account of his own identity replaces the creation myth of Genesis with an arbitrary, mechanistic authority resembling E.J. Pratt's "great Panjandrum" in "The Truant." The advice Bobby's mother gives him is to "shout down" "aggregate of microdots" with "Hail Mary" (17). Like many of the other instances of "magic" or illusion in the novel, the mystery of the

"man on the TV" is demystified with Ted eventually admitting to Bobby that he had "made microdots up, that the phrase was only a lot of nonsense that didn't really explain the man on the TV at all" (17). One of the more poignant ironies of Bobby's story, then, is that invention, including linguistic invention, fails to explain, much less redeem, experience.

Although Ted O'Malley talks incessantly throughout Bobby's story, he possesses no real vocabulary to account for his own existence or to articulate his own suffering. His language is comprised mainly of linguistic graffiti that is often clever but ultimately nonsensical, and his "science" is closer to pataphysics, the science of nonsense, than physics, or "real" science. Ted's dark play ultimately points toward nothingness: the meaninglessness that he sees as his life. This combination of play and nihilism characterizes Bobby's father. Indeed, Ihab Hassan's description in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* of Alfred Jarry, the founder of pataphysics, could be a description of Johnston's Ted O'Malley. Hassan writes that "like Sade, Beckett, or Burroughs, Jarry suffers from a reductive rage; he belittles our world. At times, there is something almost sacramental about his peculiar nihilism."⁶ Hassan also writes of Jarry that "in his world, paradox and triviality rule the waning day . . . He ends as a prophet of otherness, standing beside himself, Ubuesque. He also ends as a humorist of the infinite" (49). Ted O'Malley's roster of ghostly awards such as "Ghost Who Must Have Been Most Liked, Gregarious, Lonely, Boring, etc." (170) and "The First Annual Funeral Awards," designated following a prolonged period of close observation of a graveyard from an upstairs bedroom window, situate him as a "humorist of the infinite" as well as foreshadow his own death. The prevalence of sewage in Johnston's novel might also remind us of the centrality of waste in Jarry's "King Ubu." As Hassan remarks, referring to Ubu, "reduction leads finally to waste; this is the essential joke of life" (52).

Hassan's description of Jarry as a "prophet of otherness, standing beside himself" resembles the double image of Ted O'Malley that runs throughout Johnston's novel. The double father image in Bobby's story is centered on a paradox of presence and absence and plays upon the dichotomy of reality and illusion. The strange paradox of Bobby's father being both "there and not there," both present and absent, is not fully

realized by Bobby until after Ted's death. When the video tape of Ted's last forecast is played in the room containing Ted's casket, Bobby says, "It was strange to have him alive on one side of the room, and dead on the other" (179). The news of O'Malley's death is typed on the screen, "superimposed on a moving image of him, the words and the image contradicting one another...there and not there, an animated relic" (179).

The paradox of the father being "there and not there" captures the essence of Bobby's story. In acknowledging the "strangeness" of the double father figure—dead on one side of the room and alive on the other—Bobby intuits the strangeness of his own story, and of narrative itself: that storytelling plays upon the boundaries between reality and illusion, truth and lies, presence and absence. The O'Malleys' marginal existence on the fringes of the town—living in all the neighborhoods but never really part of them, a "neutral zone" (6)—might be seen as a metaphor for the marginality of narrative itself, and for its strangeness.

"Art" has numerous manifestations in the novel. Bobby's story, in other words, provides the framework for but does not constitute the only kind of artistic activity. Motifs of artistry or creativity run throughout the book in the form of performances, inventions, work play and wit. Gabriel, the boy in the wheel chair, for example, is a performer who, as Bobby tells us, "always needed an audience" for his "performances" (39). We are reminded also of Uncle Rennie's enactment of Lee Harvey Oswald's murder, with each family member playing a part except for Agnes, who refuses to participate in the farcical illusion.

In Chapter Five, Bobby provides us with an important clue as to the function of humour or wit when he says that "at school, I developed a kind of compensating wit" (109). What Bobby is compensating for is his isolation, brought on ostensibly because of his plans to become a priest, but really because of his evolving artist's sensibility. The idea of compensation through artistry or invention is crucial to an understanding of Bobby's story as a testing ground for the power of narrative that I suggested earlier; it also provides an important link between the characters of Gabriel, Bobby and Ted, all of whom attempt, through invention, some "compensation" against the misery of the world and a society that all too readily persecutes those who are different.

