INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

The Quest for Identity:

Defining the "Self" in Two Novels by Annie Proulx

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the

degree of Master of Arts

by

Anna Martikainen ©

April 1998

For my parents.

Thank you for all your love and support,

and for giving me the courage to strive after my dreams.

"Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther....And one fine morning—
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."
F. Scott Fitzgerald

"Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born ***between people*** *collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction."*
Mikhail Bakhtin

Table of Contents

Abstract

The idea of the "self" as an autonomous whole is no longer sufficient in contemporary discussions of identity. Individuals are "subjects," defining themselves against and through other subjects and their environments. A definitive self is impossible to achieve—the process is ongoing, fluid, and relational, without a final destination. The focus of this thesis is an examination of the quest for identity in two novels by Annie Proulx—*The Shipping News* and *Accordion Crimes*.

To facilitate this discussion of the quest for identity, I employ the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, and of the dialogic critics that he has influenced. The notion of "dialogue," in its broadest sense, reveals that the quest for identity is not a solitary quest. Each questor is a product of his or her surroundings, and these surroundings shape the quest. The quest for identity is a dialogue with place, including both the environment and the people within it. The situatedness of the quest for identity is also compounded by time. Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotope" ("time-place") further extends the interconnectedness of the quests for identity. Characters are dialogically related to each other through time, as past, present, and future quests intersect. All of these aspects illustrate the inconclusivity of the quest for identity.

Chapter 1, "Introducing the Quest," outlines the critical framework that I use throughout my thesis. I explore Bakhtin's notions of "polyphony," "dialogue," "carnivalesque," and "chronotope," and explain their relevance both to Proulx's novels and to the quest for identity.

Chapter 2, "Untying the Knots: *The Shipping News*," applies this framework to *The Shipping News*. I focus primarily on Quoyle's quest for identity, though the quests of

the other characters in the novel are important in the dialogic model I employ. To structure this chapter, the "knots of narrative"—structure, place, and relationships—are shown to be central to defining the quest for identity.

Chapter 3, "Listen to the Music: *Accordion Crimes*," discusses Proulx's depiction of the immigrant experience in America. This novel is different from *The Shipping News* in that the protagonist is not a human questor but a green button accordion. As the accordion moves through its various owners, many perspectives of the quest for identity are presented. I use the metaphor of the "unfinished symphony" to examine this novel, emphasizing the polyphony of the text, as well as the unfinalizability of the subject.

Chapter 4, "Colouring the Quest," brings these two novels together and summarizes their similarities and differences by comparing the major symbols of each novel—the green house in *The Shipping News* and the green button accordion in *Accordion Crimes*.

Acknowledgements

Heartfelt thanks to the following people, all of who helped me, in various ways, to attain the goal of my quest.

To Dr. W.G. Heath, my thesis advisor, for undertaking this project with me. You allowed me the freedom to develop my ideas, while offering sound advice and constructive criticism at every step along the way.

To Dr. Kim Fedderson, for serving as my internal reader. The past two years as your teaching assistant have been very rewarding for me, and I hope to convey the same passion and enthusiasm for teaching and learning in my future teaching endeavours.

To Dr. Noreen Golfman, for serving as my external reader, as well as introducing me to Annie Proulx at the 1997 Learneds Conference in St. John's, Newfoundland.

To Dr. Jeanette Lynes, who first exposed me to the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. Without that, this thesis would have been totally different.

To Barbara, Doris, and Chris, my fellow graduate students. As we go our separate ways, I am comforted by the many memories I have of the past year. I would like to thank all of you for believing in me, for listening to my incessant "thesis speak," and most of all, for being wonderful friends.

Finally, a huge thank you to my family and friends. I could not have done this without your support, encouragement, and patience.

Chapter 1

Introducing the Quest

"Our conceptions of who we are never include all that we are anyway...we shall call ourselves by many names. Our metaphors of self cannot then rest in stasis, but will glory in difference and overflow into everything that belongs to us."
(McDowell 88)

The concept of "identity" has been under reconstruction in recent years. With the rise of literary theories (post-structuralist, Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial, for example) that question and challenge the idea of a centre, the notion of identity as a fixed, autonomous self, has been re-examined. Identity can no longer be defined solely in terms of one's individual attributes, but rather as relational, a dynamic interaction between "self" and "other." Identity is not an isolated result or *product*, but a *process* that involves many different elements. This revised concept of identity as a process is central to my thesis.

How does one quest for a self that is constituted through relation? The idea of a quest brings to mind an adventure, a search, in hopes of a reward. Traditionally, questors travel to unknown lands (on their own), meet strange people, and by the end of their adventure, come to an understanding of themselves. In the sense of personal insight and growth, "quest" is an appropriate term for my study, as the subjects we meet, I argue, are searching for their identity (whether it be a conscious or unconscious search), and most have left their homes for unknown territories in that search. In these quests, however, the questors are not alone—their quests are intimately connected to the other quests

happening, simultaneously and interactively, around them. The self-in-progress is the "goal" of the quest, although a definitive end is never reached. The conclusion of each novel is only a new beginning, as the search for self is never-ending.

Two novels by Annie Proulx—*The Shipping News* and *Accordion Crimes*—are the focus of this study. By examining the quests for identity of the various characters that people these texts, I will show that identity is not a stagnant, stable entity, constant through time. There can be no "self" without an "other"—"to 'make' one's self, or at least to make one's self a single entity, is impossible, for all selves are multiple, divided, fragmented, and a part of a greater whole" (Rigney 39). The characters that we, as readers, meet throughout the novels are on a quest, both literal and figurative, for their identity. The style and structure, as well as the characters, relationships, events, and setting of the novels, intensify and depict their quests.

A paradox evolves out of my study. The quest for identity that I am defining is a quest for something fluid and indeterminate, resisting absolute definition. As the opening paragraphs have already shown, "identity" is a multi-faceted entity. The sense of "identity" that I want to invoke is one that also takes into consideration context and history. This sense of identity is elusive, "unfinalized," making definition impossible. My study illuminates and celebrates this eternal quest for identity.

The writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, and of the dialogic critics he has influenced, form the dominant perspective of my study. They use "dialogue" as *the* mode of expressing identity. Moments of relation exist in dialogue and these moments of relation constitute identity. Dialogue, although not limited to verbal speech, is comprised of "an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two" (Holquist 38). Identity, then, is defined

through this relation, the self being dependent on, in fact, consisting of, the other. In the words of Bakhtin, "[t]he genuine life of the personality is made available only through a *dialogic* penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself" (*Problems* 59). When related back to the quest for identity, dialogue becomes the primary means for the questor to seek for his or her identity. The process is an ongoing dialogue, or quest.

Various terms, such as "polyphony," "dialogue," "carnivalesque," and "chronotope" evolve out of Bakhtin's interest in the novel, and become important when discussing the quest for identity. Bakhtin champions the "polyphonic novel," in which "the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its 'languages'" (*Dialogic* 262). This system is termed "polyphony," a term Bakhtin borrows from music and that signifies the novel's "subtle and complex interweaving of various types of speech" (Lodge 21). As Bakhtin explains:

> Different linguistic and stylistic forms may be said to belong to different systems of languages in the novel. If we were to abolish all the intonational quotation marks, all the divisions into voices and styles, all the various gaps between the represented 'languages' and direct authorial discourse, then we would get a conglomeration of *heterogeneous* linguistic and stylistic forms lacking any real sense of style. It is impossible to lay out the languages of the novel on a single plane, to stretch them out along a single line. It is a system of intersecting planes...there is no unitary language or style in the novel. But at the same time there does exist a center of language (a verbal-ideological center) for the novel. The author (as creator of the novelistic whole) cannot be found at any

> one of the novel's language levels: [s]he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect. The different levels are to varying degrees distant from this authorial center (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 48-49).

Not all literary critics would agree with Bakhtin that the author is seen as a conductor of the contesting voices in the novel. However, it is important to note that the authorial voice (if it is present in the dialogue) is no louder than any others participating in the dialogue. It is simply the organizing factor.

Proulx's novels exemplify the qualities of a polyphonic novel. In fact, many dialogic critics see contemporary literature as extolling many of the virtues that Bakhtin celebrated in the work of Dostoevsky and Rabelais. As Linda Hutcheon notes: "[i]t has been suggested, for instance, that contemporary narrative illustrates even more clearly than does Dostoevsky's fiction the polyphony and dialogism that Bakhtin so prized" (83). It is through the dialogue of the characters in the two novels that identity is constituted. For example, at the beginning of *The Shipping News*, Quoyle is trapped in his existence—"But the circumstances enclosed him like the six sides of a metal case" (Proulx 17). His marriage to Petal is a one-sided conversation, as he does not confront her about her adulterous escapades, preferring to hang on to the illusion that his is a happy life. With the collapse of this relationship, Quoyle is forced to accept the illusory nature of that dialogue. When he moves to Newfoundland and meets Wavey, a new dialogue begins. Their relationship is one that requires few words—for Bakhtin, dialogue signifies *more* than just conversation. The respect and kindness they show each other speaks volumes. After a near sexual union with Wavey, Quoyle's life, his identity, his dialogue, and his quest take a new turn. He becomes intimately connected with the land of his

ancestors. It is a rebirth of sorts, as "[a] sense of purity renewed, a sense of events in trembling balance flooded him./Everything, everything seemed encrusted with portent" (Proulx 196). He has broken out of the cage and begins to truly communicate with his environment.

In *Accordion Crimes*, polyphony is essential to the quest for identity. A major theme of the novel is the assimilation of language (in this case, "American English") in order to be accepted into American society and culture. In the chapter entitled "The Goat Gland Operation," the German immigrants are forced to change their names, to deny their heritage, and to *become* American:

> 'This is Roosevelt's horse, he is riding it hard. He don't like hyphens! Jesus Christ! He is concerned about German hyphen Americans. See here, down here. He says, 'some Americans need hyphens in their names because only part of them have come over. But when the whole man has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight out of his name.' And what else drops? Jesus, Jesus and Christ, a beautiful language, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Schiller drops, Goethe drops, Kant and Hegel, Wagner, Wagner drops. Schubert, he drops. *The accordion drops* [italics mine]. And beer drops. Instead we get crazy dried-up American women yelling for the vote and the goddamn dried-up Americans and their dried-up American ideas about Prohibition. They don't see the Germans are the best, the hardest-working people in America. They don't see that everything that is good in America come from the Germans' (Proulx 86).

The Germans are not the only ones who experience this phenomenon. At another point in the novel, Hieronim Przybysz, encounters the same language barrier:

> ...but he could neither read English nor speak American and the immigration inspectors marked him down as illiterate. In this way Hieronim learned that to be foreign, to be Polish, not to be American, was a terrible thing and all that could be done about it was to change one's name and talk about baseball (Proulx 259).

A paradox arises here, as these immigrants come to America in order to forge a new life and identity for themselves, while attempting to preserve the languages and cultures they left behind. How the various sections of the novel deal with this paradox is an important aspect of the quest for identity in *Accordion Crimes*.

Although "dialogue" has been introduced above, it is necessary to define further what is meant by this term, in Bakhtinian analysis, and to show how dialogue differs from polyphony. Generally, "'polyphony' is associated with the macrocosmic structure of the text (literally, its 'many voices') and 'dialogue' with reciprocating mechanisms *within* the smaller units of exchange, down to the individual word" (Pearce 46). It is in the world of dialogue that the subject exists—"the Bakhtinian subject is an incontrovertibly *social* subject, he or she is formed through an ongoing process of dialogic exchange with his or her various interlocutors" (Pearce 4). Polyphony, the many voices, makes dialogue possible. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin states: "The author constructs the hero not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definitions; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero's *discourse* about himself and his world" (53). The many voices in the dialogue are not suppressed and controlled by a monologic authority, but exist in relation to each other.

Despite the idyllic notion that many voices exist and are able to express themselves in a polyphonic, dialogic world, this world is by no means egalitarian. Many dialogic critics examine the power structure that necessarily comes into play *among* the voices. Although different voices have the power to dialogue, the power is not equally distributed. Take, for example, the accordion maker's first days in "La Merica" in *Accordion Crimes*. His subjectivity is defined by the dominant, English-speaking community. His inability to participate in the dialogue as an equal makes him a "prisoner of language" (Proulx 33)—his life reaches a tragic end due to the unequal distribution of power. The power struggle that is revealed in a dialogic world is integral to the quest for identity.

An examination of dialogue in Proulx's novels reveals its importance in the quest for identity. According to Bakhtin, "[t]he ideological becoming of a human being...is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (*Dialogic* 341). In *The Shipping News*, Quoyle is constantly appropriating other voices and incorporating them into his identity. Quoyle is in an entirely "new world" upon his arrival to *Newfoundland* (Proulx's happening upon the setting for her novel may have been serendipitous, yet it is a more than suitable place for a man to embark upon a quest for his identity), and must "learn the ropes." The voices that he appropriates can be likened to the strands that come together to tie a knot. His name is significant in this process, as a "quoyle" is literally a "coil of rope." His first days at the newspaper are spent imitating the dialogue of the other employees. As he becomes more comfortable with his own voice, these voices are incorporated into his own. For example, he writes an article that goes against the editorial "expertise" of Tert Card, which shifts his identity completely. Jack Buggit takes his side

in this conflict, legitimizing Quoyle's voice in the community. Therefore, it is through dialogue that Quoyle learns about himself.

Dialogue is much more than an exchange of words in conversation. In *Accordion Crimes*, music is an important type of dialogue. With the green button accordion as the protagonist of the novel, it is only natural that many characters would utilize music to express themselves. In the chapter titled "Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair," for example, music becomes *the* medium of communication. While searching for the "old music," Dolor Gagnon thinks that "[i]f he brought the green accordion he wouldn't need to talk" (Proulx 180). The various characters in the novel become intimately tied to the dialogue that the accordion can (or can *not*) provide.

The situatedness of dialogue necessarily entails a thorough appreciation for the time and place where dialogue occurs. Bakhtin uses the term "chronotope," which literally means, "time-place," to describe "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 84). Bakhtin goes on to say that:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (*Dialogic* 84).

Much like the competing voices that intersect in the novel, time and place become intimately related and fuse together with meaning. The establishment of a specific, yet fluid, context plays an important role in the quest for identity, as time and place create the

context for dialogue. Eudora Welty notes, "[b]esides furnishing a plausible abode for the novel's world of feeling, place has a good deal to do with making the characters real, that is, themselves, and keeping them so" (121).

The various chronotopes that present themselves in Proulx's novels are significant in the quest for identity. From the isolation of a Newfoundland fishing village to the busy streets of New Orleans, Proulx takes her characters, and her readers, through worlds of experience. How her characters place themselves in their surroundings is an integral aspect of their quest for identity. In *The Shipping News*, the setting takes on mythic proportions. Proulx's description of the land and the sea reflects the various degrees of Quoyle's quest, as well as the identities of the novel's other characters. The island of Newfoundland becomes a character and literally "comes to life." The characters arise out of this environment—Billy Pretty's instinctive knowledge of the sea, for example. Likewise, Quoyle's fear of water, his initial resistance to buying a boat, and his lack of "sea legs" reveal significant aspects of his identity. While he confronts these fears of place, his quest advances.

The variety of chronotopes that appear in the novels is an important aspect of the quest. Proulx's characters must be displaced from their homes in order to find out who they are, instigating the quest. A change of venue is necessary for the quest to begin. How the different characters adapt to the environment—from Quoyle buying a boat to cross the bay in *The Shipping News* to the German immigrants in *Accordion Crimes* cultivating the land, building a community out of nothing—illustrates the identity they are carving for themselves in a strange place. This dialogue with place is important to the quest for identity.

As well, Proulx's manipulation of time in *Accordion Crimes* with the use of "flash-forwards" becomes an integral thematic and structural quality of the novel. At various points in the novel, we, as readers, are often privileged to learn about events that take place in the future. At these moments, place stands still, and time takes on a life of its own. These "flash-forwards" function as a way of collapsing time. The telling of events that take place in the future makes the present moment only one in a continuum, yet a necessary part of the whole. The notion of chronotope, then, becomes significant to the quest for identity. Characters are defined not only through the places and times they inhabit, but through the expansion and contraction of time around them. Their quests become dialogically related to quests that take place before and after them.

Bakhtin's writings on the "carnivalesque" are also important in an examination of the quest for identity. The concepts of "polyphony," "dialogue," and "chronotope," among others, are expressed in a particular situation, namely the "carnival." Before looking at examples in the novels, it is necessary to define the key concepts of the carnivalesque as it is expressed in literature.

Essentially, "carnival makes familiar relations strange" (Holquist 89). People, places, and things are put into a new perspective, opening up an entirely new way of looking at the world. Bakhtin sees the carnival as a time of renewal and celebration: "This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 34).

The carnival, as it is expressed in literature, is often called the "carnivalesque" or "carnivalized" literature. The various attributes of the carnival illuminate the struggle for

identity, as well as the multiplicity of expression. What, for Bakhtin, took place in the medieval forum of the carnival, now takes place in any setting. An important element of contemporary literature is the carnivalized nature of everyday experience. "The ambivalence and incompleteness of contemporary novels recall the similar qualities of the carnival and of the Romantic grotesque, as defined by Bakhtin" (Hutcheon 84). There is a definite contiguity between the carnival as documented by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* and contemporary expressions of the carnivalesque. In both cases, the carnivalesque has helped to bridge the gap between "high" and "low," or "popular," culture.

One of the most important elements, or goals, of the carnival is to overturn hierarchies and to celebrate all that is usually dismissed by the official discourses. "For the time of the carnival, the difference between the social orders seems to be abolished, everyone accosts everyone else, and the insolence and license of the feast is balanced only by a universal good humour" (Docker 175). Print media is a form of official discourse. In *The Shipping News*, there is the complicated image of *The Gammy Bird.* Jack Buggit, a fisherman by trade, starts a newspaper in Killick-Claw through provincial job training, as he is unable to fish due to the decline in fish stocks. He knows nothing about "journalistic discourse," and rejects that system. Yet, the paper is a success because he "know[s] what people want to read about. And no arguments about it" (Proulx 67). *The Gammy Bird* is a reflection of the community—utilizing the official discourse of print media to express the ideology of the people. The different features, such as the sexual abuse column, car wrecks, and Nutbeem's re-interpretation of the news stories from the radio, reflect the community mentality. It is Jack Buggit's mission to fulfill this

need: "I know what my readers wants and expects and I gives 'em that" (Proulx 68). When Quoyle goes against *this* established discourse by writing what *he* thinks "the shipping news" should be, he carnivalizes what has already been carnivalized.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses the significance of masks and disguises worn by carnival participants. They are "connected with the joy of change and reincarnation with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; [they reject] conformity to oneself" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 39-40). Carnival participants were invited to disguise themselves, not to hide their identity but to celebrate who they were. "Masking was extremely important in carnival, in part to partake of world upside-down, in part to loosen any fixed daily identity, to enjoy identity as fluid and open, changing and changeable, as becoming not static being" (Docker 179). The notion of becoming over being is very important to the concept of the "self-in-progress" and, by extension, to the quest for identity.

In contemporary literature, however, ambiguity and ambivalence arise out of the use of masks and disguises. In *Accordion Crimes*, as already mentioned, music and performance are integral to the quest for identity. Costumes are used to symbolize different nationalities, yet become weighted with stereotypical images. In "Hit Hard and Gone Down," Joey and Sonia are a husband and wife accordion duo. The costumes that the various performers wear at the Polish accordion competitions they attend no longer represent their culture, but are outrageous costumes that reflect the spectacle that the competition has become. Again, a venue for celebration and community has been turned into one that ridicules and derides.

