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SILENT NATURE AS “A CLAW IN THE GUT”: SHOCK THERAPY EPIPHANIES IN ANNIE PROULX’S WYOMING STORIES

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the representation of an awesome and unforgiving nature which welds together the three collections of Annie Proulx’s Wyoming stories. My claim is that with potent metaphors of humans’ silencing of nature and of the way the latter strikes back, Proulx’s short fiction calls for urgent awareness of the interconnectedness between humankind and its natural environment. If Proulx’s fatalistic short story endings rarely suggest an epiphany on the part of the characters, her overarching uses of brutal poetic justice and sarcastic narrative voices bring about reader epiphanies, working as shock therapy, and thus prompting a biocentric view of the world. This article argues that Proulx’s Wyoming stories offer one of the best examples of “narrative ecology,” to take up the term coined by Alex Hunt, or what Adrian Rainbow calls “ecoliterary texts,” in that they engage in a real relationship with nature, and bring about readers’ awareness of the need for new paradigms and mythologies working against the noxious myth of individualism, and pointing to nature as an intricate sacred hoop.

KEYWORDS: Annie Proulx, Eco-poetics, Ecofeminism, Biocentrism, Short Story, Epiphany.

LA NATURALEZA SILENTE COMO UN «ZARPAZO EN LA TRIPA»: TERAPIAS
DE CHOQUE EPIFÁNICAS EN LOS RELATOS DE WYOMING DE ANNIE PROULX

RESUMEN

Este artículo está centrado en la representación de una naturaleza asombrosa y despiadada que cohesiona las tres colecciones de historias sobre Wyoming de Annie Proulx. Intento demostrar que con esas metáforas poderosas del silenciamiento de la naturaleza y de la forma en que ésta contraataca, los relatos de Proulx apelan a una consciencia imperiosa de la interconexión entre la humanidad y su ambiente natural. Si los finales fatalistas de los relatos de Proulx sugieren muy pocas veces una epifanía de sus personajes, su uso extensivo de una justicia poética brutal y el sarcasmo de sus voces narrativas hace que la epifanía se produzca en sus lectores, una suerte de terapia de choque, que provoca asimismo una visión del mundo biocéntrica. Este artículo concluye que las historias de Wyoming de Proulx ofrecen uno de los mejores ejemplos de “ecología narrativa,” tomando el término de Alex Hunt, o lo que Adrian Rainbow denomina “textos ecoliterarios,” ya que se sitúan en el marco real de relación con la naturaleza, y hacen que los lectores sean conscientes de la necesidad de nuevos paradigmas y mitologías opuestos al mito nocivo del individualismo, y convirtiendo la naturaleza en un intrincado y sagrado círculo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Annie Proulx, Eco-poética, Ecofeminismo, Biocentrismo, relato, epifanía.

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Even though North American writer Annie Proulx was the first woman recipient of the PEN/Faulkner award for her novel *Postcards* and has won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Shipping News*—again a novel—she nevertheless regards her short stories as superior to her novels,¹ especially her three volumes of Wyoming Stories, *Close Range* (1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008).² The way she sees it, “[if] the writer is trying to illustrate a particular period or place, a collection of short stories is a good way to take the reader inside a house of windows, each opening onto different but related views—a kind of flip book of place, time and manners” (*The Missouri Review* 2-3). The common setting in rural Wyoming thus welds together these three collections into one long short story cycle, in the tradition of Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg Ohio*, and in many ways similar to neoregionalist writers Russell Banks and Bobbie Ann Mason’s short stories.³ Spanning the pioneer era of the nineteenth century all the way to postmodern, present-day Wyoming, these autonomous, self-contained narratives are simultaneously interconnected. They all focus on the same place and cast recurrent themes, narrative voices, patterns, and motifs, some even casting the same characters.⁴ Despite the growing number of academic studies of Proulx’s fiction, few scholars have paid attention to the rhizomatic connections from one story to another when it comes to interpreting the brutality of her Wyoming nature descriptions.