The fact that Johnston published the story of Gabriel separately in the Spring 1985 issue of *Fiddlehead* (under the title "Gabriel") suggests his interest in the figure of the outsider who is persecuted by society and who attempts, without success, in Gabriel's case, to compensate through some kind of inventive tactic. Admittedly, Gabriel's "oracles" are not the stuff of high art (his "trances," his "haul" of bad words), but they empower him for a limited time. Gabriel's "powers," which are based on his difference ("because he was different, he was believed to have special powers," [38]), are not accepted by society, implying that he, because of his difference, is not accepted. After being caught playing "show, tell, pull and play" with three twelve-year-old girls, Gabriel is socially ex-communicated, a scarlet-lettered boy: "A bell had been hung on Gabriel's name: keep clear, keep clear. Do not speak it. If spoken, do not hear it" (47).

Bobby does not understand the depth of Gabriel's isolation and suffering until later, suggesting that remembering and telling, memory and narrative, move in reverse loops, and not in a forwardly sequential string of beads. As Bobby tells us, "How could I know that life in that [wheel] chair was life encased in one-way glass. [Gabriel] could see out, but not get out—and no one could see him . . . And not the Equalizer, not obscene boasts nor loud lies could break that glass. Nor could he, as on rare days he seemed to be trying, charm his way out with the church-morning pitch of his voice" (42). The image of glass links Gabriel to Bobby, as both continually watch the world through a window. The "equalizer," one of Gabriel's gimmicks, links him to Ted O'Malley and the world of invention, play and play-objects. Tragically, Gabriel's inventive attempts to compensate for his own difference fail, and he becomes a victim of a society that refuses to accommodate any degree of difference or strangeness.

Like Gabriel, Ted attempts to compensate for the isolation of existence through various forms of inventiveness or creativity. Ted's endeavours to "compensate" are much more far-reaching than Gabriel's, however. What Ted attempts as a way of compensating involves what Freud calls, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, a "delusional remoulding of reality."⁷ This "delusional remoulding" Freud cites as an even more radical way of pursuing happiness—or avoiding suffering—than the creation and/or appreciation of art which, Freud argues, induces

only a "mild narcosis" which can "do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs, and it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery" (28).

Of delusionism, the more radical means of attempting to forget misery and console ourselves, Freud writes:

[The delusion procedure] operates more energetically and more thoroughly [than art]. It regards reality as the sole enemy and as the source of all suffering, with which it is impossible to live, so that one must break off all relations with it if one is to be in any way happy. The hermit turns his back on the world and will have no truck with it. But one can do more than that; one can try to re-create the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one's own wishes. But whoever, in desperate defiance, sets out upon this path to happiness will as a rule attain nothing. Reality is strong for him. He becomes a madman, who for the most part finds no one to help him in carrying through his delusion. (28)

In this example, Freud is describing the delusion of the individual: the artist, the madman, or, in the case of *Bobby O'Malley*, the father made strange by an undeniable reality—his wife's celibacy and the "obtuse silliness" of the world as Ted sees it. The social delusional remoulding of reality, made by "a considerable number of people in common" (28) Freud refers to as religion, a mass-delusion that, he says, is never recognized as such among those who share it. Bobby O'Malley struggles in the border zone between his mother's (and his society's) mass delusion expressed through Catholic dogma and his father's personal delusion expressed through his continuous and obsessive remoulding of the world through play, parody and nonsense—a world remoulded, but not redeemed.