Out of the use of masks and disguises, a physicality of the carnivalesque arises. The "material bodily principle,"—"images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 18)—evolves out of this. Proulx's novels are imbued with physicality, such as the emphasis placed upon food and eating in *The Shipping News* (the description of all the various ways to prepare squid is only one example).

The cyclical nature of the carnivalesque must also be mentioned. It grows out of the material bodily principle, but extends beyond it. As Bakhtin states: "[t]he grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming" (*Rabelais* 24). The individual, as a part of the "carnival," is in a constant state of becoming—"the carnival sense of the world knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of *conclusive conclusion*: all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 165). This relates directly to the quest for identity as a self-in-progress. The "unfinalizability" (another term utilized by Bakhtin) of the characters in the two novels is reflected through the use of the carnivalesque.

Carnivalesque dialogue is also an important feature of the quest for identity. Not only are hierarchies overturned, but all are invited to participate—"carnival does not know footlights...it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators...Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 7). During the Christmas pageant in *The Shipping News*, for example, the audience is involved in what is happening on stage—from laughing at and with the performers, to actually

becoming a part of the show. As well, most of the spectators are performers in the program. This brings the community, and all the quests, together. Bakhtin feels that "carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people...it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants...it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 11-12). The carnivalization of literature "brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 123), all in an effort to reveal the multiplicity and fluidity of identity.

The key elements of Bakhtin's carnival, as listed above, are essentially positive in nature. People are allowed to shed their official identities and celebrate without inhibitions. When compared to contemporary illustrations of the carnivalesque, this is the most obvious and significant difference. While the carnivalesque is used to question official discourse, there is often a hint of futility. Ambivalence and ambiguity prevail in the contemporary carnival. It provides an arena for self-exploration, but often with the condition that the hierarchies will revert back once the carnival is over. The protagonist of *Accordion Crimes* is the green button accordion, filling the novel with numerous instances of performance, whether it is a concert or simply a group of people sharing the songs of their heritage. There is a feeling of freedom and communication during these times. However, once the music is over, the musicians are hurled back into the identity conferred upon them by society. The accordion maker, for example, finds solace in the songs of his homeland, despite the violent and demeaning reality of his life in New Orleans.

The ambiguity and ambivalence of grotesque imagery is important to the quest for identity. Its elusive nature makes defining the grotesque virtually impossible, allowing for flexibility. In this sense, exploring the grotesque is quite apt when exploring the quest for identity, as the "perception of the grotesque is never a fixed or stable thing, but always a process, a progression" (Harpham 14). In the following passage, Philip Thomson comments on the connection between the grotesque and the Bakhtinian carnival:

> For Bakhtin...the grotesque is essentially physical, referring always to the body and bodily excesses and celebrating these in an uninhibited, outrageous but essentially joyous fashion. The carnival, that favourite popular arena for the indulging of physical excess, is seen by Bakhtin as the grotesque event *par excellence*, the place where the common people abandoned themselves to exuberantly obscene excesses of a physical kind (56).

The use of grotesque imagery is a prominent aspect of both novels in this study. In *The Shipping News* there is the bizarre murder of Bayonet Melville—his body is found bobbing in the rocks, and his head in a suitcase floating in the sea (we later discover that it was his wife who committed the murder). How Quoyle deals with this event reveals progress in his quest—as he confronts his fear of water and all its mysteries, he becomes more confident in himself. Through these experiences, Quoyle becomes more certain in his dialogues with his daughters, Wavey, and all the residents of Killick-Claw.

In *Accordion Crimes*, we are witnesses to brutal murders and hideous characters all portraying the immigrant experience in America. Proulx does not gloss over the

violence that took place in the building of a country, and creates an atmosphere where almost anything can (and does) happen.

How does the carnivalesque illustrate the quest for identity? In providing an arena where anything is possible, subjects are able to express themselves in many ways. Unlike Bakhtin's carnival, which took place at specific times during the year (the Saturnalia, for example), the contemporary carnival has been adapted to fit into our daily lives. From the Melvilles aboard the "Tough Baby" in *The Shipping News* to the goat gland operation in *Accordion Crimes*, the carnivalesque is an important element of the novels to be examined.

The quest for identity, as the above pages have demonstrated, is not a simple one. Questors are mired in their surroundings, eking their existence out of the places, people, and dialogues that surround them. *The Shipping News* and *Accordion Crimes* share similarities, yet each novel portrays their quests for identity in distinctly different ways. While the former tells the story of one man, going back to the home of his ancestors in search of himself, in the latter the central character is a green button accordion. As this protagonist changes hands, various quests are undertaken. Proulx shows us that the immigrant experience is by no means a uniform one; no two subjects are identical.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that these quests are never complete—"Bakhtin's novelistic hero is characterized by his 'unfinalizability': he [sic] is a subject not in a state of being but of becoming...He becomes 'himself' through a dynamic exchange with another's discourse; that is, through the process of *dialogue*" (Pearce 89). And, in the words of Bakhtin himself, "[a]s long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word" (*Problems* 59).

This brings us back to the quotation from McDowell that I began with—the quest for identity never comes to a complete stop (even in death, people live on through the stories that are told about them). Defining the self gains its significance through the *process*, not the final *product*.

Chapter 2

Untying the Knots: *The Shipping News*

"The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied."
*(Bakhtin, **Dialogic** 250)*

In literary discourse, the image of the knot can serve on various levels as an organizing or thematic principle. As Bakhtin notes above, the chronotope (the "time-place" of the novel) ties the text together structurally. In this sense, "[t]he chronotope does not represent social reality but is rather a means of showing the representability of events in history" (Thomson 15). The elastic relationship between time and place in a novel plays a major role in keeping the knot that is the text together. As the events of the story are told, a "knot of narrative" is tied.

The chronotope is not the only "knot of narrative" that holds the strands of the novel together. Dialogue necessarily becomes involved in this process, as the polyphony of voices in the novel also forms knots, binding the characters together. These knots cannot be untied, as they connect the subject to his or her surroundings, as well as to the people within those surroundings.

When applied to dialogic criticism, knots provide an interesting analogy. The interconnectedness of all the voices in a text is comparable to the strands that form a knot. It is impossible to separate these voices, as all the dialogues thrive upon and exist only through their connections—dialogue can exist *only* through relation. As Michael Holquist notes, "In the sphere of communication the individuality of the speaker is

always and everywhere *relative*" (59). The polyphony in a text is represented by lengths of string, knotted together, intimately connected. These knots of dialogue are then woven together to form the text.

As an extension of the above "knots of narrative," the metaphor of the knot is also representative of the quest for identity. This quest takes place inside these "knots of narrative" (the chronotope and dialogue): "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 110). Though it is necessary to examine the knots of narrative to understand their significance, it is not the goal of literary discourse, specifically this discussion, to untie the knots that tie *The Shipping News* and Quoyle's quest for identity together.

The image of the knot is at the heart of the following discussion. A thorough examination of "the knots of narrative" in *The Shipping News* will demonstrate that identity is, in fact, a knot, and the quest for identity is the process of examining this knot. Furthermore, "knots of narrative" function as the connective tissue of the novel—the tie that binds the characters, places, and events together.

Central to this intricate system of knots is Quoyle's quest for identity. Time, place, the various dialogues, as well as the structure of the narrative, are all elements of the complex "knot-system" at work. It is this complexity that serves to emphasize the ongoing nature of the quest. The "knots of narrative" are never meant to be totally untied, as that would destroy the integrity of the novel, and the quest for identity.

What, then, is the role of the reader in this process? Knots are often thought of as necessary to untie, but as these opening paragraphs suggest, this is not the case in literary

discourse. The "knots of narrative" tie the novel together, forming the knot that is the text. All these connections are important, whether on a structural or thematic level. The reader's role is to examine the "knots of narrative," but not to "unravel" the text.

Structural Knots: Keeping the Story Together

"In a knot of eight crossings, which is about the average-size knot, there are 256 different 'over-and-under' arrangements possible...Make only one change in this 'over and under' sequence and either an entirely different knot is made or no knot at all may result."
The Ashley Book of Knots

This passage appears as the epigraph to *The Shipping News*. The stage has been set—the infinite combinations that can be achieved in knot-tying relate to the various stages of a quest, to all the different people who are encountered along this quest, and to the structure of the text itself. The arrangement of words, chapters, and events is intended to tie a particular tale, a particular "knot of narrative." How knots serve to construct, and hold together, the structure of *The Shipping News*, will be the focus of this section.

In a general sense, the novel is comparable to a knot. Each word chosen, each utterance uttered, each event that occurs, becomes integral to the finished product—the novel itself. At a structural level, Bakhtin defines the novel as an amalgamation of "stylistic unities":

> The stylistic uniqueness of the novel as a genre consists precisely in the combination of these subordinate, yet still relatively autonomous, unities (even at times comprised of different languages) into the higher unity of the work as a

> whole: the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its 'languages' (*Dialogic* 262).

This system of languages is the dynamic system of dialogue that makes up the novel. These dialogues, in turn, determine the structure and chronotopes of and within the novel.

As a metaphor for a text, the knot is quite suitable. However, when applied to *The Shipping News* in particular, another layer (or knot) becomes apparent. Passages from three texts are used to set the mood for each of the 39 chapters of the novel—*The Ashley Book of Knots*, *The Mariner's Dictionary*, and *Quipus and Witch's Knots*. These passages structure their respective chapters and the narrative as a whole, while illuminating the various stages of Quoyle's quest.

An examination of the first three chapters of the novel illustrates all of the above "knots of narrative." The first, "Quoyle," introduces the protagonist. As the formlessness of his life to this point indicates, he is simply a coil of rope. More specifically, he is compared to "[a] Flemish flake [which] is a spiral coil of one layer only. It is made on deck, so that it may be walked on if necessary" (Proulx 1). This rope, Quoyle, can be knotted in an infinite number of ways, and his quest will provide many opportunities for experimentation. In the second chapter, "Love Knot," Quoyle meets and falls in love with Petal Bear—"An invisible hand threw loops and crossing in Quoyle's intestines" (Proulx 12). He becomes ensnarled in his role as the dutiful husband, and loses sight of any existence without her or their children: "the circumstances enclosed him like the six sides of a metal case" (Proulx 17). Their relationship is described as "a month of fiery happiness. Then six kinked years of suffering" (Proulx 13). The third chapter unravels this "love knot," and in its place ties the "Strangle Knot." Their marriage has

deteriorated. Quoyle longs for Petal's affection, but his love is unrequited because she prefers the company of other men. Her tie to Quoyle is one that she wishes to break. In the end, Petal is killed in a car accident, and Quoyle is left to raise their two young daughters on his own. From this point, much of Quoyle's quest deals with untying the "strangle knot" that his love for Petal had become.

In these examples, knots function purely on a symbolic level, as they do not actually appear as part of the story. It is not until Quoyle arrives in Newfoundland that knots become a physical reality for him, while still functioning as symbols of his quest for identity. The knots, both literal and figurative, connect Quoyle to his surroundings and moor him in his quest. The process is gradual and is not a linear progression—knots become replaced with other knots.

The physical presence of knots in *The Shipping News* necessarily complicates the "knots of narrative." No longer are knots merely representative of the chronotope, but they actually appear in the story. Quoyle *uses* these knots in his quest for identity. This duality serves to enhance the interconnectedness of Quoyle's quest and the structure of the novel. Not only is Quoyle knotted to the particular dialogues and chronotopes he participates in, but these dialogues and chronotopes contain knots that become useful in his quest. For example, Chapter 8's "Slippery Hitch" is used for "small boats...that are easily capsized" (Proulx 71). At this point, Quoyle is still in the early stages of his quest. He is tentative about his move to Newfoundland and the various tests and challenges he has faced to this point, the most poignant of these being the necessity of owning a boat. He has yet to buy his first boat, which relates back to the "slippery hitch." If Quoyle is likened to a small boat, he is easily capsized without some sort of tie to the people and

places around him. By Chapter 18, "Lobster Pie," however, Quoyle is more secure in his identity on the island—the "lobster buoy hitch...was particularly good to tie to timber" (Proulx 145). As he becomes more connected to his life in Newfoundland, he "learns the ropes," and finds the utility in knots. However, it is important to note that these are still metaphorical uses of knots, though they are metonymically related to his life in Newfoundland.

The third type of structural knot is a physical reality in the novel. In the murder of Bayonet Melville, "the Dutch Cringle" is the knot that untangles the mystery surrounding his death. Quoyle finds the suitcase, identifying it by its knotted handle (the "Dutch cringle"), which contains Melville's severed head. In this chapter, Quoyle's quest advances, as the article he writes on the *Tough Baby* is the first of many original, contemplative articles he writes on the diversity of boats that enter the harbour. In many ways, Quoyle has an affiliation to the visiting boats, because he also sailed into this community as a stranger. As he discovers the utility in knots his quest for identity moves forward and he incorporates these knots into his conception of the world. On these occasions, the knots have multiple meanings. Not only are they structural knots, tying the narrative together, but they also function *within* the narrative as keys in Quoyle's quest for identity.

Fishing, boats, and all things nautical are fundamental to living in Newfoundland. And, as the various catastrophes that appear in the novel attest, the life of a fisherman is by no means "smooth sailing." Quoyle's quest is not linear, and he must deal with many challenges along the way. A major test occurs in the chapter titled "Deadman," where Quoyle's quest for identity is directly tied, both to his career as a journalist, and to the

discovery of Bayonet Melville's body. He is out walking along the rocky coastline by his home, and comes to the end of the land:

> At last the end of the world, a wild place that seemed poised on the lip of the abyss. No human sign, nothing, no ship, no plane, no animal, no bird, no bobbing trap marker nor buoy. As though he stood alone on the planet. The immensity of sky roared at him and instinctively he raised his hands to keep it off. Translucent thirty-foot combers the color of bottles crashed onto stone, coursed bubbles into a churning lake of milk shot with cream. Even hundreds of feet above the sea the salt mist stung his eyes and beaded his face and jacket with fine droplets. Waves struck with the hollowed basso peculiar to ovens and mouseholes....
>
> As Quoyle descended, he slipped on the treacherous weed, clung to the rock. Reached a shelf where he could stand and crane, glimpse the maelstrom below. Could go no further.
>
> He saw three things: a honeycomb of caves awash; a rock in the shape of a great dog; a human body in a yellow suit, head under the surface as though delighted in patterns of the sea bottom (Proulx 209).

The immensity of the situation before him is the polar opposite to the metal case that enclosed his life with Petal. This immensity is then funneled into the body in the yellow suit that he finds caught in the rocks.

This discovery spurns Quoyle into action. He crosses the bay in his boat in order to contact the authorities, with no consideration of the danger before him. While he sets off, "[t]he boat wallowed about and a short length of line slid out from under the seat. It

was knotted at one end, kinked and crimped at the other as if old knots had finally been untied. For the first time Quoyle got it—there was meaning in the knotted strings" (Proulx 210). This epiphany, though oblique, reflects Quoyle's awareness of the significance of the knots in his life. Shortly after this passage, his boat capsizes in the rough water, and he is thrown into the sea. His survival of this accident is a turning point in the novel. He faces his fear of water and learns to swim. This experience gives him the confidence to act in other areas of his life.

Despite the tight structure of the novel, which is connected through the use of knots, *The Shipping News* ends on an open note. Just as the novel begins with infinite possibilities, it ends with infinite possibilities. The last chapter, "Shining Hubcaps," has the epigraph: "There are still old knots that are unrecorded, and so long as there are new purposes for rope, there will always be new knots to discover" (Proulx 324). Quoyle's quest, as with the rest of the "crew" of *The Shipping News*, will never be complete: "Bakhtin's novelistic hero is characterized by his 'unfinalizability': he [sic] is a subject not in a state of being but of becoming...He becomes 'himself' through a dynamic exchange with another's discourse; that is, through the process of *dialogue*" (Pearce 89). In the pages of *The Shipping News*, Quoyle has come a long way in his quest, but the quest for identity is ongoing. This is reminiscent of McDowell's notion of the "self-in-progress" that was discussed in Chapter 1.

Though the novel ends without closure, Quoyle's self-worth has been determined. The title of the last chapter is related to an earlier thought that Partridge has about Quoyle: "beyond this vagueness he glimpsed something like a reflection of light from a distant hubcap, a scintillation that meant there was, in Quoyle's life, the chance of some

brilliance" (Proulx 31). Partridge's premonition is realized throughout Quoyle's quest. Quoyle realizes that his place is in Newfoundland:

> Quoyle was not going back to New York, either. If life was an arc of light that began in darkness, ended in darkness, the first part of his life had happened in ordinary glare. Here it was as though he had found a polarized lens that deepened and intensified all seen through it. Thought of his stupid self in Mockingburg, taking whatever came at him. No wonder love had shot him through the heart and lungs, caused internal bleeding (Proulx 241).

The reference to light connects these two passages together. The quest for identity that led him to Newfoundland has enlightened him. "In the literature of quest journeys, timeless places of the past or future intersect the present world and produce a visionary experience for the hero that may be either regenerative or shattering" (Lutwack 57). Quoyle's quest is regenerative, though, unlike the traditional quest where the hero returns home, Quoyle prefers to remain in his "new found land" rather than returning to the "old world."

To emphasize the unfinalizability of the subject, Proulx ends the novel ambiguously, with Quoyle contemplating the meaning of life and all its possibilities:

> Quoyle experienced moments in all colors, uttered brilliancies, paid attention to the rich sound of waves counting stones, he laughed and wept, noticed sunsets, heard music in rain, said I do. A row of shining hubcaps on sticks appeared in the front yard of the Burkes' house. A wedding present from the bride's father.

> For if Jack Buggit could escape from the pickle jar, if a bird with a broken neck could fly away, what else might be possible? Water may be older than light, diamonds crack in hot goat's blood, mountaintops give off cold fire, forests appear in mid-ocean, it may happen that a crab is caught with the shadow of a hand on its back, that the wind be imprisoned in a bit of knotted string. And it may be that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery (Proulx 336-337).

This excerpt is linked to the previous ones in that a reference is made to hubcaps. The hubcaps are symbolic of Quoyle's marriage to Wavey, making Partridge's premonition of a "chance of brilliance" a reality. This, added to Quoyle's ponderings, renders the quest as never-ending. Quoyle's quest for identity never reaches a definitive end, because there is a world of possibilities that can influence the "knots of narrative" that are tied and untied.

As the previous pages demonstrate, the structure of *The Shipping News* is a complex system of knots that binds the text together. This "knot of narrative" links the chapters of the book with descriptions of various knots, and these knots, in turn, link the various stages of the quest for identity. Next to be explored is how other "knots of narrative" bind the quest for identity to place, as well as how dialogue is interconnected with the quest.

Tied to the Land: Knots and Place

"feelings are bound up in place...fiction depends for its life on place."
(Welty 118)

"A kind of moral geography springs from man's ability to adapt himself to hostile environments."
(Lutwack 32)

Place is an inextricable aspect of the quest for identity. Subjects "dialogue" with place just as they dialogue with other subjects in the novel. Place, because it is revealed through dialogue, becomes provisional and subjective, changing with the dialogue. In *The Shipping News*, the residents of Killick-Claw have various dialogues with place, and this diversity of perceptions changes the appearance of the land. "The human will and imagination go the longest way in making places what they are for human beings, and the mood of a person has much to do with determining the quality of the places he is in" (Lutwack 35). Quoyle's dialogue with place is a "knot of narrative" integral to his quest for identity.

The Shipping News traces Quoyle's move from upstate New York to Newfoundland. The home of his ancestors becomes the setting for his quest for identity, and as he negotiates his position in this place, he integrates himself into the community. While he wrestles with the challenges that arise from his situatedness, he becomes more confident in himself. In many ways, setting itself becomes a character in *The Shipping News.* Proulx's vivid description of the land brings place to life, and the characters must negotiate their existence within this environment.