Annie Proulx’s apparent interest in history and place finds its roots in her initial training as a history major. Much influenced by the French Annales School, her background has left a long-lasting imprint on her writing: “Every single thing I write, I start with the landscape. I start with the climate, the description. Only when that is done—the particular place that affects what food people eat, how they make their livings and so forth—and the story rolls out of landscape” (Wyoming Library Roundup 7). Her representation of nature suggests faith in the power of literature to ponder mythologies of place, which Proulx recognizes as “a sustaining force for most residents and people”. The problem with mythologies of place, Proulx argues and illustrates in her stories, is that they “can easily veer into denial” (Wyoming Library Roundup 7). Of the least populated state in the United States, Annie Proulx

¹ “Short stories are at once more interesting and more difficult to write than longer work. The comparative brevity of the story dictates more economical and accurate use of words and images, a limited palette of events, fewer characters, tighter dialogue, strong title and punctuation that works toward moving the story forward.” (*The Missouri Review* 2-3)

² See *The Paris Review Interview* with Annie Proulx, p. 1.

³ Most of Russell Banks’ stories are set in New England. One of his collections, *Trailer Park*, constitutes a true short story cycle set in Catamount, Massachusetts, rather than a collection of separate stories with different settings and characters. As for Bobbie Ann Mason’s stories, they all take place in Kentucky, and are in that sense similar to Proulx’s three collections grounded in one and the same state. In all three cases, the focus is on ordinary characters representing rural communities and lower-class Americans living on the fringes of society, most of them poor, uneducated, and with few options in order to rise on the social scale.

⁴ This is mostly the case in *Bad Dirt*.



laments, “Wyoming likes its isolation and clings to the idea of the rugged individualism of the nineteenth century as its basic characteristic” (The Paris Review 11).

In her influential work, ecocritic Joni Adamson’s central claim is that “writers, critics, and activists who wish to help us find answers to our most difficult social and environmental questions must come home from the wilderness, take a hard look at the middle place where culture emerges from nature, then work to reveal the broad socioecological forces that exploit humans, nonhumans, and their environments” (xix). As a matter of fact, Proulx’s sensitivity to place, landscape, and ecology, as Alex Hunt argues, calls for an “environmental ethos,” that is “an ethics of place based on environmentally sustainable ways of living and laboring on the land and on values of local community cooperation” (5). Alex Hunt states that “Proulx seems to agree that if we are visionary enough to write onto the land a story of civilization, we must also be capable of writing a new story of sustainability” (194). O. Alan Weltzien has written about the “geographical determinism, landscape and caricature” in these stories, concluding that “[in] facing the spectacle of landscape, we are admonished to take a biocentric view of the world” (110). This article prolongs this idea, and seeks to elicit the literary strategies and tropes which participate in teaching “a lesson in humility,” as Weltzien contends.

Focusing specifically on Annie Proulx’s Wyoming stories, this article explores the representation of an awesome and unforgiving nature, gauging the significance and effect of the violence pervading these stories. In spite of the difficulty of tackling so many stories in the scope of one single article, my approach here seeks to study overarching themes and symbols and the effect of the reiteration of a tragic pattern marking the characters’ fates throughout. Moreover, studying the corpus as a cycle—rather than as three collections of unrelated stories—helps reveal the significant echoes and leitmotifs which pave the way for an interpretation of the plotting, the dry irony of the narrative voices, and the symbolism resurfacing in many of these stories.

My claim in this paper is that Proulx’s Wyoming stories rely on a series of brutal epiphanies for the reader to be confronted with an unyielding wildness from which humans are not removed, but which they are entirely part and parcel of. Moreover, story after story, Proulx’s fatalistic and violent endings together with her dark sense of humor and the peculiarly wry voices of her narrators may in the end register as shock therapy for her readers, prompting one to meditate upon the ways in which humankind treats non-human nature and, ultimately, itself. I will first pinpoint the sublime vision of a nature red in tooth and claw, as Tennyson once put it, which prevails in these stories. I will then cast light on the way the characters serve to voice a certain environmental ethos, pointing to humans’ place within nature, whether in rural areas or in wilder places. Finally, I will broach some of the most powerful symbolism together with Proulx’s plotting in her tales which imaginatively reinvests Tennyson’s vision of nature, here endowed with a grotesque power to strike back. This last part assesses how Proulx’s Wyoming stories may read as attempts to shock readers into awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and their more-than-human habitats.