The only help Ted O'Malley receives in his "desperately defiant" attempts to alter reality and make it more bearable comes from Bobby. In other words, Bobby functions as a kind of co-creator, or perhaps a necessary audience or witness to his father's frenzied attempts to divert himself from an intolerable reality. But what is curious about Bobby's story is that he never explicitly says that his father's creative endeavours—his many inventions and projects—are Ted's way of fending off suffering. Bobby does suggest boredom as a possible reason for his father's continual pursuit of new "toys" and games. Ted indulges in

word play, for example (Rodin's Stinker, Little Horphan Hannie, etc.), as Bobby tells us, to "make a word more interesting" (11). The idea of invention as an antidote to boredom reappears later in the story with Ted's "fantasy forecasts" and the invention of the vacucycle. After his "retirement" as weatherman, Ted assumes a round of household chores which, as Bobby tells us, "included vacuuming the floors every day....Before long, my father got bored with it, and came up with a way of making it more interesting. He put his idea on paper first....Soon, in hockey helmet, hunched over the handlebars, his eyes focused on the floor in search of dirt, he was tricycling around the house at all hours of the day and night. He looked, with the vacuum roaring behind him, the bag on his back, like some strange exterminator" (153). The vacucycle is short-lived, however, with Agnes' ultimatum: "GROW UP OR GET OUT" (155), recalling Freud's description of the man who takes extreme measures in an attempt to forget misery and who becomes a madman who "for the most part finds no one to help him in carrying through his delusion."

The "vacucycle" symbolizes a frighteningly meaningless, arbitrary and chaotic universe that reminds us of the "random wave lengths" that Ted says comprise the "aggregate of microdots" who is the man on the TV. It might also remind us of the vacuum that Ted and Agnes's marriage has become, as Bobby says: "now, like armies who no longer remember why it was they first took up arms, they began to wander aimlessly, and to look at one another across the distance with puzzlement and reproach" (54). Or of the paddling races in Bobby's high school gym class in which the contestants remain stationary even though a winner is designated at the caprice of the teacher; one strives in a vacuum, a world of hidden signs. "Vacucycle" is also part of a set of images in the novel that, as Stuart Pierson observes, denote a motif of the whirling vortex, a world of nightmare and vertigo.⁸ The fact that Ted finds "no one to help him in carrying through his delusion" holds true for society in general when, for example, he attempts to market his "fantasy forecasts" that do not tell what the weather was like, but "what the people wanted it to be like," and, as Bobby says, "no-one was interested" (152).

Ingenious as Ted's inventions may be, his chronic *ennui* invariably sets in again until the next gadget is invented as a

temporary but ultimately meaningless diversion. In other words, Ted's artistry or "remoulding" of reality has no real power to sustain him or to make him forget misery. Moreover, objects like the vacucycle and the "teddy tank" represent dark parodies of middle-class family life, just as Ted's regime of physical fitness involving lifting his family in "some strange calisthenic of family togetherness" (26) parodies familial unity.

We might well question why Bobby suppresses the real reason for his father's obsessive play and inventiveness when it is obvious to the reader, at least, that Ted's antics are not executed out of mere boredom, but isolation, despair and an inability to discern or believe in any kind of genuine meaning underlying human existence. We know that Bobby has an aversion to things that are "too horrible to believe" (10). He prefers, for example, the second, "slightly less terrifying" theory of why the whirlpools in the pond near the O'Malleys' house defied location; the second theory, incidentally, was that the whirlpools "moved about, random mobile vortices" (9) that occasionally swallowed a swimmer, another version of the random wave lengths and the vacucycle. Bobby's father's affair with Harold's mother is also, for Bobby, "too horrible to believe," but it is undeniably real. His attempts to suppress its reality are suggested by his placing of the event—his father and Harold's mother, "naked in the Teddy-tank," "roaring out of the darkness" (70)—in parentheses. It is similarly "too horrible" for Bobby to believe that his father committed suicide, and the death is euphemized with Bobby's remark that "I know my father didn't plan his death, but I can't help thinking he knew a good thing when he felt it coming on" (175). Yet the reference to death as a "good thing" betrays Bobby's innate sympathy with his father's experience of reality as a nightmare.