Quoyle's quest begins with a portrait of his life in Mockingburg, New York, a "dreary upstate town" (Proulx 1). He shuffles from job to job; his life has no direction. Decisions are made for him by his family and friends: his childhood is moulded by a dominating father; Partridge gets him the job at the *Mockingburg Record*; and, Petal is the dominant voice in their marriage. Her death, as well as the suicide of his parents,

leaves him "orphaned," as he loses the forces that have guided his life. Another example of Quoyle's passivity is observed in the fact that the move to Newfoundland is suggested by his aunt. The few ties he has to Mockingburg are broken, initiating his quest. His life is just a shell, and the largeness of this hollow is only emphasized by his "great damp loaf of a body" (Proulx 2). That shell begins to fall away slowly when he leaves New York and moves to Newfoundland, "the rock that had generated his ancestors" (Proulx 1). As he becomes entwined in his life in Newfoundland, the ties to his former life begin to fray.

Within this "knot of narrative," three strands of place can be examined individually. These strands come together to form this particular knot of narrative, though they merit individual inspection. The three strands are the environment, specifically Newfoundland; ancestry and family; and the green house on Quoyle Point.

*****

Proulx's choice of Newfoundland as the setting for Quoyle's quest for identity is apt. The very word "Newfoundland" implies a new world, a new life, and a new beginning. Quoyle is discovering a new place. Though he brings the baggage of his former life with him, he soon finds that it will not aid him in his new quest. His fears must be faced head on. Newfoundland, the home of his ancestors, holds the answers he needs to recover his heritage. In the process, he learns about himself. "Here it was as though he had found a polarized lens that deepened and intensified all seen through it" (Proulx 241). Quoyle's experiences with the people and places of Newfoundland are the "polarized lens" that offer him "the chance of some brilliance" (Proulx 31).

Paradoxically, Newfoundland is not a new place. Many generations have forged a life on the rock. Newfoundland is not a benign place—it is rough, barren, hostile, cold,

and dreary. Success and survival are achieved through perseverance and hard work. As the main resource of the island, fish, is depleted, new ways of making a living have to be created. Fishing, however, will always be integral to the dialogue the people have with their environment. Jack Buggit, for example, has succeeded in building a new career as a newspaper editor. Yet he refuses to give up fishing. He tells Quoyle on his first day at *The Gammy Bird,* "Any fishing stories, I want to hear about 'em first. I knows the problems, being as I'm still in the fishery" (Proulx 69). He also refers to himself as "the skipper" (Proulx 68) of the paper. The paper succeeds because it is a product of the community, not a form that is imposed upon the people.

The fact that Quoyle moves to Newfoundland is also paradoxical. Many native Newfoundlanders dream of getting off the island, of finding a new life somewhere else. Different dialogues with place form the various quests. Tert Card and Dawn Bludgel anxiously await their departure; Nutbeem, an "accidental tourist," is also looking forward to continuing his round-the-world voyage; and, of course, there is Quoyle's father who left the island as a child. His unhappiness and subsequent suicide, though tragic, reveal that getting away is not enough. Cutting yourself off from your roots can have detrimental effects on your identity. This further emphasizes the relativity of place to each person. For Quoyle, this is a "new found land," and through his experiences on the island, he connects the past with his present reality.

The challenges that the questor must face grow out of the environment. Because Newfoundland is an island, boats are the primary means of transportation, a fact that is significant to Quoyle's quest for identity. We are introduced to his fear of water in the first pages of the novel: "And Quoyle feared water, could not swim. Again and again the

father had broken his clenched grip and thrown him into pools, brooks, lakes and surf. Quoyle knew the flavor of brack and waterweed" (Proulx 2). Once the decision to move to Newfoundland is made, he must face this fear in order to survive—it is not just a matter of avoiding swimming pools.

Quoyle reluctantly accepts this challenge. Upon their arrival, he prefers to drive around the point than to use a boat to get across the bay. When he does purchase a boat, he discovers that the aunt has bought a new truck—"We need it. Got to have a truck here. Got to get back and forth to my shop. You got a boat, I got a truck" (Proulx 99). It is a reversal from their earlier discussion in which she chided Quoyle on his insistence to drive around the point.

Quoyle's purchase is impulsive—a step in the right direction perhaps, but one that does not take into consideration the complexities of the sea. "The sea's formlessness has always represented the ultimate disorder in man and universe. The sea is the least assimilable of all terrestrial places: in its depths human existence is impossible, on its surface no human trace remains" (Lutwack 47). Quoyle ignores these complexities, choosing to focus instead on the emotional: "he'd taken the plunge. Smiled, rehearsing a story of how he'd decided on the spur of the moment to buy a boat and get it over, how he almost felt transformed, ready to take on the seas, to seize his heritage" (Proulx 87-88).

He gradually becomes more comfortable on the water, and the climax of this process is when his boat capsizes. In this situation, he is forced to learn to swim. His survival of this incident is an epiphany—one of his worst fears has been confronted. Of course, one can never conquer the sea, as Lutwack notes above, but Quoyle gains

confidence through this experience that enables him to act in other areas of his life. Quoyle's dialogue with his environment is integral to his quest for identity. The setting, Newfoundland, is essential to the process of negotiating his identity.

*****

Ancestry and family are bound to place through history and tradition. The knowledge of one's family history illuminates the past and affects the future. Quoyle's roots are in Newfoundland, yet at the beginning of *The Shipping News*, he knows little about his past. Proulx depicts the separation he feels from his family in the following passage:

> His earliest sense of self was as a distant figure: there in the foreground was his family; here, at the limit of the far view, was he. Until he was fourteen he cherished the idea that he had been given to the wrong family, that somewhere his real people, saddled with the changeling of the Quoyles, longed for him (Proulx 2).

In this picture, Quoyle perceives of his "self" as "other." The familial ties have been broken in his nuclear family, not to mention his other relations. It is only when he explores his heritage (after his parents' suicide) that he discovers ties to other people:

> Then, foraging in a box of excursion momentoes, he found photographs of his father beside brothers and sisters at a ship's rail. A girl, somewhat apart from the others, looked toward the sea, eyes squinted, as though she could see the port of destination a thousand miles south. Quoyle recognized himself in their hair, their legs and arms. That sly-looking lump in the shrunken sweater, hand at his crotch,

> his father. On the back, scribbled in blue pencil, 'Leaving Home, 1946' (Proulx 2-3).

The girl in the picture is his aunt, Agnis Hamm. Proulx draws a connection between her and Quoyle through their similar depictions in the two photographs. We later discover that they share similar dialogues with Guy Quoyle, Quoyle's father and Agnis' brother—both were abused, either physically or sexually, by him. Quoyle and the aunt also share mannerisms—both have the habit of putting their hands to their chins. The discovery of these familial ties is directly related to Quoyle's quest for identity. They enable him to learn about his past, to explain the present, and to have confidence in the future.

Despite family resemblances, each subject's situation is unique, as dialogue is borne through particular situations. In Quoyle's case, his identity hovers between being an outsider and a descendent of the community simultaneously:

> 'I remembers the Quoyles and their trouble. They was a savage pack. In the olden days they say Quoyles nailed a man to a tree by 'is ears, cut off 'is nose for the scent of blood to draw the nippers and flies that devoured 'im alive. Gone now, except for the odd man, Nolan, down along Capsize Cove. I never thought a one of the others would come back, and here there's four of them, though one's a Hamm and the other three never set foot on the island of Newfoundland' (Proulx 139).

The Quoyles have a reputation in Killick-Claw as savages and brutes. Quoyle learns about this past, and he negotiates his identity in the community as a "new breed of Quoyle." He may have descended from this family tree, but his actions prove his motivations to be quite different from his ancestors.

This is reflected in Quoyle's attempt to make amends with his past. Nolan Quoyle is his only living relative (besides his aunt), and Quoyle does everything he can to rectify any past disputes, and to improve Nolan's living conditions. Nolan's move to the asylum in St. John's from the filthy sty that he lived in at Capsize Cove, allows him to enjoy the "creature comforts" of life, but still traps him, his dream to be a pilot forever unfulfilled (Proulx 296-297).

Quoyle's first encounter with Nolan occurs in the chapter entitled "The Cousin," which has the following epigraph: "Magic nets, snares, and knots have been, and in some instances probably still are, used as lethal weapons" (Proulx 259). Cousin Nolan "laid lengths of knotted twine on the threshold of each room," (Proulx 263), forcing Quoyle to seek out his kin. What he finds is a reflection of himself:

> Even in the dim light, even in the ruin of cadaverous age, Quoyle saw resemblances. The aunt's unruly hair; his father's lipless mouth; their common family eyes sunk under brows as coarse as horsehair; his brother's stance. And for Quoyle, a view of his own monstrous chin, here a somewhat smaller bony shelf choked with white bristle (Proulx 264).

All three generations are brought together in this moment—Quoyle has found a link to his past.

Despite the connection that is made at this moment, Quoyle realizes that not all ties are so easily explained. Quoyle confronts Nolan and shows him the knots he found in his home. Nolan jumps up, throws the knots in the fire, and shouts: "Them knots'll never undo now: they's fixed by fire!" (Proulx 265). When Quoyle goes to visit Nolan in St. John's, he learns of his aunt's abortion (she was raped by Quoyle's father). His past is

becoming more complicated; though he is filling in the blanks, the knowledge is sometimes difficult to digest.

Proulx presents a double-bind in these situations. Quoyle desperately wants to learn about his genealogy, and meeting Nolan answers many of these questions. However, the more he learns, the more he realizes that he is different from his ancestors. The knots that Nolan throws in the fire acknowledge both of these elements. Quoyle will never know everything about his heritage, nor can he sever himself from that ancestry.

In the discussion of ancestry, names are significant: "any name is a container; poured into it are the conscious or unwitting evaluations of the namer" (Strauss 15). In *The Shipping News*, Proulx does not give Quoyle a first name, though on one occasion he is referred to as "R.G. Quoyle" (Proulx 288). With this emphasis placed upon his family name, Proulx knots Quoyle to his ancestry—the assumption can be drawn that the "G" stands for "Guy" (his father's name) but there is no verification of this in the text. His identity is rooted in the history of the Quoyles. The name itself is significant—"Quoyle" (a coil of rope) refers both to Quoyle's identity, as well as to the fact that he is bound to his ancestry.

As already demonstrated, Quoyle's entire family tree is knotted in the grotesque—incestuous relationships, abuse, rape, and internal feuding make up the branches. Quoyle must work his way through these "knots of narrative" as part of his quest. He integrates this history into his identity in Bakhtinian fashion. The cyclical nature of life and death is central to Bakhtin's carnival. However, there is also an element of pessimism in this process, as Linda Hutcheon notes: "all of Bakhtin's positive readings—of birth and death cycles, of the community of the people, of the inverted

order—somehow do not quite ring true of today's pop culture. Instead we find an inverted but demonic world of folly, pain and confusion, one that Northrop Frye has labelled as 'ironic'" (86). Quoyle's quest is built upon this irony. His travels to his father's birthplace are spurred on by his father's suicide, as well as the tragic death of his wife, Petal Bear. Albeit, he is able to overcome these tragedies, but not without much pain and suffering. Though Quoyle integrates the negative experiences that have been a part of his life, many still remain unexplained.

An examination of the aunt's name, or in this case, lack of a name, provides an extension of this discussion of naming. Quoyle repeatedly refers to Agnis Hamm as "the aunt." How is this significant to a discussion of the quest for identity in *The Shipping News*? The aunt has renounced any affiliation with her family, as the family portrait previously discussed attests. In returning to Newfoundland, she is also attempting to reconcile this separation:

> The aunt leaned on her elbow. Chin on the heel of her hand. 'As you get older you find out the place where you started out pulls at you stronger and stronger. I never wanted to see Newfoundland again when I was young, but the last few years it's been like an ache, just a longing to go back. Probably some atavistic drive to finish up where you started. So in a way I'm starting again, too. Going to move my little business up there' (Proulx 29).

Not only is the aunt connected to Quoyle through their appearance and mannerisms, but they also share the ambiguity surrounding their names.

Like Quoyle, the aunt must also confront the ghosts of the past in her quest for identity. Her "homecoming" awakens many memories within her:

> The aunt let herself remember an October, the pond frozen, ice as colorless as a sadiron's plate, the clouds in thin rolls like grey pencils in a box...She was eleven or twelve....
>
> He came onto the ice, unbuttoning his pants, sliding gingerly on the soles of his fishing boots. And although there was no place to go but around and around, although she knew he would get her later if not now, she skated away, evaded his lunging for a long time. Maybe ten minutes. A long time.
>
> She stood now and looked at the pond. Small, uninteresting. No reason to go down to it. The sky was not red but almost black in the southwest. Storms on the way (Proulx 224-225).

The vivid memories of her rape grow out of this scene, and are intermingled with her present thoughts of the onset of winter and difficult times ahead on Quoyle Point. Like Quoyle, the aunt is forced to confront these past events. Quoyle, however, proves to be the stronger of the two. When he brings up the subject to her, she chooses to ignore the invitation to talk, while Quoyle, on many occasions, faces and conquers this history (confronting Nolan and his knots, for example).

*****

The green house on Quoyle Point is focal when considering place as a "knot of narrative" in *The Shipping News*. The green house unites the elements discussed to this point—the place (Newfoundland), the water (it is sitting on the edge of a cliff, across the bay from Killick-Claw), and ancestry (it is the family home). Quoyle's dialogue with his ancestral home is fundamental to his quest for identity.

The renovation of the green house correlates to the renovation of Quoyle's identity. At first, he is unsure of the move, and their journey to the house is littered with setbacks. They take a wrong turn, their vehicle gets stuck in the muddy road, and they have to camp out for the night, drinking coffee out of empty pop cans. When they finally get to the house, they find it in a shambles. It is literally tied to the land with cords attaching it to the rock.

Despite its dilapidated state, they move into the green house and begin renovations. Quoyle wakes one morning to a bird, and wanders to the sea. Along the way, he finds a brooch, knotted with hair. He throws it into the sea (similar to the knot that Nolan throws into the fire), rejecting this heirloom. On this walk, he also sees Nolan on the water, though "man and boat were eaten by mist" (Proulx 104-105) before Quoyle gets a good look. The walk concludes with Quoyle's decision to make "some part of this place as his own" (Proulx 105). Quoyle must learn about the past before he can move into the present and the future. His quest is intimately related to his family's history. Yet, he must find his own voice to be part of the community of Killick-Claw. It is important for him to create his own dialogue, a new chapter in the family history with Wavey, Bunny, and Sunshine at his side. To do this, it is necessary to move out of the house and into his own home.

The aunt also deserts the dream to settle permanently in the green house. She realizes that her future is in St. John's. Both Quoyle and the aunt do not totally reject the importance of the past, as the house becomes a summer camp—a place to visit on holidays, but not a "real" home. Quoyle and the aunt have both learned from the actions

of the Quoyles. It is a mistake to take your home with you and expect to have a harmonious relationship with a new place:

> The house was heavy around him, the pressure of the past filling the rooms like odorless gas. The sea breathed in the distance. The house meant something to the aunt. Did that *bind* [italics mine] him? The coast around the house seemed beautiful to him. But the house was wrong. Had always been wrong, he thought. Dragged by human labor across miles of ice, the outcasts straining against the ropes and shouting curses at the godly mob. Winched onto the rock. Groaning. A bound prisoner straining to get free. The humming of the taut cables. That vibration passed into the house, made it seem alive. That was it, in the house he felt he was inside a tethered animal, dumb but feeling. Swallowed by the shouting past (Proulx 263).

In this passage, the house comes alive. The ties that bind it to the land are forced—a dialogue imposed by the Quoyles onto their home. Ultimately, Quoyle rejects this way of life. As his quest progresses, he opts for a more harmonious relationship with place, which necessarily means the abandonment of his ancestral home.

The significance of the house culminates in its destruction, emphasizing the fact that presence cannot be forced on a place. A winter storm takes the house down: "The great rock stood naked. Bolts fast in the stone, a loop of cable curled like a hawser. And nothing else. For the house of the Quoyles was gone, lifted by the wind, tumbled down the rock and into the sea in a wake of glass and snow crystals" (Proulx 322). Because the history of the Quoyles has taken a new turn through Quoyle and the aunt, the past ties are broken. The aunt is not shaken by this turn of events—"We'll build a new place. Like

you say, a summer place. I'd as soon live in town the rest of the year. Fact, I was thinking of it" (Proulx 323). To finance this operation, they utilize the insurance money from the house. In this sense, they have not totally rejected the past; it is reworked and adapted to suit the new generation of Quoyles.

Quoyle anticipates these changes as he becomes more comfortable with his identity in Newfoundland and his ties to the land strengthen:

> He pressed his groin against the barrens as if he were in union with the earth. His aroused senses imbued the far scene with enormous importance. The small figures against the vast rock with the sea beyond. All the complex wires of life were stripped out and he could see the structure of life. Nothing but rock and sea, the tiny figures of humans and animals against them for a brief time.
>
> The sharpness of his gaze pierced the past. He saw generations like migrating birds, the bay flecked with ghost sails, the deserted settlements vigorous again, and in the abyss nets spangled with scales. Saw the Quoyles rinsed of evil by the passage of time. He imagined the aunt buried and gone, himself old, Wavey stooped with age, his daughters in faraway lives, Herry still delighted by wooden dogs and colored threads, a grizzled Herry who would sleep in a north room at the top of the house or in the little room under the stairs.
>
> A sense of purity renewed, a sense of events in trembling balance flooded him.
>
> Everything, everything seemed encrusted with portent (Proulx 196).

In this passage, every person, every moment, and every place are tied together. The quests for identity overlap and become knotted together.

*****

As a "knot of narrative," place is an inextricable aspect of the quest for identity. Eudora Welty states that "feelings are bound in place" (118), and in *The Shipping News*, Newfoundland becomes the centre of Quoyle's quest. He must conquer the elements, including the island itself, as well as confront his ancestry, a process which culminates in this dialogue with the green house that rests upon Quoyle Point. Quoyle's quest for identity relies heavily upon this place, and while he faces each of the challenges that arise from his move to Newfoundland, he makes strides toward defining himself against this environment.

The Ties that Bind: Quoyle's Relationships

*"the Bakhtinian subject is an incontovertibly **social** subject, he or she is formed through an ongoing process of dialogic exchange with his or her various interlocutors."*
(Pearce 4)

> *Within the limits of a single work...we may notice a number of different chronotopes and complex interactions among them, specific to the given work...it is common moreover for one of these chronotopes to envelope or dominate the others....Chronotopes are mutually exclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships. The relationships themselves that exist among chronotopes cannot enter into any of the relationships contained within chronotopes. The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are dialogical (in the broadest use of the word)*
> *(Bakhtin, **Dialogic** 252).*

The third "knot of narrative" to be discussed in regards to *The Shipping News* is how identity is constituted through relations and dialogues with others. One's relationships are a determining factor of one's identity. At the level of dialogue, the

process is complex: "The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a *dialogic* penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 59). An examination of Quoyle's quest with the other quests in the novel at the level of dialogue reveals important elements of Quoyle's identity. The dialogues that Quoyle has with the characters of *The Shipping News*—Partridge, Petal, his daughters, the aunt, the men at *The Gammy Bird*, and Wavey—all shape his quest.

*****

At its most basic level, dialogue requires two people—"a dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two" (Holquist 38). All three aspects are essential to dialogue, and identity is revealed in the "relation" that Holquist mentions.