1. ENCOUNTERS WITH THE WILD: A SUBLIME VISION OF NATURE, RED IN TOOTH AND CLAW

Annie Proulx's harsh and barren Wyoming wildness stands on the side of Edmund Burke's idea of the sublime. Infinite and terrifying, it inspires a feeling of both dread and awe:

You stand there, braced. Cloud shadows race over buff rock stacks as a projected film, casting a queasy, mottled ground rash. The air hisses and it is no local breeze but the great harsh sweep of wind from the turning of the earth. The wild country –indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky– provokes a spiritual shudder. It is like a deep note that cannot be heard but is felt, it is like a claw in the gut. (*Close Range*, 99)

In the above, synaesthetic description of nature, a human, it seems (“You”), or the omniscient narrator, observes and takes in the surrounding landscape and atmosphere. The language ecopoetically translates the vibrancy of living matter (“a deep note that cannot be heard but is felt”), what Mark Treddinick defines as the “land’s wild music”. The pathetic fallacy here at play (with “cloud shadows rac[ing]”, or “the air “hiss[ing]”) translates the feelings of astonishment and terror which Burke associates with the sublime in nature.⁵ Far from the anthropomorphic representation associating nature with the human –often female– body which is current practice amongst much ecofeminist writing, Proulx’s highly dysphoric nature is here perceived as beastly. It is typically ungraspable, unrelenting and threatening, as for instance in “mima mound county”, where characters observe “to the west a fanged landscape that [seems] to be coming at them” (*Close Range* 214). In Annie Proulx’s Wyoming stories, both the weather and terrain are always looming in the foreground, ominous and malevolent:

December was wretchedly cold, made worse by violent winds. [...] Dry and bitterly cold wind built the snow into small private dunes on the lee side of each sage plant, polished the remaining snow into tight, glossy sculptures. The few clouds drew out as fine and long as needle threads and the wind-damaged sky showed the same chill blue as a gas flame. The wind set its teeth into the heavy log house and shook it with terrific gusts. In the early mornings it ceased for a few hours, then as the sun climbed over the aspen, it returned, brutal and avid, sweeping into the air what little loose snow remained. It never really stopped.” (*Bad Dirt* 184)

⁵ “THE PASSION caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.” (Burke 53)



Already these animated descriptions of “a fanged landscape” or a “brutal and avid” “wind [setting] its teeth” into the log house set the decor à la Tennyson. “Red in tooth and claw”, as the poet once put it, Proulx’s nature comes with teeth and claws indeed; as I will get back to later, these turn out to be powerful leitmotifs throughout, symbolizing the savage, ruthless quality inherent in nature, with even the wind possessing an animal nature. The might of the climate (“violent winds,” “the wind-damaged sky,” “terrific gusts”) is here perceived by a character from outside of Wyoming and is paired with a number of hypallages (“December was wretchedly cold”, “bitterly cold wind,”) betraying the onlooker’s own feelings of wretchedness and bitterness. Confronted with a climate of such magnitude, the character’s vision of Wyoming’s harsh winter seems to evoke hell, as suggested in the oxymoronic simile “the same chill blue as a gas flame”.

Proulx’s offers an anti-pastoral vision. Clearly, her nature does not allow for an idealization of a peaceful, harmonious ranching life.⁶ One of the indications of the universality of these descriptions lies in Proulx’s New England stories *Heart Songs*, where nature is no less inclement, despite the rather different climate and landscape. “Stone City” is one of Proulx’s many stories where predation takes place in various human and animal forms, going from hunting to incest. In that sense, it could very well be a Wyoming story. It significantly ends on a vision of blood and of a fox which seems to hold the last claim over the place. The closing passage underlines bestiality, and thus suggestively prolongs the story of the rather savage Stone family –the name of whom obliquely refers to their being emotionally hardened:

The bastard fox loped smoothly down the hillside to the abandoned farm, carrying something delicately in his jaws. [...]

The fox gently released his prize amongst his cubs. Despite its broken wing the year-old cock grouse tried to fly; but the smashed muscle and bone dragged and the bird rolled to the ground like a feathered pinwheel. The wooly cubs, still in milk teeth, cowered from the flapping terror. The bird ran, nearly gaining the brambles before the old fox caught it again, broke one leg and returned it to the cubs.

At last, a small, ash-dark vixen, bolder than others, darted for the bird and leaped away with a few blood dabbled feathers. (Italics not mine, *Heart Songs* 40)

In Proulx’s world, both animal and man metonymically embody wildness. Throughout her short stories, animals and men are often presented as wild beasts, unempathetic and thereby capable of the most violent forms of savagery, with lions reaping girl scouts, coyotes digging up to eat a freshly-buried, stillborn baby, men castrating calves, pronghorn, and other men alike, cutting out animals’ tongues or