In other words, despite Bobby's attempts to "compensate" for isolation through humour, suppress otherness (silence, for example) through an orderly, controlled narrative form (strung beads) and "remould" (and thus redeem) experience through both of these devices, we know that Bobby knows that the strangeness of experience and things "too horrible" to be believed stand a real possibility of being undeniably true, despite attempts to reconstruct reality into something more tolerable. Bobby knows the truth, for example, behind his father's deceptive bowling score cards—that Ted has not been bowling

but has been, instead, out with Harold's mother. Bobby's "compensating wit" can neither alleviate his own isolation nor redeem the suffering of the world. It cannot save his father or Gabriel, as the ironic reversal of Bobby as the (reluctant) guardian of Gabriel, the "guardian angel," suggests. Bobby's story works towards the admission that the artist has limited power as a meliorating agent against life's misery and that art—a particular kind of "delusional remoulding"—cannot redeem a fallen world that Agnes calls "post-Vatican," Ted calls "post-expansion"⁹ and literary critics sometimes call postmodern.

Ted O'Malley's life spans, as the inscription on his headstone indicates, 1918 to 1974, a nightmarish era, in Western culture, of war, corroding belief systems and atrocities such as the Nazi concentration camps. It would be incorrect to assume that Johnston is suggesting that art has no function in a morally chaotic modern—or postmodern—world, but rather that art, including narrative art, cannot assume a shape or form that belies the cultural and historical reality surrounding it. As the biological and artistic son of his father, Bobby O'Malley can hardly ignore the strange legacy left to him. Through the telling of his story, Bobby may attempt, as he sometimes does, to suppress the "other" or to sublimate it into sanitized, humorous episodes, but the strangeness of his story continually rises to the surface. As a storyteller, he inhabits a border zone between the "mass delusion" of his mother's Catholicism and his father's parodic enactment of the madness of a fallen world; both worlds are, ultimately, equally mysterious and based on delusional attempts to console ourselves and to forget misery. Bobby's story is his attempt, and as a means of "forgetting" suffering, it is only partially successful. Through the act of narrative, those we love can be born again, as Bobby gives birth to his own parents in Chapter Two, but the illusion of art cannot sustain "real" life, just as a story artfully shaped as strung beads cannot fully capture the many aspects of experience that are random and inexplicable. Thus *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* is also inevitably the story of the limitations as well as the power of narrative.

NOTES

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988): ix.

² Wayne Johnston, *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* (Canada: Oberon, 1985): 7. Further quotations from Johnston's novel are cited in the essay.

³ See Stuart Pierson's review of *The Story of Bobby O'Malley* in *Newfoundland Quarterly* LXXXIII.3 (Winter 1988): 40-48.

⁴ See Richard Paul Knowles' review of *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, "Opening on Memory," *Fiddlehead* 149 (1986): 92-93.

⁵ The "sordid miracle" Agnes is referring to is Ted's comparison of God parting the Red Sea to God plugging the sewage pipe (13). Ted is constantly reducing aspects of culture and religion that are held in reverence by most people such as his reduction of the Red Sea to a sewage system, which scandalizes his wife.

⁶ See Ihab Hassan's chapter "Interlude: From Pataphysics to Surrealism" in his book *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, 2nd ed. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1982): 49. Further quotations from Hassan are cited in the essay.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961). Further quotations from this work are cited in the essay.

⁸ See Stuart Pierson's review, cited above. Pierson discusses two central metaphors in *Bobby O'Malley*: an enclosure ("at times comforting, but always turning into a trap" [42]) and "a vortex—a whirl." He argues that "the two are related, for it is with reference to the enclosure that the turning takes place, and from inside which it is seen: a turning faster and faster, getting tighter and tighter, down and down into madness, horror, isolation, blood, shit and death." This labyrinthine configuration in Bobby's story, Pierson's review suggests, may in part come from the influence of the "modern fantasists—echoes of whose playfulness with abstractions like space, time and mind show up in Bobby's story." (41)

⁹ There is probably a fine line between suppressing and choosing not to disclose. In other words, from the point of view of narrative, Ted and Agnes's celibate marriage is, for the reader, the missing piece of information in the story, although the reader begins to suspect this fact before Bobby actually discloses it. As a storyteller, then, Bobby is aware that the truth about his parents' relationship is the punch line of his narrative and as a result, it is in his best interests as a storyteller to withhold this piece of information until near the end of the story. But this, I think, only partly explains why the reality of Ted's situation is not disclosed any sooner. Another reason is that Bobby does not wish to puncture the illusion of the world of childhood, a world, by and large, of pleasantness; he wishes to keep suffering at a distance, both for himself and the audience/readers of his story.