In the first pages of *The Shipping News*, Proulx tells the story of Quoyle's upbringing, adolescence, and early adulthood. He grows up in a world where his voice is not valued or heard. He has yet to experience a dialogic space where he can express himself. He has no direction in his life, no purpose:

> Nothing was clear to lonesome Quoyle. His thoughts churned like the amorphous thing that ancient sailors, drifting into arctic half-light, called the Sea Lung; a heaving sludge of ice under fog where air blurred into water, where liquid was solid, where solids dissolved, where the sky froze and light and dark muddled (Proulx 3).

The Shipping News portrays Quoyle's process of "unmuddling" his identity through dialogue with others. He begins his quest without confidence in himself: "hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence. Stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties learning to separate his feelings from his life, counting on

nothing" (Proulx 1). Quoyle's distance from his environment prevents him from having a dialogue with those around him.

Quoyle's situation is more complex than simply social ineptitude. He desperately wants to generate dialogue with others: "Quoyle was a failure at loneliness, yearned to be gregarious, to know his company was a pleasure to others" (Proulx 4). His friendship with Partridge is the first step to reversing this trend, and developing a dialogue with those around him.

Partridge is the vehicle that starts the dialogue. He introduces Quoyle to the world of language. Working as a reporter for a small-town paper, the *Mockingburg Record*, Quoyle begins to make sense of the world around him. He appropriates the stories of others to define his life. Though his employment is still cyclical (he gets laid off every summer), he discovers an aptitude for reporting: "Quoyle, who spoke little himself, inspired talkers. His only skill in the game of life. His attentive posture, his flattering nods urged waterfalls of opinion, reminiscence, recollection, theorizing, guesstimating, exposition, synopsis and explication, juiced the life stories out of strangers" (Proulx 9). This appropriation of other discourses shapes Quoyle's identity. As Bakhtin notes, this is integral to dialogue:

> The tendency to assimilate others' discourse takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual's ideological becoming, in the most fundamental sense. Another's discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth—but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior (*Dialogic* 342).

Quoyle becomes so immersed in his identity as a reporter that he "[s]aw the commonplaces of life as newspaper headlines" (Proulx 8)—for example, "Stupid Man Does Wrong Thing Once More" (Proulx 89) when he buys his boat, or "Man with Hangover Listens to Boat Builder Project Variables" (Proulx 265) in a scene with Alvin Yark. The prose style of the novel reflects this through the use of short, staccato sentences that, in many cases, are fragments.

Through Quoyle's experiences with Partridge, Quoyle discovers writing is an act of interpreting reality. Partridge shows Quoyle how to manipulate words to reflect the readership of the paper. Quoyle starts off modestly, with only 12-15 verbs (Proulx 8) that he can use confidently, but these lessons aid him at *The Gammy Bird.* Partridge is involved in obtaining that job for Quoyle as well:

> Partridge back on the line two days later. Pleased to be fixing Quoyle's life up again. Quoyle made him think of a huge roll of newsprint from the pulp mill. Blank and speckled with imperfections. But beyond this vagueness he glimpsed something like a reflection of light from a distant hubcap, a scintillation that meant there was, in Quoyle's life, the chance of some brilliance. Happiness? Good luck? Fame and fortune? Who knows, thought Partridge. He liked the rich taste of life so well himself he wished for an entrée or two for Quoyle (Proulx 31).

This passage has already been discussed in relation to the ongoing nature of the quest. It is also important to note Partridge's comparison of Quoyle to newsprint. His "formlessness" is moulded during his quest in much the same way that newsprint is moulded into a paper—through the use of language. Dialogue, specifically language,

shapes identity. Partridge's hunch is correct, as Quoyle does find success at *The Gammy Bird.* He moves up the ranks and eventually becomes the managing editor of the paper.

Besides exposing Quoyle to the world of language, where Quoyle learns to make sense of his environment, Partridge is also responsible for awakening other sensations in Quoyle. As the above passage demonstrates, Partridge's identity is entwined in the culinary arts. Food is an important element of their friendship. At one of their meals, "Quoyle and Partridge ate poached trout and garlic shrimps...Quoyle tossed the fennel salad" (Proulx 9)—a far cry from Quoyle's usual dinner of "a ham knuckle, buttered spuds" (Proulx 1). The dinner parties they have are a particularly good example of the carnival feast:

> The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself....Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 281).

With this in mind, Quoyle's eating experiences are a central aspect of his quest for identity. The delicacies served by Partridge awaken his tastebuds, just like his early days as a reporter develop his awareness of language. These tools equip him for his journey to Newfoundland. Many important conversations are held over a dinner table, often complete with squid burgers or lobster pie, and beer. The carnivalesque feast permeates Quoyle's daily life.

*****

Unlike Quoyle's eye-opening experiences with Partridge, Petal Bear's dialogue with Quoyle is diminutive. Her name, Petal (only part of a flower) represents her small stature (Proulx 12). This, coupled with the bear-like ferocity of her personality, sends Quoyle's life in a whirlwind. Her insatiable passion intimidates Quoyle, and she easily becomes the dominating force in the relationship: "As a hot mouth warms a cold spoon, Petal warmed Quoyle...his heart scarred forever by tattoo needles pricking the name of Petal Bear" (Proulx 13). Despite the strides he is making as a reporter, their relationship is a one-sided dialogue. Once again, Quoyle becomes trapped in an existence that does not allow for open dialogic spaces.

This entrapment remains with Quoyle long after Petal's death. He suffers from recurring nightmares, reliving her death night after night:

> The Old Hag came in the night, saddled and bridled Quoyle. He dreamed again he was on the nightmare highway. A tiny figure under a trestle stretched imploring arms. Petal, torn and bloody. Yet so great was his speed he was carried past. The brakes did not work when he tramped them. He woke for a few minutes, straining his right foot on the dream brake, his neck wet with anxious sweat. The wind moaned through the house cables, a sound that invoked a sense of hopeless abandonment. But he pulled the sleeping bag corner over his upper ear and slept again. Getting used to nightmares (Proulx 208).

This nightmare represents the hold that Petal's memory has on Quoyle. It is significant, however, that Quoyle cannot stop to help her in his dream. His quest involves going much farther than Petal could ever take him. Her memory permeates most of the novel—"what of Petal's essence riding under his skin like an injected vaccine against the plague

of love?" (Proulx 195)—preventing him from acting on his feelings for Wavey. His quest involves dealing with the ghost of Petal, of untying the "six kinked years of suffering" (Proulx 13) that was their marriage.

Petal's ghost also haunts Quoyle's employment at *The Gammy Bird*, as Quoyle is assigned to cover car wrecks (a front-page feature) for the paper. This assignment is debilitating to him, and always reminds him of Petal: "I can't cover car wrecks. You know why. I think of what happened. Car wrecks. Ships" (Proulx 72). Part of Quoyle's quest involves learning to integrate his fears, and not to run away from them. Bakhtin notes, "in the system of grotesque imagery death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole, and life as a whole can inspire fear least of all" (*Rabelais* 50). This carnivalesque wholeness is a goal of Quoyle's quest, and involves integrating his experiences with Petal into his life with Wavey. At this point in the novel, however, he is fractured, and cannot see past the parts that make up the whole. Once he accepts the interconnectedness of his identity with those around him, his quest takes a new turn—he succeeds at the paper and experiences love with Wavey.

Dialogue is not an egalitarian state of existence. The power struggle inherent in dialogue is indicative of the hierarchies that can divide the interlocutors. In Quoyle's and Petal's relationship, as noted, Petal's is the dominant voice. Also significant in this power struggle is the fact that their relationship is a reversal of "traditional" gender roles. Petal is the adulterer, and Quoyle becomes the caregiver to their children, as well as tolerating his wife's promiscuity. She leaves for days at a time on her trysts. One night, she calls Quoyle from a bar in Alabama, in need of the recipe for an Alabama Slammer. Quoyle pleads with her to come home, willing to do anything to have her there. Petal is not

interested in this, and hangs up the phone once she has the information she needs (Proulx 15). Quoyle is unable to stand up to this abuse. He does not wish to "rock the boat":

> Quoyle believed in silent suffering, did not see that it goaded. He struggled to deaden his feeling, to behave well. A test of love. The sharper the pain, the greater the proof. If he could endure now, if he could take it, in the end it would be all right. It would certainly be all right.
>
> But the circumstances enclosed him like the six sides of a metal case (Proulx 17).

The image of the metal case is in direct contrast to the communion with the land that Quoyle experiences in Newfoundland with Wavey (Proulx 196). He is relying on others, primarily Petal, to define the boundaries of his quest.

In contrast to Quoyle's and Petal's marriage, there is the dialogue between Partridge and Mercalia. Partridge is the homemaker (similar to Quoyle) while Mercalia is a graduate-student-turned-truck-driver (a traveler like Petal). Partridge happily follows Mercalia to California, where she has found employment. Partridge's philosophy—"Everything that counts is for love, Quoyle. It's the engine of life" (Proulx 10)—fuels *their* quest. They wholeheartedly embrace the carnivalesque. Partridge and Mercalia feast on life, and face the unknown with confidence and anticipation, without fear. Quoyle, on the other hand, clings to his dialogue with Petal for safety and security. He has yet to experience the love that is the "engine of life."

*****

Dialogue between children and adults demonstrates a unique exchange between subjects. In *The Shipping News*, Quoyle's daughters, Bunny and Sunshine, are important

in his quest for identity. Bunny and Sunshine are daily reminders of his life with Petal. A life without his daughters is unfathomable for Quoyle:

> But from the first moment that Petal raved she was pregnant, threw her purse on the floor like a dagger, kicked her shoes at Quoyle and said she'd get an abortion, Quoyle loved, first Bunny, then Sunshine, loved them with a kind of fear that if they made it into the world they were with him on borrowed time, would one day run a wire into his brain through terrible event. He never guessed it would be Petal. Thought he'd already had the worst from her (Proulx 23).

His love and concern for his daughters enlighten his quest; he is no longer making decisions only for himself. It is this union that Bakhtin addresses in his writings on dialogue—Quoyle's words and actions influence and grow out of exchanges with his daughters.

Quoyle's quest is directly linked to helping his daughters deal with the death of their mother, bringing life and death together. "Carnival is a symbol and celebration of mortality. It affirms that all things pass away: opinions, customs, values, ideas, classes, institutions, lives, worlds...the poetry of carnival welcomes death and decay with open arms" (Di Renzo 192). Quoyle, Bunny, and Sunshine must incorporate Petal's death into their dialogue. They make up stories about her death (i.e. she is sleeping), but these falsities only stall the reality of the situation. To truly embrace the carnivalesque, they must accept Petal's death.

The lines of ancestry discussed earlier are also drawn in the children, connecting the past and the present. Sunshine reminds Quoyle of Petal. He "saw briefly, once, Petal's vanished fact in Sunshine's look. Pain he thought blunted erupted hot. As though the

woman herself had suddenly appeared and disappeared. Of course she had, in a genetic way" (Proulx 148). Bunny, on the other hand, is connected to Quoyle: "His stout, homely child with disturbing ways" (Proulx 101) and "she's large and strong child for her age" (Proulx 300). Bunny's fear of the white dog is her way of dealing with the death of her mother, and Quoyle's dealing with this fear is an integral part of his quest. Instead of pushing Bunny into the mouth of the dog (like his father pushed him into the water), Quoyle handles the situation with patience and concern. This desire to understand Bunny's fear is an example of the Bakhtinian notion of acceptance and integration of fear into the cycle of life. Wavey attempts to explain this to Quoyle, because he is reluctant to discuss death with the girls: "There is grief and loss in life. They need to understand that. They seem to think death is just sleep" (Proulx 331). Bunny begins to accept her mother's death, though many questions remain unanswered. The ambiguity of death, life, and resurrection is a cornerstone of Quoyle's dialogue with Bunny.

*****

Agnis Hamm, "the aunt," is Quoyle's counterpart in his quest. Together, they move to Newfoundland, each with the need to wrestle the past. Quoyle's dialogue with the aunt untangles the "knot of narrative" that connects him to his roots. In her quest, the aunt must confront the demons of her childhood: "So strange, she thought, going back there with a bereaved nephew and Guy's ashes....Wondered which had changed the most, place or self? It was a strong place. She shuddered. It would be better now. Leaned on the rail, looking into the dark Atlantic that snuffled at the slope of the past" (Proulx 34). At the end of the novel, she is still unable to disclose her pain to Quoyle when he confronts her about the abuse she suffered at the hands of her brother. It is debatable just

how much she has dealt with and accepted her past. There are many knots that remain untied at the end of the novel, an example of the unfinalizability of identity. Her moving in with Mavis Bangs, however, alludes to the fact that she is coming to terms with Irene Warren's (her former partner's) death.

The physical similarities between Quoyle and the aunt have previously been highlighted. Other connections can be drawn between the two. Not only have they both recently suffered the loss of a loved one, but they also have in common the death of Guy Quoyle. The ways in which they deal with this death is interesting. Quoyle is ambivalent about the entire situation, while the aunt disposes of his ashes in Bakhtinian fashion:

> The box holding the brother's ashes was on the floor in the corner.
>
> 'All right,' she said, and seized it. Carried it down and through and out. A bright day. The sea glazed, ornamented with gulls. Her shadow streamed away from her. She went into the new outhouse and tipped the ashes down the hole. Hoisted her skirts and sat down. The urine splattered. The thought that she, that his own son and grandchildren, would daily void their bodily wastes on his remains a thing that only she would know (Proulx 100).

This action is typical of the carnival sense of the world: "The images of feces and urine are ambivalent, as are all the images of the material bodily lower stratum; they debase, destroy, regenerate, and renew simultaneously" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 151). This image, while coarse, demonstrates the cyclical nature of life. Strength and energy is gained through the debasement of others. The aunt is rejuvenated through this process, and responds to Guy's treatment of her in their youth.

Initially, the aunt is the dominant voice in her dialogue with Quoyle, and is described as having a "manly heart" (Proulx 179). This is similar to the role reversal between Quoyle and Petal. However, as Quoyle's voice becomes stronger, a "balance" is achieved. The aunt is taken aback by his strength: "'You have been thinking of all the angles,' said the aunt. Dryly. She was used to being the one who figured things out" (Proulx 227). This shifting power dynamic is part of dialogue: "Although Bakhtin's model allcws for the dominance of one subject over another...this authority need not be absolute or permanent: the monologic voice may, at any point, be challenged and interrupted" (Pearce 95). The fluctuation of power between the aunt and Quoyle drives each of their quests.

This fluctuation in roles also illustrates the fluidity that can be achieved through dialogue. Neither voice is totally privileged, revealing the subjectivity of each voice. For example, upon first meeting the aunt, Quoyle describes Petal as "starved for love. I think she just couldn't get enough love" (Proulx 23). The aunt, on the other hand, "guessed that this was Quoyle's invention, this love-starved Petal. Took one look at the arctic eyes, the rigidly seductive pose of Petal's photograph, Quoyle's silly rose in a water glass beside it, and thought to herself, there was a bitch in high heels" (Proulx 24). The different perspectives that they bring to the story exemplify the polyphony of the novel. Dialogue arises out of these exchanges between voices, exposing their quests for identity.

Dialogue can also be used to mask identity. When the aunt shares her life story with Quoyle and the children, she neglects to share the fact that Warren's first name is Irene. This information is never fully disclosed. The promise of the aunt's belongings being shipped to the island is never fully realized (Proulx 227), which further complicates

the aunt's identity—what exactly is to be believed? It is apparent that dialogue is not a road to an objective *Truth*, but rather, the path to subjective *truths*.

The aunt's career as an upholsterer is significant to the dialogue. She reupholsters ships for a living, and this renovation carries over into her personal relationships. For example, she is the one to convince Quoyle to move to Newfoundland: "'It makes sense,' she said, 'for you to start a new life in a fresh place. For the children's sake as well as your own. It would help you all get over what's happened....And it helps if you're in a different place. And what place would be more natural than where your family came from?'" (Proulx 29). This move allows Quoyle to learn about his past, and he incorporates that knowledge into his emerging identity. Renovation—of the family home, as a career, and as a method of re-establishing family connections—is a major mode of dialogue in the novel.

*****

The idea of dialogue as renovation can be carried over to Quoyle's career as a newspaper reporter. Bakhtin's notion that "the ideological becoming of a human being...is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (*Dialogic* 341) allows for renovation through dialogue. While Quoyle becomes more comfortable with his voice, his writing voice changes as well. This process is gradual and is reflected through the different papers he writes for. The *Mockingbird Record* "is a family paper. We run upbeat stories with a community slant" (Proulx 5). *The Gammy Bird* is also a local paper, but with a different texture. It reflects the community, but with a harder edge—they cover car wrecks and sexual abuse stories (Proulx 67-69) instead of cartoons and self-help quizzes (Proulx 5). The official discourse of print media is carnivalized by

Jack Buggit and his reporters. Quoyle must adapt to this discourse. It is necessary for him to renovate his voice—the one he developed in New York—to participate in the dialogue at *The Gammy Bird.*

Renovation through dialogue also occurs at *The Gammy Bird.* The official discourse of the paper is subverted through Quoyle's unique profiles on ships and his editorials on the shipping industry. He contributes his personal voice to the paper, oftentimes rejecting the authority of Tert Card, thereby altering the existing dialogue at the paper.

At *The Gammy Bird,* personal fears are intimately tied to the assignments that each man is given. Nutbeem makes the following observations while having lunch with Quoyle:

> 'Have you noticed Jack's uncanny sense about assignments? He gives you a beat that plays on your private inner fears. Look at you. Your wife was killed in an auto accident. What does Jack ask you to cover? Car wrecks, to get pictures while the upholstery is still on fire and the blood still hot. He gives Billy, who has never married for reasons unknown, the home news, the women's interest page, the details of home and hearth—must be exquisitely painful to the old man. And me. I get to cover the wretched sexual assaults. And with each one I relive my own childhood. I was assaulted at school for three years, first by a miserable geometry teacher, then by older boys who were his cronies. To this day I cannot sleep without wrapping up like a mummy in five or six blankets. And what I don't know is if Jack understands what he's doing, if the pain is supposed to ease and

> dull through repetitive confrontation, or if it just persists, as fresh as on the day of the first personal event. I'd say it persists' (Proulx 221).

Why are they matched up in this way? If dialogue is the vehicle to find and express one's identity, then it is necessary for the men at *The Gammy Bird* to confront their worst fears if they intend to incorporate them into their identity. The carnival sense of the world, according to Bakhtin, embraces these fears. "Fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is born. The whole of the people and of the world is triumphantly gay and fearless. This whole speaks in all carnival images..." (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 256). These fears cannot be eliminated entirely, but must be confronted in the arena of dialogue.

Through this confrontation, Quoyle is able to deal with the death of Petal. With this, less emphasis is placed on the car wrecks: "'What have you got, Quoyle, car wreck or boat wreck? You got to have something. Seems you're out interviewing for the damn shipping news every time there's a car wreck'" (Proulx 219). The shipping news starts off as a list of the ships in port (Proulx 87), but becomes the dialogic space where Quoyle can discuss his personal impressions of the boats that visit Killick-Claw. At the heart of the community, there is the debate surrounding the oil trade. As a comment on this, Quoyle writes a piece called "Nobody Hangs a Picture of an Oil Tanker" (Proulx 201). Fear is no longer a dominant voice in his dialogue. Because Quoyle deals with his past experiences, he gains the strength to express his own ideas and opinions.

*****

To conclude this discussion of dialogue as a "knot of narrative" within *The Shipping News*, it is important to examine Quoyle's relationship with Wavey. This

dialogue is the epitome of Quoyle's quest for identity. Wavey brings together all of the things that Quoyle struggles with in the novel: love, relationships, finding a home, and even his fear of water, as her name links her to the sea—"In Wyoming they name girls Skye. In Newfoundland, it's Wavey" (Proulx 122). His burgeoning love for Wavey gives Quoyle the strength to confront all of these challenges.