⁶ The only exception may be found in “Brokeback Mountain,” where the beginning of the story is set in a fictional place that functions symbolically in the short story as a harmonious, Edenic, prelapsarian world. The two shepherds’ descent from the mountain at the end of the season marks their tragic fall from the world of innocence and bliss where they have first discovered and enjoyed their homosexual attraction for one another. In this story, nature is indeed depicted along the pastoral mode, but it is however laden with a dominantly allegorical dimension.



stabbing their eyes out, abusing, raping, and killing women and girls. It is as if, in the end, Annie Proulx's version of the Great Chain of Being was rather a ruthless Great Chain of Preying. Evidently, notions of cruelty and pity may well be purely human concepts. One might wonder, as I will get back to later, whether her men's unnecessary violence might or not be assessed in the same light as animal violence throughout these stories. As Proulx's fox initiates his cubs to killing for food, the language suggests something quite natural ("loped smoothly," "carrying something delicately in his jaws," gently released"). The narrator moreover underlines a rather grotesque inversion deflating the sense of horror often derived from slaying, with the "wooly cubs, still in milk teeth [cowering] from the flapping terror"—the latter being no other than a small bird with a broken wing and "smashed muscle and bone."

Annie Proulx's landscapes have inherited from Edward Abbey's vision of the wilderness as, on the one hand, natural beauty needing respect and celebration, and, on the other hand, cruel, indifferent, rugged and yet resilient life:⁷

Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere. No past slaughter nor cruelty, no accident nor murder that occurs on the little ranches or at the isolate crossroads with their bare populations of three or seventeen, or in the reckless trailer courts of mining towns delays the flood of morning light. (*Close Range* 99)

Echoing Edward Abbey's skepticism as regards civilization, Annie Proulx's pervasive cynicism and systematically tragic endings may at first ward off any glimmer of hope, as comes clear through the warning against Western lofty arrogance and amnesia delivered by one of her Abbey-sounding, omniscient narrators: "Other cultures have camped here a while and disappeared. Only the earth and sky matter. Only the endlessly repeated flood of morning light. You begin to see that God does not owe us much beyond that" (*Close Range* 99). If Proulx's characters seem to gain understanding mostly via tragic falls, her stories nevertheless offer reader epiphanies that challenge Western assumptions about human's dominant position within the natural world. Triggering astonishment, the spectacle of the sublime in Proulx's nature comes close to an encounter with the sacred as encapsulated in the term "hierophany," defined by Mircea Eliade: "something sacred is revealed to us" (Translation mine 17).

⁷ See *Desert Solitaire* as Abbey contemplates the land's potential relief following his departure: "Grateful for our departure? One more expression of human vanity. *The finest quality of this stone, these plants and animals, this desert landscape is the indifference manifest to our presence, our absence, our coming, our staying or our going. Whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern whatsoever to the desert.* Let men in their madness blast every city on earth into black rubble and envelop the entire planet in a cloud of lethal gas—the canyons and hills, the springs and rocks will still be here, *the sunlight will filter through*, water will form and warmth shall be upon the land and after sufficient time, no matter how long, somewhere, living things will emerge and join and stand once again, this time perhaps to take a different and better course." (Underlining mine 334)



An outsider from New England, the protagonist Mitchell finds intense pleasure in the encounter with the wild. His response to the sublime landscapes he contemplates while listening to his beloved classical music constitutes a kind of infralinguistic “lifting of an environment to expression”:⁸

Without warning a gigantic bass huffing and snorting smote him. The loudness stunned him, seemed to blow a hole in his chest. The sound seemed so intensely dinosaur-like that he almost screamed. The frail wandering notes returned, then again the ghastly roars. [...] In his mind this music, the dinosaurs, the roaring organ all merged. The power of the organ made it the correct instrument for this landscape. With shuddering flesh and electric current coursing up his spine he could hardly bear it, the perfect fit of this music to the tawny ground, the abrupt buttes, distant fan of peaks, the monstrous scale of geologic time. (*Bad Dirt* 190)

This comes almost as an echo of Tredinnick’s assessment of nature writing, “Geologic time is what you hear ticking behind a work of nature writing” (23). In a way also reminiscent of Willa Cather’s Western landscapes, the immensity of a seemingly prelapsarian world is both exhilarating and humbling, reminding the perceptive eye of one’s own microscopic existence against this “monstrous scale of geologic time”: “He felt as though he had stumbled into a landscape never before seen on the earth and at the same time that he had been transported to the *ur*-landscape before human beginnings” (169). Mitchell’s thoughts verbalize the drive to “*experience with*” nature which Tredinnick believes is at the heart of nature writing (23). In his book eloquently entitled *The Land’s Wild Music*, Tredinnick defines nature writing in terms that may well apply to Proulx’s stories. “Nature writing,” he says, “is literature that engages with the more than human realm” (22).

Mitchell’s numinous experience again echoes Burke’s descriptions of the feeling of astonishment when confronted with the sublime. It comes as a shock that the reader experiences by proxy, with embodied consciousness of the “shuddering flesh and electric current coursing up his spine” Mitchell’s multisensorial response to the landscape echoes the “spiritual shudder” earlier induced by nature and compared with “a claw in the gut.” Later in the story, as Mitchell’s wife turns her back on Wyoming to return to the safety of her New York business life, she acquires for a brief moment an inkling of Mitchell’s thrilling revelation of the numinous when immersed in nature: “Was this what Mitchell saw when he went on those long drives, the diminution of self, a physical reduction to a single gnat isolated from the greater swarm of gnats. The absurdity of living one’s life?” (*Bad Dirt* 197) Throughout her three collections, Proulx’s individual characters are invariably reminded of the superiority of nature’s power. The realization can be fatal in some stories; in others, like

⁸ I am here quoting a sentence from a letter by William Carlos Williams which inspired the title of a conference organized in Toulouse by the GENA in March 2013, “The Lifting of an Environment to Expression: American Representations of Place,” where an earlier version of this paper was presented.



in Mitchell's case for instance, they bring about a sense of the sacred opening onto something beyond the profane, everyday life of the quotidian. Furthermore, "like a claw in the gut," these revelations often correspond to devastating moments of awareness. As Charles E. May argues in "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction," "[the short story] presents moments in which we become aware of anxiety, loneliness, dread, concern, and thus find the safe, secure and systematic life we usually lead disrupted and momentarily destroyed. The short story is the most adequate form to confront us with reality as we perceive it in our most profound moments" (142).

2. MOVING TOWARDS AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHOS

As opposed to Eugenie who cannot quite fathom her husband's deep enjoyment of the wild, Mitchell's character points to the interconnectedness between humans and their habitats. He serves to expose the gradual despoiling of nature: "He understood the wildlife of the place as well as the undisturbed country was under assault. Awful diseases were sweeping through the wild creatures [...], teamed with loss of habitat and encroachment on ancient migration routes. He knew he was seeing the end of this wild world and time" (*Bad Dirt* 192). Here and there, Proulx's stories offer fleeting glimpses of "the remnants of the vanishing wild," which may well read as a wake-up call from a general numbness to the ongoing ecocide. (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 158)

As illustrated by the coyote roaming in the airport parking lot at the end of Mitchell and Eugenie's story, Proulx's fiction conveys a sense that even one of the wildest places in the United States has fewer and fewer unexploited lands, untouched by asphalt, mining and pollution. This is made clear for instance in the crude, typically ecofeminist image used by one of the locals to explain the source of "a filthy yellow haze lying over the Wind River range." (*Bad Dirt* 190):

"Pollution. It's smog. Comes from that goddamn Jonah infill methane gas project. One well ever ten acres. Never seen that smog before in Wyomin. You're seeing her start to die. The whoremasters got ahold of her. They got her down on her knees and any tinhorn with five bucks in his jeans comes by they put the prod pole to her and say, 'suck his dick.'" (*Bad Dirt* 191)

The insider's testimony of recent change in the climate combined with the metaphoric mapping here at play (i.e. the feminine land is degraded into a subaltern prostitute exploited by industrial developers analogically in the position of humiliating clients) characteristically associates the earth with a woman's body, controlled and abused for profit by patriarchal forces, with men submitting it to their lust and greed. Although in this very case, the reader is told that the outsider Mitchell character finds "the image raw and offensive" (191), many a story unapologetically flaunt brutally coarse language or rather violent, sometimes obscene images at you. The bleakest picture of the government-sponsored capitalist exploitation of the land comes through Wade Walls' cynical assessment of an overexploited land:



But he knew all about the place, the fiery column of the Cave Gulch flare off in its vast junkyard field, refineries, disturbed land, uranium mines, coal mines, trona mines, pump jacks and drilling rigs, tank farms, contaminated rivers, pipelines, methanol-processing plants, ruinous dams, the Amoco mess, railroads, all disguised by the deceptively empty landscape. [...] He knew about the state's lie-back-and-take-it income from federal mineral royalties, severance and *ad valorem* taxes, the old ranches bought up by country music stars and assorted billionaires, the bleed-out of brains and talent, and for common people no jobs and a tough life in a trailer house. It was a 97 000 square-mile dog's breakfast of outside exploiters, Republican ranchers and scenery. (*Close Range* 213)