In Wavey, Quoyle finds a soul mate, as they have had very similar experiences in their lives. One of these similarities is the relationships they have prior to their meeting. Like Petal, Wavey's husband died in a tragic accident (Proulx 194). Both Quoyle and Wavey hold back from committing to each other, preferring instead to cling to the memories of their deceased mates. The irony of this is that neither Petal nor Herold Prowse deserves their fidelity. Both Petal and Herold made no secret of their escapades, while Quoyle and Wavey watched it happen (Proulx 304). When they meet, they are both reluctant to give away too much, for fear of being hurt again. They must integrate these past dialogues into their identities before they can go on. Again, Bakhtin's notion of the cyclical nature of the carnival comes to mind. This step is an important one in Quoyle's quest.

As well, both Quoyle and Wavey share an affiliation to children. Quoyle is driven by the wish to make coping with Petal's death as easy as possible for his daughters. He hesitates telling them the truth, thinking that this is best for them. Conversely, Wavey feels that it is important to treat children like adults, and tries to explain the concept of death to Bunny and Sunshine (Proulx 331-332). That difference of opinion aside, they are both dedicated to their children. Herry has Down's Syndrome, but Wavey is not shaken in her determination to make his life as comfortable as possible: "Fervent. A ringing

voice. Here was Wavey on fire....Rescuing lost children, showing them ways to grasp life. She squeezed her hands together, showing him that anyone alive could clench possibilities" (Proulx 146).

Their relationship develops slowly—"Like two ducks swimming at first on opposite sides of the water but who end in the middle, together. It was taking a long time" (Proulx 222). Yet, the dialogue is genuine, as they confront their hopes and fears together. This is the ultimate goal of dialogue—an exchange of ideas without fear of domination. Quoyle's and Wavey's dialogue is the least power-driven of all the dialogues in *The Shipping News*. Through this relationship, Proulx presents feelings of acceptance and tolerance of ideas and emotions.

Their marriage represents the cyclical nature of the carnival. Their respective pasts cannot be erased, nor totally overcome, but the ability to move beyond these memories keeps the cycle turning: "Victory over fear is not its abstract elimination; it is a simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, a gay transformation" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 91). The ambiguity of the conclusion of *The Shipping News* indicates that the dialogue between Wavey and Quoyle is ongoing—just as the quest for identity is never-ending, such is the nature of the dialogue that contributes to the quests.

*****

As a "knot of narrative," dialogue is an integral aspect of Quoyle's quest for identity in *The Shipping News*. Though an attempt has been made to isolate the various dialogues from each other, it is important to note that all the dialogues inform and influence one another. Quoyle, as the central character of the novel, is at the centre of this examination. His quest must take into consideration those around him. Partridge, Petal,

Bunny and Sunshine, the aunt, the men at *The Gammy Bird*, and Wavey, are all essential to Quoyle's conception of himself.

Conclusion: Knots as a Metaphor for Reading

"It should be pointed out that the carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of ***conclusive conclusion****: all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again."*
(Bakhtin, ***Problems*** *165)*

Because the epigraph to *The Shipping News* from *The Ashley Book of Knots* appears "outside of the story," the novel as a whole can be likened to a knot to be undone by the reader. The metaphor of the knot is extended to include the interpretation of the novel by the reader. In this sense, the "knots of narrative" that have been discussed come together to form the knot that is *The Shipping News*. The act of reading and interpreting the novel is synonymous with the process of untying a knot. This discussion of *The Shipping News* has isolated various strands, the "knots of narrative," in order to untie Quoyle's quest for identity.

Each of the three "knots of narrative" that have been examined in relation to the quest for identity—the structure of the novel, the role of place, and the dialogues that connect Quoyle to the other questors in the novel—drives some aspect of Quoyle's quest. The image of the knot is central to each element, and connects the three aspects together.

To remain true to Bakhtinian thought, however, this discussion of *The Shipping News* ends with the notion that we are participating in a dialogue within the knot of

literary criticism. Hardly the last word has been uttered in regards to this novel. Interpretation is just as unfinalizable as Quoyle's quest for identity.

Chapter 3

Listen to the Music: *Accordion Crimes*

Polyphony is "music in which instead of the parts marching in step with one another, and without particular interest in their individual curves, they move in apparent independence and freedom though fitting together harmonically."
(Oxford English Dictionary)

The quest for identity is not a solitary quest. Dialogic theories insist upon the interconnectedness of subjects, and identity is constituted through these relations. Each questor's voice is different, and all of these voices converge in the polyphonic novel. It is impossible to separate these voices as they rely on each other for their identity. We are not defined *by* others, but through our relations *with* them. The quest for identity is inseparable from dialogue.

The plurality and interconnectedness of the quest for identity is at the heart of this discussion of Annie Proulx's *Accordion Crimes*. The novel relates the stories of a variety of immigrant experiences in America. As readers, we are exposed to the complexities and challenges of building a new life in a new country, while simultaneously attempting to preserve the traditions of the "old country." The heterogeneity of these experiences comprises this novel—without *one* of these stories, subsequent stories are completely altered, shifting all of the quests entirely. We can no longer think of the "self" as removed or separated from the whole—each "self" is integral to the whole. Michael Holquist refers to this as the "unique and unified event of being" (24). All of the characters, whether they are aware of it or not, affect and are affected by the dialogues with and of

others. The quests for identity are occurring, simultaneously and interactively, around them.

Because "polyphony" is a term Bakhtin borrows from music, the notion of the multiplicity of voices can be extended, comparing *Accordion Crimes* to a musical composition. Just as all of the instruments and melodic lines are important to the integrity of a symphony, all of the voices, places, events, and dialogues are important to the totality of the novel. On their own, these tunes do not have meaning, but must be analyzed in their relation to the whole: "With polyphony, it is the totality of a text which constitutes the dynamic ensemble, not its various components each seen as a reflection of the whole" (Malcuzynski 53). The meeting of voices may not be harmonious, but it is within these relations that the quest for identity takes place.

The dialogic model prevents an absolute conclusion to the novel. Bakhtin notes: "the carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of *conclusive conclusion*: all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again" (*Problems* 165). The stories within *Accordion Crimes* do not make a definitive statement about the immigrant experience. The novel is fractured and fragmented, emphasizing the unfinalizability of the subject that Bakhtin celebrates in his writings. At many points in the novel (especially at the end of each chapter), we are left to wonder what happens next. We never find out, but that does not nullify the dialogues. All of these exchanges are necessary to the quests that take place. The continuous dialogue keeps the quests moving and changing. In this sense, *Accordion Crimes* is not only comparable to a musical score, but this score is an "*unfinished* symphony." The end of each chapter and the end of the novel do not complete the immigrant experience—

these ends are not a conclusion to the quest for identity. The "flash-forwards" scattered throughout the novel indicate that the quests will go on indefinitely, as past dialogues influence future ones. There is no "fermata"—a dramatic pause in the music for effect—in this performance. There is just a cue for someone else to take up the tune and continue the dialogue.

The metaphor of the "unfinished symphony" will inform this examination of Proulx's *Accordion Crimes*. This metaphor exemplifies the ongoing nature of the quest for identity, while necessitating an appreciation for the uniqueness of all the voices in the score. The voices gain meaning and significance only through their dialogic interaction with others. Each voice gets a "solo," although this solo can only be heard or distinguished through a relation to the symphonic whole. The interconnectedness of the quests is comparable to the different melodic lines that are heard in a symphonic performance.

To facilitate this discussion of *Accordion Crimes*, I will discuss each of the chapters separately to illuminate the variety of stories and quests within the novel. Each chapter, then, is a solo, a melodic line, or a movement, that comes to the forefront while the rest of the quests provide the harmony against which it is played. Despite the effect that this separation implies, each chapter cannot stand on its own, but is merely a fraction of the whole novel.

Proulx uses the green button accordion to connect the chapters, making it the protagonist of the novel. As this accordion changes hands—from Beutle to Gagnon to Gasmann--different stories are told and heard. What all of these stories share is a dialogue with the accordion as well as the problems and challenges shared by immigrants

in America. How these problems and challenges affect each quest differs significantly. With the dialogic model at the fore, each chapter and each voice is given a unique perspective to add to the novel. It is this play between similarity and difference that illustrates both the interconnectedness *and* the particularity of the quests for identity in *Accordion Crimes*.

In order to understand the rationale for discussing the novel by its parts, it is necessary first to examine the structural elements of the novel. These elements, because they can be traced in various forms throughout the novel, connect the stories together, while the variance in setting, experiences, and dialogues, fracture and fragment the narrative.

Structure: Reading the Score

"This fracturing and fragmentation of the chronotope [is] a consequence of the multiple centres of individual consciousness contending with one another in the modern novel." (Pearce 70)

When applying the metaphor of the "unfinished symphony" to *Accordion Crimes*, both the literal and figurative connotations of this metaphor must be considered. At a literal level, there are numerous musical performances throughout the stories, and each of these performances contributes to the total musical score. A unity of voices is never reached, leaving this particular score "unfinished."

The novel begins on a "high note" with "the accordion maker." He makes the stories of the novel possible, and sets the quest in motion. He is the creator of the green button accordion, and has aspirations to take this craft to "La Merica," where he dreams

of becoming a famous accordion maker and musician. "He thought of a new life, fresh and unused, of money hanging in the future like pears hidden in high leaves" (Proulx 23). The fact that "the accordion maker" is never given a proper name serves to depersonalize his character—he is not the only one to leave his home and his family in search of a better life. This anonymity is especially pronounced upon his arrival in New Orleans. He lives in a crowded boarding house, sleeping with strangers. It is only when he plays his accordion that he finds solace in his life. Ironically, however, it is on one of these nights that he is arrested and accused of murder, simply due to his ethnicity. The green button accordion is lost in the scuffle, and thus begins its journey.

There are many other instances of music and performance in the novel, driving the quests for identity. For Joey and Sonia Przybysz, who travel the Polish Polka Playoff circuit, the stage is their home:

> Before they married, Joey was already doing the Polish festivals and contests, a living to be made that way, just driving around from state to state, wherever they had the ethnic festivals, dances, parish get-togethers, Polka Days in a dozen states, busloads of tourists pouring in....It took a year of work before she got out there on the stage with him, before she got over being frightened of the sweating crowd and the snaky cords running every whichaway over the dirty stage, the squealing feedback and the sensation that she was going to pass out in front of everybody. And her throat feeling from the liniment like it had been scraped with a broken branch. She could hardly talk, but all the strength in her leaped into the singing. Then it got good, especially when they won a contest, exciting when the screamed out Joey's name—and hers!—and shouted and whistled (Proulx 325-326).

Their winnings help feed and clothe their family, fueling their existence.

Music drives the quests for identity, whether it is a public performance or not. No definitive tune is ever heard (the accordion makes different sounds depending on who is playing it and where it is played), and this music is an "unfinished symphony"—all of the songs and parts are necessary to the whole.

Figuratively, the metaphor of the "unfinished symphony" also functions as a definition for the text. The end of the novel is inconclusive—we are left to wonder what Mrs. Simms will see when she looks up. Will the children find and keep the money that was hidden in the accordion, and reverse the nature of their life? Or, will Addie (the woman who runs the store) be the first to run into the street? We never find out what happens, just as an "unfinished symphony" has no "final" note.

Contrary to the inconclusiveness of the novel, however, the green button accordion's quest reaches an end. It is run over by a tractor-trailer, and its hidden contents are revealed. The physical destruction of the green button accordion does not indicate that the quest for identity is over. Its legend lives on—partly through the money that is found, and more importantly, through the dialogues which take place along the way.

Proulx's placement of an inanimate object as the central character of the novel destabilizes the narrative. The accordion can "speak" only when it is played, and the multitude of dialogues that ensue from the accordion's transportation throughout the novel offers a multitude of perspectives on the immigrant experience. There is no "hero" to follow, decentring the traditional quest narrative. Instead, we are following the travels of an accordion. The characters in each story are not fully developed, preventing a

relationship between reader and character from forming before the accordion is moved to its next destination. This technique is very effective in demonstrating the multi-faceted and plural nature of the immigrant experience. Though similarities and connections can be drawn (through the accordion), the quest for identity is one that cannot be defined absolutely. At the end of "The Accordion Maker," for example, Fish Man sails away with the accordion. We later discover that he sold the accordion in Iowa, but we are given no details of this journey.

The green button accordion acts as a link that binds these disparate experiences. The fact that the green button accordion must be played to be heard not only emphasizes the interconnectedness of the dialogues, but it is also breaks down the language barrier that separates people. Take, for example, Dolor Gagnon. He does not speak French, yet he goes to Montreal, searching for the "old music." To combat the language barrier, he takes the accordion to "speak" for him. His trip is a success, as he finds what he is looking for. However, this discovery cannot transform his present situation:

> He wanted to play that music, music that belonged to him by blood inheritance, but could not learn it because he didn't speak French, because he lived in a place where the music was no longer admired or played, because he could never be as good as the tranced man with the piston leg. Random had revealed nothing, meant nothing and held no meaning for him. The journey to Québec had only compounded his sense of alienation and inadequacy. He could never be those accordionists. And of himself he knew what he had known when he was two—nothing, *rien*, nothing (Proulx 207).

Though the accordion can bridge many gaps, some of these hopes and dreams are unbridgeable.

The green button accordion stimulates dialogue in other ways. Discussions surrounding its worth and value, as well as the value of accordion music, dominate many conversations in the novel, as people debate their opinions on the subject. These debates are important to the quest for identity as characters negotiate their place in their surroundings. The Relámpagos are a case in point. They want to succeed in the music business, so they play what the people want to hear rather than playing their own songs: "the traditional music was not so popular now; it was all swing and big bands" (Proulx 140).

While it winds its way through its quest, the green button accordion is woven into the narrative. Each chapter is linked to the others through the shared presence of the accordion, joining their disparate experiences. To facilitate this link, a "hand-off" occurs, where the accordion leaves one place and moves to another. To demonstrate this transition, I will examine the transfer of the accordion from "The Accordion Maker" to "The Goat Gland Operation." The accordion maker is arrested in an ethnic dispute that erupts in New Orleans. While in jail, he is killed during a raid by American patriots. (Gratuitous violence pervades the novel, following the accordion wherever it goes, hence the title of the novel. I do not think this is a result of the accordion, but is often an effect of the struggles of being an immigrant in a new land. In other instances, the randomness of violence is just a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time). The hand-made, green button accordion is taken by Pollo. He leaves New Orleans and heads up the Mississippi. Pollo is subsequently killed by his partner, Fish Man, who "take[s] the

accordion along for the ride" (Proulx 60). The accordion has left its home in Louisiana, and is off to new, strange places. The accordion next appears in a lumber yard in Iowa. While shopping for supplies, Beutle spots "a green button accordion, furred in dust" (Proulx 69). He feels an instant attraction to the instrument:

> Beutle picked it up, gave it a tentative squeeze, then filled the office with a loud and pumping polka. The dust flew from it as he worked the bellows. The other two Germans stood with their faces ajar.
>
> 'Hans,' said Messermacher. 'This is marvelous. That you can do this. This music gives me happiness' (Proulx 69).

The purchase is not made until their next visit, when they discover that the owner of the lumber yard (*and* the accordion) was killed by a pile of falling lumber. The green button accordion brings pleasure to the three Germans and their families for many years, though it also brings them hardships: "The next day a sign without a single flyspeck hung over the bar: GERMANS NOT WELCOME. GET THE HELL BACK TO DUTCHLAND" (Proulx 88).

There are similar transfers between the other chapters in the novel, with yard sales and pawnshops as the dominant conduit. These exchanges always occur through an intermediary. The various owners never meet—the accordion progresses through its journey in fateful fashion. From taxicab to antique shop to lumber yard, the green button accordion makes its way through America. This distance between the quests further fractures and fragments the quest for identity.

In each chapter, a second accordion is also featured alongside the green button accordion, generating a dialogue that compares and contrasts the merits of each

instrument. As the value of one accordion is determined, the other accordion increases or decreases in value accordingly. For example, in "Don't Let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand," Octave purchases the green button accordion from Buddy impulsively, "because it sounded good and loud and could sound better, but most of all because it had looked him in the eye" (Proulx 255). However, the green button accordion does not live up to Octave's expectations:

> He was giving the green accordion all he could, it was breaking out breathy sobbing roars as though from a strongman's heaving chest, it was an instrument of sweat and that big crying voice talking to them, but even with the grille off, even with the new reeds, it wasn't right. It didn't have the range....His mind was made up. He'd bring it to Chicago and sell it to some homesick squeezer and he'd get himself a big-key strong-back like the one Clifton played, more notes than he'd know what to do with (Proulx 262).

The piano accordion is what the people want to hear in this situation, and the green button accordion just cannot compare. Its "identity" is assessed through a dialogue with other accordions.

The shifting significance of the green button accordion throughout the novel also contributes to this dialogue. Its identity is reliant upon a dialogue with people, not just with other instruments. For the accordion maker, building fine instruments is his dream, and the green button accordion is his ultimate achievement. The uniqueness of the green button accordion is relative to the perceiver. For example, the accordion is a symbol of the accordion maker's craft and his identity; it represents the secret of the money to Abelardo Relámpago; and for Dolor, the green button accordion is a key to unlock his

past. By the end of the novel, this uniqueness is rejected and the accordion is seen as trash. Vela asks her mother to throw the accordion away: "'Ma, I don't want that junk. Take it out. Just throw it in the trash. And that thing too,' pointing her chin at the accordion. Audrey pressed a button on the player and the tape shot out. She dropped it in the plastic bag as if disposing of a reeking bone" (Proulx 423). This situation is ironic in that Vela really likes accordion music, which is why Dick Cude (a friend of the family) buys the accordion and the accordion tapes for her. She does not want to admit this in front of the girls at her birthday party. Again, the accordion's worth is determined by the context in which it appears. As displays of ethnicity become more comic than honest expressions of one's culture, the accordion becomes a mockery.

The green button accordion is not the only thing that connects the eight chapters of the novel together. As previously discussed in reference to *The Shipping News*, the dialogues with place and with the other questors in the novel are integral to the quest for identity. Though each chapter shows a different perspective of the immigrant experience in America, rooted in a specific time and place, many similar issues, challenges, and problems are displayed—from racial discrimination to language barriers to family conflicts. The importance (or not) of these challenges as it relates to each chapter varies, and the "dialogue" between these variances help to tie the novel together. Language, a central issue in the novel, is shown to have a changing role in the narrative. The accordion maker is ostracized and *killed* because he cannot speak English—he is outside of the dominant, English-speaking discourse. Alternately, Dolor Gagnon desperately wants to speak French, the language of his ancestors. His lack of a history creates a void that weakens his sense of identity.

The narrative of each chapter is divided further into smaller sections. These sections resemble newspaper articles, as each of these episodes is introduced with a title. The titles recur within their episode, referring perhaps to something said, or a particular event, or the introduction of a new character. This device illustrates the variety of stories that are told within each chapter. Each section describes a moment in time, and each of these disparate episodes relates, directly or indirectly, to the quest for identity. These divisions fracture the linear narrative, though simultaneously illustrate the interconnectedness of experience.