The accusatory tone and remarkably long list of instances of industrial use and abuse of Wyoming's land make this passage one of the most explicitly political in Proulx's stories. Moreover, in underlying the consequences of the economic system on individuals such as those represented in her fiction ("and for common people no jobs and a tough life in a trailer house"), this passage encapsulates much of the socio-economic and historical perspective offered by Proulx's stories, thus emphasizing interrelatedness on more than just the level of ecosystems and climate. The devastating impact of capitalism on nature is furthermore captured by her poetic style when describing the light over "the tiny town of Swift Fox, population seventy-three": "At dusk a globe of light like an incandescent jelly-fish formed above Swift Fox and stained the mountainy darkness the weak orange of civilization" (*Bad Dirt* 171). Going hand in hand with industrialization and the plundering of natural resources, these descriptions of nature condemn civilization as a poisonous, dirty, polluting and iridescent force ("an incandescent jelly-fish," "filthy yellow haze," "stained").

Densely poetic in its own, harsh way, Proulx's style nevertheless brings in much Abbey-like provocation and rough talk, as exemplified in the tribute she pays her predecessor through monkey-wrenching Wade Walls' voice in "The Governors of Wyoming": "'You know what Abbey said about cows don't you –stinking, fly-covered, shit-smearing, disease-spreading brutes'" (*Close Range* 224). "Monkey-wrencher" (224) and vegetarian activist Wade Walls serves to denounce the beef industry, here vociferously exposed as an environmental plague:

These subsidized ranchers and their gas-bag cows destroying public range, riparian habitat, wiping out rare plants, trampling stream banks, creating ozone-destroying methane gas, ruining the National Forests that belong to the people, to all of us, stinking, polluting, stupid, world-destroying cows –and what for? A pitiful three percent of this state's gross income. So a few can live a nineteenth century lifestyle. (*Close Range* 218)

Inspired by Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Wade and his renegade accomplice, Shy, stealthily conduct underground operations aiming at sabotaging beef cattle. Yet, as these two extremist characters rant and destroy, only to end up getting caught cutting fence in their neighbor's pastures, the story suggests a rather violent ending for Shy, thus punished for turning on his own neighbor.



Conversely, the other set of characters in this story point to more reasonable farming practices that may help ranchers thrive on, and yet show more respect toward the land. Skipper Birch explains to his mother their new ranching approach to avoid overgrazing:

Showing results. Where we raked the hay into these little piles and left it –places where that hard old alkali ground's been bare [...]– it's softer, mellow. It's makin grass. You want to know how much the land an water's been run down, Mama, take a look at the county agricultural reports for back at the early part of the century –all the kinds a grass that growed here, all kinds of water. Now it's brittle. Hard and brittle. The soil is crusted up. It's the long run Hulse and me is thinking about [...] We] come to feel the long run is the only thing that matters. (*Close Range* 231-32)

Proulx's stories do seem to hammer in one essential point, in variations, having to do with the interdependence between farmers and their neighbors, between nature and culture, between wildness and civilization, between the past, the present, and the future. Proulx thus avoids the pitfall of opposing nature and culture, or humans and the wilderness, as Abbey has been reproached with by ecocritic Joni Adamson. On the contrary Proulx's geographical determinism precisely underlines the continuum between nature and culture. Mitchell's voice in "Man Crawling out of Trees" also serves to underline "the cardinal rule of the country –that you give aid and help to a stranger, even your bitterest enemy when he is down" (*Bad Dirt* 195). Of course, one might argue that overall, Proulx's characters spend more time abusing one another rather than cooperating as a tight-knit community, and it is certainly true that the remaining impression is rather that brother will turn on brother in the struggle for the survival of the fittest in harsh and barren Wyoming. But does this ferocious plotting not actually pave the way for the tragic outcomes which, in the end, lend the stories their moral value?

One of the stories reverts to multiculturalism as Proulx pictures a bison hunting ritual amongst an ancient Native American band some 2,500 years ago, "centuries before the Indians had horses or bows and arrows" (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 123). As opposed to the caustic tone and overall dysphoric atmosphere pervading most of Proulx's parodic imitations and pastiches of folktales and fairy tales,⁹ "Deep-Blood-Greasy-Bowl" draws from Native American myth and ritual without flaunting the dry irony characteristic of Proulx's narrative voices. Admittedly inspired by Native American ways and stories, it re-imagines and tells in a legendary tone of an old bison-hunting ritual which consisted in driving an entire herd of bison off a cliff. Proulx emphasizes the give-and-take relationship between her Native Americans and their environment. First, it is made clear that the thoughtful killing

⁹ I have written elsewhere on this subject, in a paper to be published in the international *ORDA* journal, in a special issue edited by Michael Stambolis, *Resisting Norms and Confronting Backlash: Gender and Sexuality in the Americas*..



of the bison herd is motivated not by greed but by need, as metonymically projected onto the totem-like, eponymous and sacred bowl:

He could see the band's sacred treasure, a deep stone bowl that had come to them in the distant past. [...] After a successful bison hunt it was rubbed with fat which further darkened the stone. Power emanated from the bowl. It craved blood. It needed fat. [...] Small Marmot could feel its grey force pulling the bison closer, the bowl thirsty for the blood that would brim to its cold lip. (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 128-29)

Second, the ritual brings in magpies and eagles instantly feeding on the still warm bison's corpses, heightening the unsentimental look onto the necessary violence associated with the massive killing for food, while underlining the inter-relatedness of all living beings. The brutality of the scene is nonetheless presented as part and parcel of the natural order of things, perpetuating the interdependent web made of all life forms in the biosphere:

Some [bison] had fallen on a projecting ledge where they tried to rise on broken legs or with shattered pelvises. Already a few magpies were pulling at open wounds and ravens spiraling down. Most of the bison had fallen or rolled all the way to the talus slope, killed by the impact; some even now were being eviscerated by the women. Men waiting at the bottom with spears and stone axes killed the survivors. None must live, for they would tell the secret of the invisible cliff to the other bison. At the top, the hunters discovered the trodden remains of the young man who had gone too close to the running herd, now pulverized into bloody mud. His wife would not rejoice in the massive kill. But the news had not yet reached her and she, with the others, sliced and tore, cut still-pulsating throats and caught the blood in deerskin bags and clay pots. The hunters began scrambling down a precipitous cliff path some distance away, eager for the good rich meat. [...] The eagles cried sweetly and gently overhead, the old pair gliding down to feed on a broken animal on the high ledge. No one doubted that the birds remembered the last drive and would aid them in the next one. (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 131)

Third, Proulx's descriptions resort to synaesthesia and hypallages in a way suggesting human attentiveness to the expression of the natural world around:

The men [...] strained for the aural vanishing point, those sounds too remote for all but the inner ear. The need to put on fat, to store food against the hungry winter slinking toward them made them exquisitely sensitive to the nuances of the natural world: string clouds rubbing against the sky like a finger drawn over skin, the quiver of a single blade of grass in calm air showing subterranean movement. Some could tell by the briny smell of seaweed when storms were advancing from the distant ocean. [...] Below their suspirations and heartbeat, they sensed the roaring of bison deep inside the earth, a bellowing that made bedrock quiver and promised that something long-awaited was about to happen. (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 124)

Clearly inspired by American Indian ways and stories, this short story by Annie Proulx draws on the traditional motif of the Sacred Hoop: "The concept



is one of singular unity that is dynamic and encompassing, including all that is contained in its most essential aspect, that of life” (Gunn Allen 56). As opposed to the ranchers’ lifestyle in most of her stories, born from the Pioneer Spirit and pitting humans against nature in a struggle for dominion, this story by Proulx offers a strikingly different vision of humans’ relationship to the rest of the natural world. Acknowledging the essential harmony of all things, Proulx’s re-imagining of an ancient ritual abides by American Indian philosophy: “The American Indian sees all creatures as relatives, [...] as offsprings of the Great Mystery, as cocreators, as children of our mother, and as necessary parts of an ordered, balanced, and living whole” (Gunn Allen 59). In this story, Proulx recuperates mythical material, most visible in the totem-like, eponymous, hungry, and powerful, greasy bowl that will receive the blood and the fat of the bison as an offering. Going back to legendary times, humans in this story are represented as at one with nature. Thus, the interconnectedness between all living beings is for once shown in a positive light, rather than to be concluded from the tragic repercussions of one’s foolish or selfish actions.