With this in mind, I shift now to a discussion of time in *Accordion Crimes*. Bakhtin's writings on the chronotope help to explain how Proulx's manipulation of time fractures the narrative and the quest for identity. This fragmentation of time is observed most simply in the eight chapters of the novel (each of which takes place in a different part of the country and in a different time), as well as in the sections of each chapter. Many "moments in time" are retold and lived throughout the narrative, spanning the late 19th century to the present day. These "moments in time" are connected, however indirectly, to the journey of the green button accordion. Though it seems that the chapters of the novel are not related to each other, the protagonist links all of these disparate quests together. The events of one chapter play a significant role in determining the events of chapters that follow. Consider, for example, the temporal links between "Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair" and "Don't Let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand." The former chapter ends with Emma (Dolor's wife's sister) telling her husband, Emil, of Dolor's suicide. They, along with their children, are on their way to Texas, and have the

green button accordion with them to sell for Dolor. The chapter ends with the reader asking many questions:

> 'It's Dolor. Dolor killed himself. Emil, he had everything to live for, they don't know why he did it. He left here a note. All it said was 'I am happy.' My poor sister, they got her under sedatives.'
>
> 'Jesus Christ. When?'
>
> 'Saturday. The day before yesterday. We was driving along and laughing and having fun and his little green accordion in the back seat and he was—' Please, please, Emil, she thought, don't ask how (Proulx 223).

We do not find out how Dolor committed suicide until the next chapter, and we are told by a complete stranger to Dolor, Buddy Malefoot: "*He cuts off his own head.* He makes a thing in the woods, tie up the chain saw between some trees and get it running, and then he—and then he walk into it so it—*zut*" (Proulx 240). The chronotopes overlap and become dialogically related to each other. The past is brought into the present, as it affects events that follow.

The many chronotopes in *Accordion Crimes* are important to the quest for identity. Not only are they all relevant to the quests, but chronotopes also meet and intersect dialogically. Bakhtin states: "in the literary artistic chronotope...[t]ime as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible" (*Dialogic* 84). An analysis of the various chronotopes illuminates aspects of the quest for identity. At the most basic level, there is the green button accordion's chronotope. This narrative is chronological and is the foundation on which the novel rests (a somewhat shaky foundation). The green button accordion's life spans approximately 100 years. The aging of the accordion is

revealed through its shifting significance; its youth and beauty change to dullness and lifelessness as it becomes less useful to those who own it. Though it is the chronological chronotope of the accordion's existence that binds the narrative, the accordion's worth is negotiated when it intersects with the other chronotopes of the novel.

Through dialogic interaction with the other chronotopes in the novel, time is expanded and contracted, disrupting the chronological narrative of the accordion. We visit many places, both in the past through the telling and retelling of stories, and in the future through the foretelling of future stories. In this way, past, present, and future are all brought together in the bellows of the green button accordion.

At a chronological level, then, we are told the story of the green button accordion as it makes its way through America. While it moves from the accordion maker to Beutle to Relámpago to Gagnon, and so on, we trace the accordion's journey. It is *within* these stops that time takes on the "flesh" of which Bakhtin speaks, as the chronotopes dialogue with each other. Not only are we told the story of the accordion, but a myriad of stories are told by and to the characters within this chronological narrative. The intersecting chronotopes distort and fragment the chronological existence of the accordion. Time becomes fluid as these different realities of time meet in the novel. In "Hit Hard and Gone Down," for example, Mrs. Josef Przybysz tells the story of her husband's first years in America: "she retired, concentrated her time on church, cooking, social meetings and telling stories of the hard times they had survived" (Proulx 283). Her husband emigrated from Poland to America, was unable to continue his practice as a pharmacist, and was forced to settle for employment as a cigar maker. He was also one of the founding members of the local Polish club, the mission of which was to preserve the language and

culture of their people. This story is told differently by her son, Hieronim, when these two chronotopes meet: "My old man? Hey, I don't want to talk about the bastard. The old lady fills you with lies. He was a lousy musician, interested only in the dollar....He claimed to be a pharmacist in the old country, but I did some checking up and he wasn't nothing but a peasant. Tried to make out he was better over here" (Proulx 301). Whose conception of time is correct? In a dialogic world, this question does not have and does not need an answer, as "There are no truths...Only stories" (King 391). The past is received through a dialogic lens, always dependent upon the teller and the told.

There are many other occasions in the novel where the past takes on flesh in the present through storytelling. We learn of important aspects of each character's quest for identity. Time is a continuum, and the past is continually affecting the present moment. Just as the green button accordion's history affects its respective owners, family histories permeate the present. In "Don't Let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand," the death of Belle (the Malefoots' daughter) is an oppressive presence in the home. Mme Malefoot enshrines her daughter, refusing to let her memory die:

> A net of light appeared on the wall, a delicate mesh in a curving form like a drawn bow, with a deep band at the end and a fringe of filaments, long threads of moonlight given motion by the warm air above the electric heater through which the light passed. She could not find the source of this odd and beautiful dispersion and in a few minutes it was gone, the wall an ordinary dull white. She took it as proof of her daughter's ascension and presence (Proulx 236).

Mme Malefoot refuses to believe that her daughter is dead, dramatically altering her present consciousness.

To further complicate the intersecting chronotopes within each chapter, it is also important to examine how time is manipulated *between* chapters. "Spider, Bite Me" ends with Baby visiting her sister, Betty/Felida, in Minneapolis. In a moment of carelessness, the accordion is lost: "In the hotel lobby he realized he had left the green accordion on the floor of the cab. He rushed to the street but the taxi was gone. He made call after call, no, he did not notice the cabbie's number or name; no, he did not know what cab line it was, he remembered nothing except the yellow light on top and it could not be recovered" (Proulx 161).

The following chapter, "Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair," begins in Paris, and proceeds to tell the history of Dolor Gagnon. Upon his return from military service overseas, many years later, he finds the green button accordion in the cab, exactly where Baby left it at the end of "Spider, Bite Me." At this point, it is apparent that these stories have been taking place simultaneously, though the reader is not aware of this until the quests of Baby and Dolor converge in the taxicab in Minneapolis.

Not only do past and present collapse as chronotopes intersect, but the future is also implicated in this continuum. In *Accordion Crimes*, Proulx uses "flash-forwards" to tell readers of events which occur in the future. In these "flash-forwards," quests that have yet to take place become dialogically related to quests that have already happened, or are presently occurring. As Bakhtin notes: "Thus time is a unity, no internal categories segment it; there are no individualized, internal beginnings or dead ends; its moments follow sequentially one after the other in one world that everyone shares in common and that is the same for all" (*Dialogic* 240). Despite the unity of time that is alluded to in this passage, the meeting of chronotopes also ruptures any conception of chronological time

in the novel. We are no longer experiencing a linear quest, but a "symphony" of quests happening simultaneously in the past, present, and future.

An examination of several examples from the novel illustrates this collapse of time through "flash-forwards." In "The Accordion Maker," the following passage appears:

> (The smell of kerosene, bilge, metal, marine paint, the stink of anxious men, of dirty clothes and human grease, mixed with the briny flavor of the sea, etched Silvano's sensibilities, a familiar effluvia later on the Texas shrimp boats, and not even the rank stench of crude oil and gas in his roustabout days in the early decades of the new century erased it....his game ended as he crouched in the jungle trying to relieve himself and a hostile Indian's arrow pierced his throat) (Proulx 30).

This "flash-forward" is dialogically related to the oil lamps on the ship to America. The accordion maker and Silvano have yet to reach "La Merica," and we are told of Silvano's death in Venezuela many years later. In the linear narrative, Silvano embarks upon his adventure following his father's death: "He made his way downriver in the shadow of warehouses, passing the steamboats and freighters, the flat-bottomed wood boats, moving toward the stink of fish and bilge" (Proulx 59).

In "The Goat Gland Operation," we have an example of a "flash-forward" that attempts to reconstruct the present moment: "(But wasn't it their son Rawley...who pieced together his grandfather's farm and more...? Wasn't it Rawley who gave money to start the Prank Farm Pioneer Museum and who moved heaven and earth, hired private investigators, to find the old green accordion his father played?...)" (Proulx 103-104). In

both of these examples, a sense of futility in the future persists: though the characters continually strive for tomorrow, things do not work out as they are planned.

These "flash-forwards" do not always pertain to the main characters of the story, splintering the narrative further. On many occasions, we are told the fate of minor characters. While the accordion maker is in jail for a crime he did not commit, there is the following insight into the future: "(Decades later the great-grandson of this guard, intelligent and handsome, enrolled as a medical student; he served as a donor of sperm at the medical center's in vitro fertilization program and was the maker of more than seventy children reared by other men. He accepted no money for his contribution)" (Proulx 58). The implication here is that *anyone's* future is accessible. Everyone is a part of the quest for identity—many chronotopes meet and influence each other in *Accordion Crimes*. The information given in this passage does not relate directly to the scene being depicted—Silvano is being questioned in a police station—but makes a statement about who gets to propagate in this society. The accordion maker's bloodline is severed when he is ostracized by the American people, while those who are accepted in this society have the means and the power to prosper.

An examination of the structure of *Accordion Crimes* reveals techniques and elements that are significant to the quests for identity of immigrants in America. Proulx takes the metaphor of the "melting pot" to symbolize the assimilation of immigrants to American society, and turns it on its ear. The narratives do not converge, but expand in order to contain all the dialogues and chronotopes of the novel. Yet, all of these voices and situations are connected through the green button accordion, though the song that each questor sings or plays contributes its own movement to the "unfinished symphony."

Examinations of these various movements—how they connect *and* disperse the quest for identity—will be the focus of the remainder of the chapter.

"The Accordion Maker"

"There were plenty of obvious faults to be seen in the Old World but only speculations of what might be found in the New. Immigrants were thus forced to conceive of America before experiencing it, and consequently preconceptions of its physical qualities far outstripped reality. It was ironical that many immigrants later discovered that they had exchanged a strong feeling for places in the Old World, unsatisfactory though their lives had been there, for an abstract, unlocalized ideal in the New World."
(Lutwack 143)

The first story in Proulx's novel describes the genesis of the green button accordion. The Sicilian accordion maker has dreams of moving to "La Merica" and becoming a master craftsman of accordions. His wife refuses to leave the village, and becomes paralyzed with determination to stay: "As days passed it became clear that this paralysis was an evil put on her by some choleric force, the will of an enemy that she never leave the village" (Proulx 24). This does not stop the accordion maker, and he departs with his son, Silvano. The green button accordion takes the wife's place as his comforter and "mate." It has anthropomorphic qualities—"the voice of the instrument sounded hoarse and crying, reminding listeners of the brutalities of love, of various hungers" (Proulx 22). When the accordion maker plays the accordion in a bar in New Orleans, the comments of Cannamele and Pollo make playing the accordion sound explicitly sexual: "He's the man, the singing is the man, and he's doing it to a woman and the accordion is the woman!" (Proulx 44).

The accordion maker realizes upon his arrival in America that the ideal world he constructed does not exist. Immigrants are pawns in a system that works from the top down. The green button accordion, instead of being his ticket to fame and fortune, is merely a way of tolerating his existence in this New World.

The clash between official and non-official discourses is at the centre of the accordion maker's quest for identity. On the ship to America, he is given the following advice: "If you wish success you must master the American language" (Proulx 32). His refusal to assimilate into this system makes him a "prisoner of language" (Proulx 33), and predicts his failure. Out of fear of the "other," he rejects the strength that can be achieved through a dialogic interaction with others, eventually determining his fate. What Bakhtin sees as the "ideological becoming of a human being...[as] the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (*Dialogic* 341) is the assimilation of *authoritative discourse* (in this case, American English) into the *internally persuasive discourse* of the subject. "The struggle and dialogic interrelationship of these categories of ideological discourse are what usually determine the history of an individual ideological consciousness" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 342). The accordion maker's silence implicates him in a crime he did not commit—even gaps and silences have meaning in a dialogic world. Through his father's experiences, Silvano learns that in order to succeed in this environment, it is important to be "generic." He changes his name to "Bob Joe" (Proulx 59), rejecting his Italian roots entirely. Strauss believes that "a naming of self is always a genuine placement or categorization" (17). Silvano's placement in this American identity means that he has discarded his Italian identity—instead of Bakhtinian "assimilation," Silvano has completely *renovated* his identity in an attempt to succeed in his new home.

The official discourse does not tolerate the polyphony and heteroglossia of the immigrant voices. Ironically, it is only *with* the presence of these other voices that the official American discourse can assert its authority: "in order to see our selves, we must appropriate the vision of others" (Holquist 28).

The accordion maker's murder in jail (Proulx's fictionalization of an historical event) results in the green button accordion's move to its next place of residence. Fish Man and the accordion sail up the Mississippi on a raft, after he disposes of Pollo. Violence is a result of the official discourse's attempts to stifle the polyphony of immigrant voices. These voices must compete with each other, as well as with the official discourse, in an attempt to define themselves against others. A quotation from Cornel West that Proulx uses as an epigraph to *Accordion Crimes* describes this clash: "Without the presence of black people in America, European-Americans would not be 'white'—they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh, and others engaged in class, ethnic, and gender struggles over resources and identity" (Proulx 15). The immigrant voices are fighting to be heard.

"The Goat Gland Operation"

"The human will and imagination go the longest way in making places what they are for human beings, and the mood of a person has much to do with determining the quality of the places he is in."
(Lutwack 35)

The second movement of the "unfinished symphony" is played by three German immigrants—Ludwig Messermacher, Hans Beutle, and William Loats. In the section

titled "A Coincidence," they meet. "The three stood on the warped boardwalk speaking a mixture of German and American, sizing each other up, discovering similarities, exclaiming over the strange coincidence that had brought them to this tall grass on the same day" (Proulx 66). They name this new community "Pranken," ("hands") though when they file the papers, the name is changed to "Prank": "'If we called it *Hände*,' said Loats, 'it would of turned into Hand, a not bad name. But Prank? A joke. Your life place becomes a joke because language mixes up!'" (Proulx 67). This name is significant to their quests for identity, as all their hard work is seen by others as a joke. This mockery grows out of jealousy:

> Yet there was something strange. Although they were all successful farmers, the farms showplaces of thrift and good management, although they played music for every dance, the Germans were disliked in Prank. The children (called cabbageheads in school) and women were friendless except for each other's company....part of it was because in spite of locust, drought, hail, flood, tornado, summer frost and untimely thaw, the three always made a decent crop while men around them lost everything (Proulx 84).

Again, people are ostracized when they do not assimilate into the dominant discourse. Unlike the accordion maker, however, the Germans have carved an identity for themselves that can prevail alongside their exclusion from a mainstream ("main street") mentality.

As previously discussed, the green button accordion reenters the story in a lumber yard. Construction is thus connected with a symbol of their culture, and this connection emphasizes the notion that identity is a dialogic construction in which dialogues between

place and people play an important role. The music of their homeland binds the Germans together: ' They sat around the hard-coal heater, a great thing after burning twisted slough grass for so many winters, Lotte squeaking the violin, the accordions huffing, little Wid working a set of foot chimes, and Percy Claude ringing the banjo, so bright and clever in its sound that the old dog sat up and howled whenever he took it from the nail on the wall" (Proulx 81). Music is a vehicle for expression—the dialogue that the accordion provides unites them.

The Germans' success takes place in isolation from the external conditions and dialogues that surround them. They do not feel the need to assimilate to the dominant ideology of American society. They are content in the community they have built. Once the First World War erupts, however, they realize that their homes are not havens:

> And though once [Beutle had] trusted that common fate had removed them from the pinched seasons of the old country and directed all three of them toward rich and fruitful lives, fate began to turn its hand against them when the Serbs shot the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. It was as though ancient European enmities had sought them out from over the sea, slinking along behind each of them, just out of sight, had burrowed under the grass, waiting, as a pestilence waits until the right moment, then had risen up, eager and poisonous (Proulx 86).

Outside forces collapse the insulating walls the Germans have resurrected, and they are ostracized by the community. The clash between cultures, voices, and languages, is brought to the fore once again. The authoritative presidential discourse demands that they drop the hyphens in their identity ("German-American") which connect the immigrants to their European roots. There is no room for dialogue—one must be chosen over the other.

Beutle attempts to reconcile the duality of his allegiance in the community: "Two evenings a week, after supper, he took his accordion down to the saloons in Prank and tried to explain reasonably to the men he knew that as a person of German extraction he was loyal both to his motherland, Germany, and to his bride, America. He tried to persuade them with German music" (Proulx 88). The only consequence of this declaration is a total and absolute banishment—the bar owner erects a sign barring the Germans from his establishment. This banishment is an example of the illusion of community:

> The carnivalesque disrupts the codes and cues that make the drama of society possible. It gives the show away by revealing its artifice—and its injustice. Society prides itself when it achieves a high level of cohesion, when it perfects a script that creates the appearance of communal unity. But appearance is just that, an appearance, an illusion. It cannot acknowledge the diversities and divisions within the community itself....Carnival discredits the drama that society has created for itself (DiRenzo 205-206).

The exclusion of one voice from the dialogue weakens the possibilities that polyphony can offer. Bakhtin rejects this exclusion, and feels that fear of difference arises when one is thinking in parts, and not the whole. In *Rabelais and his World,* he states: "fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is born. The whole of the people and of the world is triumphantly gay and fearless. This whole speaks in all carnival images" (256).

In the end, the legacy of the Germans is determined by outside forces. Everything they worked their entire lives for is lost in the stock market crash in 1929. Their children

and grandchildren are left with less than they began with. In this decline, the green accordion loses significance. It represents a time when life was good, and the men, along with their wives and children, celebrated and reveled in the success that they had achieved. When the three Germans go their separate ways, it is time for the accordion to move on as well:

> Packing up for the move to Texas, one of the daughters came upon the green accordion.
>
> 'What to do with this? It's that old accordion *Vati* got from Uncle Beutle. It still plays OK.' She squeezed out chords, played the first line of 'Yes, Sir, That's My Baby.'
>
> 'Oh, put it in the brown trunk. If Willy gives up the ukulele, maybe—or maybe one of the grandkids will take it up.' The mother dropped it into the bottom of the trunk and on top of it came a sewing basket, the coffee grinder, a worn buffalo robe, a set of wool carders (Proulx 97).

Without the community dialogue, the green button accordion has lost its significance to the people of Prank.

What does this story contribute to the quest for identity? It is concerned with the personal lives of this small, German community in Iowa. Unlike the accordion maker's dream to find fame and fortune in New York, these men are interested in self-preservation. They are independent, hard-working, honest people. They have the dedication and drive to succeed, yet they do not succeed because they cling to the false security of their isolation from others. No one can escape the reach of the official

discourse that demands allegiance from the immigrants and rejects a heteroglossic panorama of loyalties.

"Spider, Bite Me"

"The fact that border places are preferred by many modern heroes is an indication that confidence in central places, in certainties and hierarchical structure, has changed to distrust and that the only recourse is to a peripheral place where the hero's total commitment is not required."
(Lutwack 45)

The duality inherent in border zones manifests itself in various forms in the lives of Abelardo Relámpago and his family. They live in Hornet, Texas, a small town that sits on the border between Mexico and the United States. His roots are Mexican, though "Relámpagos had been in this place centuries before there was Texas. They had been American citizens since 1848 and still the Anglo Texans said 'Mexicans'" (Proulx 111). Their identity is blurred as "self" and "other" meld in the individual subject: "self/other is a relation of simultaneity" (Holquist 19). To compound the border zone, the Relámpagos live in a trailer on the outskirts of Hornet—they are straddling many worlds, fracturing the quest for identity. Despite this fragmentation, their home inspires, and music arises out of their surroundings:

> Just beyond the trailer was the bus turnaround, a bulldozed circle where the drivers got out and relieved themselves against the tires....
>
> Abelardo made up a little song:
>
> *O you filthy bus,*
>
> *I was dreaming of love and riches,*

I was dreaming of happiness

When you brrrt! *Like ten elephants,*

Like a smokestack blowing up,

When you gnashed your gears

And destroyed my fragile reverie (Proulx 119).

As was the case in *The Shipping News*, in *Accordion Crimes* language and names play an important role in the attempt to define oneself, though they can also fracture the self. Adina gives her children American names and encourages them to speak English:

> Adina turned the radio knob to an American-language station and said, '*por qué* you kids don't talk American? No more Spanish. From now on American at home too, not just school. If you talk Spanish you'll end up in the fields. Talk American and get an education you get a good job. You're Americans, no? Then be an American and get some money.' For her part, she had given them a start with American names: Baby, Chris, Betty. All except the bewildered, smiling Crescencio, named after his drowned grandfather, Crescencio, already defeated by his name, and poor little Roselia who had died in her crib, only a week old.
>
> 'How stupid,' Abelardo had muttered at each birth, insisting on other names as well, Rogelio, Tomás, and Félida. The daughter went by two names, answering to Betty from the mother's mouth, Félida from the father's (Proulx 120).

In school, the children are reprimanded for speaking Spanish by the official discourse of the classroom. The goal of the education system (though it is still segregated) is to wipe

away any cultural differences and to produce American citizens. Even show-and-tell becomes a politically motivated event:

> The Relámpago brothers brought their accordions They played the bus song (without singing the words), waited for the teacher to smile. Her white face dipped in disgust.
>
> 'The accordion is not a good instrument. It is a rather *stupid* instrument. Polacks play it. Tomorrow I'll bring in some *good* music for you to listen to' (Proulx 128).

In this system, matchbooks (what the rest of the children bring for show-and-tell) have more value than cultural symbols.

Every aspect of Abelardo's life is a duality. He is a busboy by day to feed his family and a musician by night to feed his soul. "At night he entered his other world and, accordion against his breast and his powerful voice controlling the movements and thoughts of two hundred people, he was invincible; at the restaurant he was subservient, not only to the demands of the occupation but to some cringing inner self" (Proulx 110). Money drives this society, so when Abelardo is given the opportunity to bridge this gap (illegally), he jumps at the chance. He delivers packages for a man who frequents the restaurant. Although we are never told who he is or what is in the packages, it is apparent that he is a criminal. Each package that Abelardo delivers to a car waiting in the alley behind the restaurant earns him a thousand-dollar bill:

> So large a bill could not be real money. It was abstract, a thing of ferocious value, not to be showed and not to be spent. He got a can of shellac and a small brush, creased the first bill lengthwise, shellacked it lightly on one side, removed the

> bass end of the green accordion and glued the bill into an interior fold of the bellow. It was entirely invisible, could not be discovered except by knowing fingers, could not be seen, even if someone removed the ends and looked into the bellow. The man came into the Blue Dove with his secret packages and secret thousand-dollar bills for one year and two months (Proulx 134).

This is the "secret" that is alluded to throughout the story. The money contained in the accordion's bellows is why no one else is allowed to play the accordion. Abelardo dies before he can spend the money, and for the rest of the novel it remains hidden from view. Culture and material wealth meet in the accordion.

The dialogue between genders also contributes to the duality of this story. Abelardo's home is decidedly patriarchal, and these gender roles are played out in relation to the green button accordion. The story begins with Félida playing the green button accordion. Abelardo rebukes her, all the while thinking: "How well she sang! He had heard her but he had not heard her. Well, and how had she learned the accordion? No doubt from watching, from listening to him, from admiration of her father" (Proulx 108). Later on in the tale, Félida takes the accordion so she can play it for one of her teachers. When she arrives home, Abelardo is livid: "A woman cannot play the accordion. It is a man's instrument. A woman cannot get other musicians to play with her, nobody will hire you, your voice is not strong enough. Your character is bad, you are disobedient, you have no future in the musical field" (Proulx 139). The fact that her teacher is more interested in her body than in her musical abilities compounds these gender relations. Feminist dialogic critics are interested in exposing the power relations that become encoded in dialogue. As Laurie Finke notes: "no dialogue is ever free and equal. Rather,

the notion of the dialogic requires precisely an investigation of the power relations that inform and shape any discourse" (16). *Accordion Crimes* is filled with instances of male domination over the female. Dialogue is charged with political motives, not only in the suppression of cultural differences but in gender differences as well.

At the end of the story, we discover that Betty/Félida is now living in Chicago, and is married to an Italian accordion player. Gender roles define this relationship as well. Betty/Félida has not escaped, she has just changed places. She has not reconciled her past to her present identity: "For her it hardly mattered. They had all been dead for her since she was fourteen. What was disturbing was the living brother on the sofa, his mouth moving, the yellowed fingers tapping his knees, the ostentatious wincing at the billowing Italian music. She felt a meanness, a necessity to wound him" (Proulx 158). Her husband exploits Betty/Félida's lack of cultural identity: "She can fake anything, she's very good at the ethnic stuff" (156). She is wearing a mask, not to celebrate her identity, but to hide her true feelings, dreams, and desires.

Just as in the previous two stories, the green button accordion must continue its journey once the questors go their separate ways. Abelardo is dead (from a lethal spider bite); Chris, one of the sons, is shot to death; Betty/Félida has started a new life in Chicago; Adina, the mother, has cancer; and Baby is struggling to survive in Chicago. The green button accordion is left in a taxicab.

This movement of the "unfinished symphony" explores the duality of the self. Whether it is cultural or gender differences, these dualities must be given full credence and appreciation for dialogue to be possible.

"Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair"

"this quest for an ideal self has led to self-destruction, to so-called identity crises, and to... 'the loss of the self'—the discovery that no singular fulsome identity exists beneath the surface, merely schizophrenic doubles, triples, multiples, and fragments."
(Clark 12)

Dolor Gagnon is man in search of his roots. His story is concerned with bridging the gap between the past and the present. Unlike Betty/Félida, who rejects the environment in which she was raised, Dolor's quest for identity is focussed on resurrecting the past, with the hope that it will fill in the gaps, and answer all the questions that he has about his family. All he has is his birth certificate: "[it] did not say much. The date. Both parents from Canada. His father, Charles Gagnon, had been twenty-nine, his mother, Delphine Lachance, twenty-eight. Five living children before him. His birth weight, six pounds, one ounce. That was all" (Proulx 183). Because of this unknown past, his life is fragmented:

> He knew all about how funny it was, his name taken from him, the language lost, his religion changed, the past unknown, the person he had been for the first two years of life erased. He saw how a family held its members' identities as a cup holds water. The person he had been as a child, a French-speaking boy with a mother and father, brothers and sisters, had been dissolved by the acid of circumstance and accident. He was still that person. He would return someday, like an insect cracking out of its winter case, he would wake speaking, thinking in French, a joyous man with many friends, his lost family would come back (Proulx 194).

His quest is to make up for this lack of a history, to fill the cup with memories.

Proulx deftly creates a link to the previous chapter through an intersection of chronotopes. This technique was discussed earlier, but it is important to keep in mind that these two stories (until Dolor finds the green button accordion in the taxicab) are happening simultaneously, emphasizing the interrelatedness of the quest for identity—it crosses all boundaries. Even as the protagonist, the accordion is not an ever-present character in the novel. It is absent from the narrative for extended periods of time, and the reader is left to wonder where and in whose hands the accordion will next appear. Just as the quests of the characters in the novel contain many gaps and silences, so too is the journey of the accordion filled with mystery. The chronotopes are compacted here to illustrate the complexity of one moment in time.

Most of this chapter is concerned with Dolor's life *before* the green button accordion enters his narrative. Dolor is an orphan and spends his adult life searching for his roots—he is a "stranger in [his] hometown" (Proulx 187). When he is unable to find his family, he makes up stories: "My father used to play the accordion—not this one, another one, with like piano keys. It got burnt up in a fire when I was a baby. He saved us kids but his accordion was ruined and he lost his life" (Proulx 191). He also constructs a relationship: "He found one of these photographs in the pages of a book from the base library and kept it in his wallet. The girl looked Swedish, with crayon-yellow hair and protruding blue eyes. He invented a name for her, 'Francine,' he would say, 'that's Francine, we're getting married when I get back, she's a kindergarten teacher'" (Proulx 179). This fabrication turns into a reality for him—"At night he wished Francine were with him, forgetting for long moments that he had invented her; he'd thrown away the photograph in Minneapolis" (Proulx 186). "Truth" is dependent upon dialogue.

Eventually, Dolor realizes the emptiness of these tales, and goes in search of his roots. "A heady feeling rose in him that he was returning home. Somewhere up here was his source. He wept when he saw the great river, the deep bolt of water shot into the heart of the continent" (Proulx 203). His journey is a success in that he finds people who play the "old music," and the fog of his heritage begins to clear. The euphoria does not last long, however. "On the return journey he could feel the familiar depression lowering onto him like the premature darkness that foreshadows a coming storm: a chronic, tearing misery that never completely retreated" (Proulx 207). His return to Random reveals that nothing has changed, or will change. He is a "man without a country" (Proulx 205). Though he later marries, nothing can fulfill the gap of his mystery origins, especially when his wife, Mitzi, suggests that he sell the accordion. His new life and his new name ("Frank") cannot replace the past.

For Dolor, dialogue through music becomes essential to his quest. He is of French descent, yet because he was never exposed to the language, he is unable to communicate with those who can help him. The people of Random (the name of this town aptly describes the composition of the community), most of them of French origin, share this fate, though many do not possess the same need to fill this void.

Music also helps Dolor overcome his shyness and his fear of others. The process is gradual, but he soon learns to express himself through the accordion. Every Saturday night, Dolor goes to Wilf's and Emma's home, where they eat and drink and laugh and play music together. This is an excellent example of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. When they decide to share their music with the public, the whole community is transformed in the celebration: "They were exhilarated, groaning, laughing, still hearing the music, still

seeing the way a roomful of people sprang and shuffled and swayed and pressed against each other because they had played the twenty songs they knew" (Proulx 202). Music is the medium that brings all of these people together.

The cyclical nature of the carnival is prominent in this story. In "Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair," there are several instances where the positive and the negative intersect, in particular, weddings and funerals. Wilf's death is soon followed by Emma's remarriage to Emil, and death overshadows Dolor's marriage to Mitzi: "They were married a month later, the bridegroom eager for connubial bliss, but they spent the honeymoon in Providence for the funeral of the bride's aunt Delphine Barbeau, who had been a death's head at the wedding, at the reception choking and gagging from her cancerous throat but still demanding cigarettes and still swallowing brandy..." (Proulx 218). Emma and Emil also learn of Dolor's suicide while on their honeymoon.

Dolor's contribution to the "unfinished symphony" is a lament. He is longing for a key that will unlock the mystery of his past. This gap is one that Dolor cannot bridge. He refuses to accept this mystery as integral to his identity, and his sense of self is fractured, while he persistently searches for the missing link. This unfulfillable need prevents him from recognizing the life and the happiness he shares with Mitzi, and he takes his own life, terminating his participation in the symphony.

"Don't Let a Dead Man Shake You by the Hand"

"It is precisely the differing ways people are represented that determine the differences between chronotopes."
(Clark and Holquist 280)

The symphony continues in Texas. Emma and Emil, Dolor's sister-in-law and her husband, take the green button accordion with them when they move there from Maine. It is purchased by Buddy Malefoot, whose family tree is described as "a tangled clan of nodes and connecting rhizomes that spread over the continent like the fila of a great fungus" (Proulx 229). He describes his first dialogue with the accordion: "So I squeeze it a little bit, I can hear she's special, Papa, you gonna like the sound of this instrument, and she's got a big long bellows, plenty of squeeze in her, a crying voice. Oh she's a nice little girl accordeen, lonesome for the pine trees in the north, for that poor dead man, she cries on her pillow all night" (Proulx 234).

The green button accordion is later sold to Octave, a workmate of Buddy's. Octave also has an emotional experience with the accordion:

> ...somehow or other the mirrors on the accordion had lined up just right and when Octave glanced over, the damn thing was looking right at him. Of course he knew it was his own eyes reflected but figured the odds were a million to one they could line up with the mirrors that way. It made the instrument powerfully alive, looking at him, watching him, saying 'what you gonna do? You gonna git me? Better git me, nigger, or I git you.' It was a scary thing (Proulx 255).

One night, he has to play without his regular partner, Clifton, and he finds that the accordion does not live up to its look: "Octave wasn't satisfied. He was in it now but couldn't win their hearts, couldn't make them forget Clifton" (Proulx 262). He moves to Chicago, sells the accordion and tries to make something of himself. Unfortunately, Chicago does not live up to his expectations: "Things were happening, or so it seemed, and then he got laid off and blacklisted and the jobs began to melt away, they just weren't

there anymore. The economy had coiled back on itself. Well, he'd just stick tight and wait for it to come around again. It had to; so many people needed the work" (Proulx 267). The green button accordion's fate is determined in this environment. Octave pawns it to feed his drug habit, and the accordion's journey continues.

Through her portrayals of Chicago and New Orleans, Proulx makes a comment on big cities. Instead of places where there are many opportunities, these large centres are a concentration of the problems of the whole nation: "All that goddamn talk about integration in the south—they ought to look up here, rock-solid segregation with a moat around it. Could be somebody planned it that way?" (Proulx 266). When you are in a larger place with more people, it is more challenging to have your voice heard and to define yourself among the other questors: "The process of invention is always relational. Communities define themselves over and against other communities, not simply in the hierarchical opposition of dominant/minority but in a system of multiple relations" (Clayton 125). The symphony becomes cacophonous, with all of the voices fighting to be heard. A club in Chicago is not the same as the club where Octave plays in Louisiana, but is a suppressant to control the anger raging within him: "He didn't know why it was, but he had raised a temper, flared into anger at little things that never bothered him in Louisiana, maybe because of the TV....He had to keep him self up with plenty of good times....He had an unsatisfiable appetite for good times" (Proulx 267). Life in a smaller community does not guarantee a simpler or more successful quest (as is witnessed in "The Goat Gland Operation"). Lutwack notes that: "There is a reciprocal relationship between place and motion as they are represented in literature....The quality of a place in literature is subtly determined by the manner in which a character arrives at it, moves

within it, and departs from it" (59). It is the characters' dialogues with place that determine how places are perceived.

In this chapter, the quests of both Buddy and Octave are concerned with relating their family histories. The family trees are important to the quests that are being undertaken. Buddy Malefoot is from a long line of French ancestry, which has mutated to include the Acadian and Cajun branches. This culture and language is being appropriated by the entrepreneurs in the area:

> 'Y'know,' Onesiphore said, squinting up his eyes malevolently, 'my generation we just live. We don't think who we are, or anything, we just get born, live, fish and farm, eat home cooking, dance, play some music, grow up old and die, nobody come here and bother us. Your generation split up. All of you talk American, no French hardly at all. Some say 'oh, I got to learn French, I got to be Cajun, quick, show me some words and give me a *'tit fer* I can play Cajun music.' So then these *bébés* here, they coming up in a time where strangers get in, make a restaurant, nobody's gonna eat at home and go to the dance, but they go to a restaurant own by some guy from Texas, a place for tourists come to see the Cajuns, like monkeys. CAJUNLAND! Put up the sign' (Proulx 235).

This is another example of a contemporary expression of the carnivalesque. Onesiphore remembers a time when eating, drinking, and playing music was a celebration. It is no longer a celebration, but an appropriation of culture and traditions for financial gain.

Octave is of African-American descent, and his family's quest for identity is mired in a struggle against the barriers that have been erected to keep them out of a definition of America. This struggle is integral to Octave's quest and a definition of

America. It is another example—along with the accordion maker, the Germans of Prank, and the Relámpagos—of the need to repress and eliminate the "other" in a definition of the "self." This dialogue is not equal, and the only way out of the oppressive discourse is through dialogue:

> despite the inequalities involved in discourse, Bakhtin insists that within the dialogic the powerless are not simply passive and silenced victims of their oppressors. However totalitarian the oppression, the powerless construct more or less subversive forms of agency; they are capable of defining their own struggles and of acting in—as well as against—their own interests. That is why Bakhtin says that the sign is the arena of the class *struggle*....all classes within a sign community use and contest the same language, and their interests and 'accents' contend within it (Finke 17).

We see glimpses of this reversal, primarily through the green button accordion. Music is a way of expressing one's uniqueness.

This is the first chapter where an exchange of the green button accordion takes place *within* the story, indicating that the accordion, while it brings some respite from the real world, is ultimately not an adequate weapon against the forces that wish to assimilate. The people seem resigned to hand over their identity in exchange for material wealth. From this point on, the green button accordion is more an ornament than a musical instrument, displaying a change of key in the "unfinished symphony."

"Hit Hard and Gone Down"

"Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators....Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its performers live *in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect."*
*(Bakhtin, **Problems** 122)*

The Bakhtianian carnivalesque feast is central to the Przybysz's quest for identity. Through music and food, this family carves an identity for themselves in America. However, as with all the stories that have proceeded theirs, this struggle is not a valued one in a country that prefers homogeneity over the plurality that a polyphonic world can provide.

For Mrs. Przybysz, food becomes essential to an expression of one's culture. She rejects the American style of food preparation:

> She despised the American supermarkets full of bright-colored square packages and heavy cans, the terrible cookbooks Dorothy bought by made-up women with American names, Betty Crocker, Mary Lee Taylor, Virginia Roberts, Anne Marshall, Mary Lynn Woods, Martha Logan, Jane Ashley, all of them thin-lipped Protestants who served up gassy baking-mix biscuits, tasteless canned vegetables and salty canned Spam without shame, the worst food in the world (Proulx 287).

In her opinion, cooking is an art, one that requires emotion and a love of food:

> In her day she had cooked with passion and experience, a craft-worker who needed no measuring cup or recipe, who held everything in her mind....she made her own good sausage and sauerkraut....kneading bread dough until her hands fainted....Józef had always recited when she made *bigos* of American beef, smoked sausages, sauerkraut and vegetables and, of course, her wild mushrooms,

> he had put his hand on his breast and declaimed, 'all the air is fragrant with the smell' (Proulx 286-287).

Her dialogue with food is not taken up by her family, and these traditions die with her. The family dinners become a memory, as Dorothy, her daughter-in-law, is a terrible cook (287).

Central to this story, as previously discussed, is music and performance. Joey and Sonia's lives *are* a carnival, as their life revolves around the stage. This carnival is different from the carnival that Bakhtin celebrates in *Rabelais and his World.* Their life is a carnival without footlights, but in participating in this event, they have become a spectacle. The costumes they wear do not represent their culture, but are vain attempts at being the centre of the performance. There are deadly consequences to the spectacle, as well. Before each performance, Sonia drinks "Dr. Jopes Red Rock healing Liniment" to alter her voice—"the sound of ecstasy and pain" (Proulx 322). In a "flash-forward" at the end of the chapter, we discover that Sonia dies of throat cancer, an illness that is no doubt caused by her voice-altering medication.

Absent from this carnival is laughter, which clearly illustrates the fact that the carnival has changed from the medieval festivities that Bakhtin advocates. Joey is furious when he discovers that their accordions have been stolen, and he blames and curses his wife for the situation. Once at the *competition*, substitute accordions in hand, no joy or communal laughter is shared among the participants. Only when Joey and Sonia defeat the Bartosik Brothers does Joey smile. Their victory has less to do with their playing than with the performance of their rivals. One of the brothers vomits on the stage, which *does*

fit into the cyclical nature of carnival. However, because this action only serves to humiliate and drive a wedge between the two brothers, the circle has been broken.

Though this entire story has been driven by accordions and accordion music, the protagonist, the green button accordion, does not reenter the narrative until the end. It is sitting on the top shelf of a pawn shop, where "every immigrant in America must have pawned an accordion" (Proulx 320). Joey spots the green accordion, and buys it for Sonia: "'Here. Bought you a present.' She could feel something square and hard, then her fingers felt the buttons....He thrust a small green accordion at her" (Proulx 331). Sonia then gives this accordion to their daughter, Florry, in an attempt to pass on their music, but one that is unsuccessful. This same accordion is sold (once again) at a yard sale.

"The Colors of Horses"

"The carnivalesque perception establishes a dialogic interaction between oppositions, not so much in order to abolish what differentiates these oppositions one from the other, but rather to dispute the social hierarchization which maintains their isolation and separation from one another."
(Malcuzynski 52)

Although I do not believe that Proulx is making any "global" or "universal" statements in *Accordion Crimes* (to do so would contradict the notions of dialogue and polyphony), I do believe that connections can be made between the stories, and these similarities can be used to trace the quest for identity. In "The Colors of Horses," we are not necessarily dealing with the immigrant experience (cultural differences are evident in this chapter, though ironically, on the periphery), but with the dialogues among people.

These dialogues have connections to those in previous stories, as the dialogues that arise out of place are integral to the quest for identity.

The green button accordion plays a secondary role in this story. Josephine purchases it from Joey and Sonia, as she and her husband, Vergil, travel west to her parents' ranch in Montana. The accordion is a gift for Fay McGettigan, the ranch hand who was an important person in Josephine's childhood. Most of the luster is gone out of the instrument, and the presentation is quite off-hand: "'It's actually junk, more like a joke than a present. We stopped at all these yard sales on the way out'....Vergil got the bedraggled instrument from the back seat, the bellows smeared with crayon scribbles, the lacquer chipped and scarred, leather straps hanging loose. Fay took it gently, looked at its sad rows of buttons and worked the bellows..." (Proulx 352). Fay then passes the accordion onto his estranged brother, who lives a solitary life tending sheep in the mountains. After his death, the accordion's fate, once again, is to be put in storage—the destiny of useless, though sentimental, items. The accordion's quest is gradually coming to an end as it becomes less useful to its owners.

Due to the nature of their way of life, the Burkes have an intimate dialogue with the place in which they live. Their first years as Bostonians-turned-Montana-ranchers, are very difficult, as they must overcome disease and drought. After these failures, Kenneth decides to breed Appaloosa horses. These horses become the centre of his existence, his family taking a back seat. The imbalance is reflected in the décor of their home: "(There were dozens of photographs showing a muscular and athletic dun horse with a brilliant blanket of white spotted forefeet; a white face; and on his throat a white shield)" (Proulx

358). Fay's job as ranch hand expands to include the raising of a child, because Josephine's father is more concerned with his prize horse, "Umbrella Point."

Because of this obsession with horses, Kenneth's dialogues and relationships with human beings are unimportant. He treats all living things as objects. His marriage is a sham, as Josephine discovers:

> Dad's been seeing this woman about half his age, in fact I know her, she was in school with me; he got involved somehow and she had a kid about two weeks ago...the baby is in the hospital with serious head injuries—my mother wants her to die—the slut is charged with endangerment of the child's life and cruelty to a child, and my father's name and part in all this was plastered across the evening news and every paper in the state (Proulx 372).

Women are treated as objects, and these tendencies are passed on to the daughter. Vergil is a cruel man with little respect for others. His utterances are littered with profanities, he has little tolerance or patience for different opinions, and he has no respect for his wife:

> [T]hey bought the wine and drove into the mountains and there, in a meadow blazing with Indian paintbrush, she ran from him half clothed and laughing like an advertisement for sanitary napkins; he played the game for a few minutes, then got angry with this crap, slammed her into the ground and tore her clothes, gave her a ringing, double-handed slap when she said stop, wrenched her legs apart and shoved in, bucking and rutting (Proulx 374).

The conversation that follows this brutal act reflects his nonchalance: "'That was rape,' she said. 'Yeah. And you fucking loved it'" (Proulx 375). After this exchange, their dialogue is over, and they each go their separate ways.

The dialogues that are heard in this movement of the "unfinished symphony" illustrate the gender roles that are generated and propagated through an unequal distribution of power. Josephine *does* escape the oppressive dialogue she has with Vergil, but he continues to abuse language in order to serve himself, and not the communion that should be the goal of dialogue. One must be continually aware of the power struggle at work in a dialogic world.

"Back Home with Reattached Arms"

"To Bakhtin, the grotesque is the expression in literature of the carnival spirit. It incorporates what for him are the primary values: incompleteness, becoming, ambiguity, indefinability, non-canonicalism."
(Clark and Holquist 312)

In this, the last story in *Accordion Crimes*, we witness the death of the green button accordion. It is thrown from the window of a moving garbage truck (the fact that the accordion is rejected by a system that collects trash is paradoxical), where it is caught beneath the wheels of a tractor trailer and demolished. The bright side of this situation is the fact that the money, which has haunted most of the novel, is now brought into the open. It is found by children, the next generation of Americans. The novel ends without disclosing the results of this unveiling, and the last *heard* note of the "unfinished symphony" is played.

This chapter presents the story of the Gasmanns. Theirs is the last in a long line of immigrant experiences that are shared in *Accordion Crimes*. One hundred years have passed since the accordion maker stepped on American soil, and not much has changed.

Ethnicity has been wiped away, the only remnants of which may be a name, or a vague sense of the people who toiled to build a nation. Cultural artifacts are antiques at Ivar's shop, and he makes a fortune selling people things that others thought were worthless. Again, monetary gain is achieved by exploiting cultural expressions.

Though the novel is filled with grotesque imagery, the story of Vela Gasmann is particularly disturbing. In "Boredom," Vela is out in her yard, amusing herself by swatting a broom at the swallows in the eaves of the barn. Mr. Kunky and his son are driving down the road with a load of metal roofing. Suddenly:

> ...a ferocious gust caught up a piece of roofing as she leaped, swinging the broom at the swallows. The sharp metal sailed across the yard like a silvery flying guillotine and sheared off both of her upstretched arms above the elbows, smashed into her face, cutting and breaking her nose.
>
> The Kunky's didn't even notice they'd cut her arms off, drove up the hill, shedding metal, and out of sight (Proulx 419).

The doctors are able to reattach her arms (hence the name of this story), though she has no use of them. To console herself, she listens to accordion music: "'Well, it's that sound that gets her, not no particular bunch a people. She says it makes her feel in a good mood. She told the therapist that if she got any use back in her hands she wanted to learn to play the accordion.' 'Yeah? They think that's gonna happen?' 'No'" (Proulx 415). Accordion music soothes her, but she denies her appreciation of this music in order to fit in with her peers.

The last movement of the "unfinished symphony" leaves the reader with many questions: about the accordion and the money, but also about the goal of the quest for

identity. Unlike *The Shipping News*, where a progression can be traced through Quoyle's search for self, *Accordion Crimes* leaves many questions unanswered. There is a sense of emptiness, a curiosity about those whose fates are unknown. Their struggles have been presented, but with no definitive end.

Conclusion: The Novel as Accordion

"the word is not a material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction."
*(Bakhtin, **Problems** 202)*

The goal of this chapter has been to illustrate the multiplicity and plurality of dialogue as it relates to the immigrant experiences portrayed in *Accordion Crimes*. Through an examination of each of the eight chapters separately, while drawing connections between them, it becomes apparent that the immigrant experience—*all* experience—is a highly dialogized event. The quests for identity that are undertaken throughout the novel are defined and lived through dialogic interaction with others and with place. The quest for identity is a situated, material event, and is interconnected to *all* of the quests happening, simultaneously and interactively, around it. And, as the final scene of *Accordion Crimes* demonstrates, not only is the quest inherently dialogic, but it is also "unfinalizable." The *process* is prized over the final *product*.

The green button accordion is the protagonist of the novel, and by tracing *its* quest for identity, the novel can be compared to an accordion. The novel presents a spectrum of the immigrant experience through the polyphony of voices that come to America. This spectrum is similar to the accordion when its bellows are stretched to produce its

maximum volume. However, all of these experiences converge in the green button accordion, as the characters' quests revolve around the instrument, however indirectly. This is comparable to the action of squeezing the bellows together—all of the voices come together in the green button accordion, and these voices live on through the stories that will continue to be told.

Chapter 4

Conclusion: The Colour of the Quest

"Bakhtin conceives existence as the kind of book we call a novel, or more accurately as many novels...for all of us write our own such text, a text that is then called our life. Bakhtin uses the literary genre of the novel as an allegory for representing existence as the condition of authoring."
(Holquist 30)

At the core of this study is the notion that the quest for identity is ongoing. It never reaches a conclusive end, as Bakhtin reminds us "that the carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of *conclusive conclusion*: all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again" (*Problems* 165). The end of each novel examined—*The Shipping News* and *Accordion Crimes*—reminds us that it is impossible to define the quest for identity in any totalizing way. This inconclusiveness is also complicated by the fact that the quests are interrelated through dialogue. The quest for identity is a situated event and cannot be separated from the environment in which it occurs.

Despite this "unfinalizability" of the quest for identity, I would like to conclude with a commentary on how my analyses of these novels by Annie Proulx—*The Shipping News* and *Accordion Crimes*—dialogue with each other. Though I have utilized the same theoretical framework to examine each novel, obvious differences arise. To facilitate this dialogue between texts, I will relate the role of the green house in *The Shipping News* and the green button accordion in *Accordion Crimes* to the quest for identity. Central to this

conclusion is a discussion of the significance that each symbol's colour (green) has on the quest for identity.

Green is "an intermediate and mediating color, soothing, refreshing, human, a color of contemplation, of the expectation of resurrection" (Biederman 158). In the color spectrum, green is in the middle, bridging the ends together. Furthermore, the colour itself is made when blue and yellow (from opposite ends of the spectrum) are mixed together. In this sense, then, green possesses qualities of each end of the colour spectrum—its significance is ambiguous. To further complicate this ambiguity, green also represents the cyclical nature of life and death. On one hand, it represents the natural world—"the colour of earthly, tangible, immediately perceptible growing things" (Cirlot 51). However, the natural world is cyclical, which implies the death that comes to all living things. In his discussion of the carnival, Bakhtin embraces this cycle and states that "death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole, and life as a whole can inspire fear least of all" (*Rabelais* 50). In this way, then, the colour green, the carnival, and the quest for identity are all defined through their cyclical nature.

When these qualities are considered in relation to the green house and the green button accordion in Proulx's novels, many similarities and differences are observed. In *The Shipping News*, the green house is the link that connects Quoyle to Newfoundland, to the sea, and to his ancestors. His dialogue with his ancestral home forces him to make many discoveries about himself. Upon his arrival on the island, he is determined to renovate this home and to learn more about his history.

However, as his quest progresses, he discovers that his future with Wavey and with his daughters is more important than replacing the shingles to a house, especially a

house that was forced upon its environment. Soon after he decides to live in the town, the green house is swept off the rock during a vicious storm. Quoyle has learned all he needed to from this place, and his quest moves into the present and the future. The transition has been made—this part of Quoyle's quest is complete. Though his quest for identity is not "finalized," the green house is no longer needed as a physical reality in his life. He has moved beyond the dialogue that the green house provides. However, it is a necessary step in Quoyle's quest to learn about his past.

In *Accordion Crimes*, the role of the green button accordion is quite different from its counterpart in *The Shipping News*. As the protagonist of the novel, its quest becomes the foundation upon which the other quests take place. Its meaning, as I have demonstrated, fluctuates dramatically, depending on the time and place, as well as on the people who play it (or do *not* play it). The greenness of the accordion bridges these different dialogues, and brings them together in its bellows.

As well, the green button accordion bridges the gap between the old world and the new world. At the beginning of the novel, the accordion maker clings to his creation for the security it can provide in a foreign environment. For him, and for many other questors in the novel, the green button accordion represents a connection to their heritage while they are struggling to assert their voices in the American community. As this dichotomy gets larger, this space between the old and new worlds widens, becoming increasingly difficult to cross. The accordion fades, in colour and in worth, and it is eventually destroyed by the forces that are driving the process of assimilation. At the end of the novel, the Gasmanns, who know little about their Norwegian roots, have no need for the

green button accordion and its quest comes to an end, just as the green house is destroyed at the end of *The Shipping News*.

A comparison of the green house in *The Shipping News* and the green button accordion in *Accordion Crimes* illustrates many of the similarities and differences between the quests for identity in each novel. In the former, Quoyle struggles to assert his voice in a hostile environment. His only tie to his past is the green house, which sits upon a cliff, tethered to the rock. One of the outcomes of Quoyle's quest is the realization that though it is necessary for him to learn about his ancestry, it is even more important for him to assert his own voice. He incorporates the dialogue with the green house into his identity, but moves beyond the plight of the Quoyles who came before him and fosters a dialogue with his community.

In *Accordion Crimes*, the prognosis is bleaker. The green button accordion is also a symbol of heritage and culture, but one that is rejected because of the ethnic divisions that are raised through association with this "immigrant's instrument." The green button accordion is placed in many different environments, and many different dialogues ensue. There are occasions when the accordion brings a community together, but in this union is also the realization that they are being excluded from a larger community due to their cultural affiliations. To be accepted into American society, this bridge (the accordion) must be burned down. The dialogue that the accordion can provide is rejected, and its "death" arises from this rejection.

The destruction of the green house and the green button accordion is integral to the quests for identity. It is through dialogue with these important symbols that Quoyle, the accordion maker, Abelardo Relámpago, and Joey Pryzbysz (to name just a few)

negotiate their identities. Their quests, as well as the many others that take place in these novels, are dependent upon this dialogue, along with the dialogues with place and with others. As they "author" themselves through a dialogue with their environments, the "unfinalizable" quest for identity takes place.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, M.M. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. ***The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays***. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.

---. Ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson. ***Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics***. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

---. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. ***Rabelais and His World***. Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968.

Biederman, Hans. ***Dictionary of Symbolism***. New York: Meridian Books, 1994.

Cirlot, J.E. ***A Dictionary of Symbols***. Trans. Jack Sage. New York: Philosophical Library, 1962.

Clark, John R. ***The Modern Satiric Grotesque And Its Traditions***. Lexington, KT: UP of Kentucky, 1994.

Clark, Katerina, and Michael Holquist. ***Mikhail Bakhtin***. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.

Clayton, Jay. ***The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Literature and Theory***. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

Di Renzo, Anthony. ***American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque***. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1993.

Docker, John. ***Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History***. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995.

Finke, Laurie A. ***Feminist Theory, Women's Writing***. Ithaca: Cornel UP, 1992.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. ***On the Grotesque***. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1982.

Holquist, Michael. ***Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World***. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Hutcheon, Linda. "The Carnivalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Popular Culture and the Erotic." ***University of Ottawa Quarterly***. 53.1 (1993): 83-94.

King, Thomas. ***Green Grass, Running Water***. Toronto: HarperPerennial, 1994.

Lutwack, Leonard. ***The Role of Place in Literature***. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1984.

Malcuzynsky, M.-Pierrette. "Mikhail Bakhtin and Contemporary Narrative Theory." ***University of Ottawa Quarterly***. 53.1 (1993): 51-65.

McDowell, Deborah E. "The Self and Other: Reading Toni Morrison's ***Sula*** and the Black Female Text." ***Critical Essays on Toni Morrison***. Ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988. 77-90.

Pearce, Lynne. ***Reading Dialogics***. London: Edward Arnold, 1994.

Proulx, Annie. ***Accordion Crimes***. New York: Scribner, 1997.

---. ***The Shipping News***. New York: Scribner, 1993.

Rigney, Barbara Hill. ***The Voices of Toni Morrison***. Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 1991.

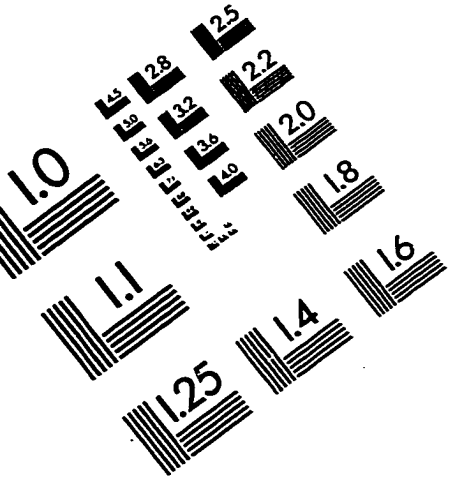
Strauss, Anselm L. ***Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity***. Chicago: The Free Press of Glencloe, IL, 1959.

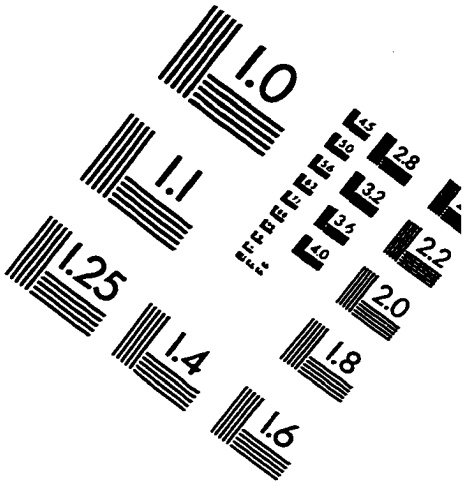
Thomson, Clive. "The Semiotics of M.M. Bakhtin." ***University of Ottawa Quarterly***. 53.1 (1993): 11-21.

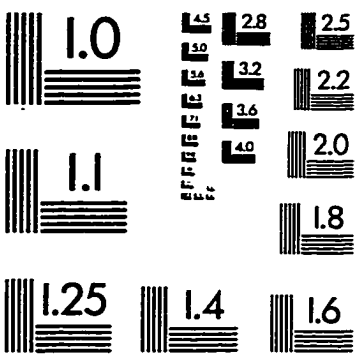
Thomson, Philip. ***The Grotesque***. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1972.

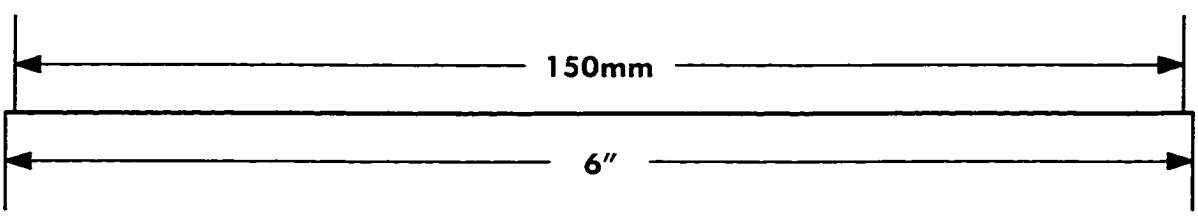
Welty, Eudora. ***The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews***. New York: Random House, 1977.

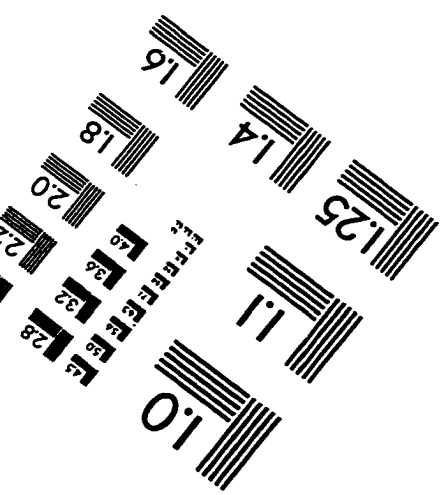
IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA-3)

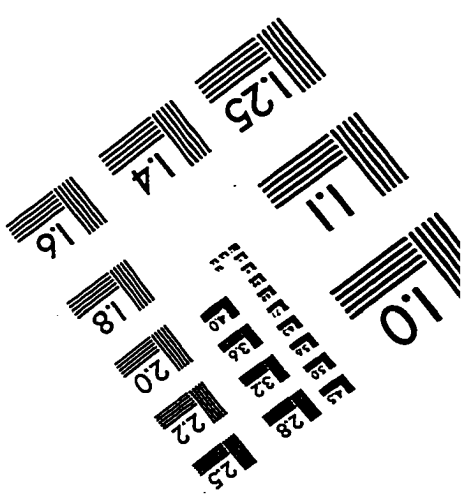












APPLIED IMAGE, Inc
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989