Illustrating the opposite, inconsiderate and cruel treatment of nature, the opening story in Proulx’s first Wyoming collection is entitled after the gruesome tale of a half-skinned steer. As told by an intradiegetic narrator, the story relates how the grotesque character named Tin Head goes about butchering a steer, after hitting it to the ground with an axe:

He ties up the back legs, hoists it up and sticks it. [...] When it’s bled out pretty good he lets it down and starts skinning it, starts with the head, cuts back of the poll down past the eye to the nose, peels the hide back. [...] He gets the hide off about halfway and starts thinking about dinner. So he leaves the steer half skinned there on the ground and he goes into the kitchen, but first he cuts out the tongue which is his favorite dish all cooked up and eat cold with Mrs. Tin Head’s mustard in a forget-me-not teacup. (32)

After dinner, as Tin Head intends to finish up his job he finds out that he will indeed never forget the steer, which has altogether vanished:

It’s gone. Only the tongue, laying on the ground all covered with dirt and straw, and the tub of blood and the dog licking at it. [...] He looks around for tire marks or footprints but there’s nothing except old cow tracks [...], but way over there in the west on the side of the mountain he sees something moving, stiff and slow, stumbling along. It looks raw and it’s got something bunchy and wet hanging down over its hindquarters. [...] And just then it stops and it looks back. And all that distance Tin Head can see the raw meat of the head and the shoulder muscles and the empty mouth without no tongue open wide and its red eyes glaring at him, pure teetotal hate like arrows coming at him, and he knows he is done for, and all of his kids and their kids is done for (*Close Range* 35-37)

The half-skinned steer thus provides a potent synecdoche for man’s abuse and silencing of nature, the dirty cut-off tongue, the “empty mouth” and the “mute bawling” (30) of the animal metaphors expressing nature’s speechless voice.



The endings of the two stories cited above both insist on the continuum between humans and nature as well as on the future consequences of humans' treatment of animals needed for food. At the end of the bison-killing ritual, the violence of the scene ("broken legs" "shattered pelvises," "magpies pulling at open wounds," "some were being eviscerated," "trodden remains [...] pulverized into bloody mud," "[the women] sliced and cut still-pulsating throats") is subsumed nevertheless by a sense of euphoria ("eager for the good rich meat," "the eagles cried sweetly and gently") and of a future reward for cooperation among living species ("No one doubted that the birds remembered the last drive and would aid them in the next one."). Comparatively, the reckless treatment of the half-skinned steer in the eponymous story brings about a sense of gratuitous cruelty and, as a result, of doom for the generations to come. As Mark Asquith argues in his recently published study, in Proulx's Wyoming stories, "landscape becomes a social player rather than a backdrop; a protagonist in a dynamic form of cultural practice; a 'verb' rather than a 'noun'; an agent of power, rather than a symbol of power relations. It becomes a dynamic cultural product, existing in a state of reciprocity with the inhabitants who live upon it: it molds their lives even while they alter it." (33)¹⁰

3. NATURE SHALL STRIKE BACK WITH A CLAW IN THE GUT

In Proulx's cynical world, the characters do not quite seem able to gain awareness or learn a lesson, albeit the hard way. Many ignorant, foolish characters underestimating the dangers of the wilderness get hit by some deadly tragic twist making for sordid, horrific endings. This is the case for instance of young nineteenth century Rose in "Them Old Cowboy Songs" who comes to embody hamartia associated with unquestioning faith in the Pioneer Spirit, and who perishes alone and in violent agony at the end of the story.¹¹ The same goes for Catlin in "Testimony of the Donkey," a self-righteous, postmodern vegetarian on a strictly organic diet. An outdoor enthusiast who is fond of hiking, she ends up paying the high price for her hubris, initially encapsulated by her euphoric, misguided and Romantic notions about her capacity to fend for herself in the wild – a capacity which is clearly denied

¹⁰ This recently published book was signaled to me during the reviewing process of the present article. Like many scholars before him, Mark Asquith studies Proulx's landscape mostly through the lens of geographical determinism and of the mythology of the West, as encapsulated in the title of his work: *The Lost Frontier*. It provides many detailed analyses of Proulx's stories and some aspects of a few of her novels, while bringing together much of the academic work carried out so far on Proulx's fiction, including some of my work previously available online. It provides a good digest of the Frontier mythology in itself, which Asquith moreover uses as a reading grid for many other regionalist writers.

¹¹ For more on this very summary analysis of the tragic elements in "Them Old Cowboy Songs" see my paper "Inheriting 'Bad Dirt,' White Trash and 'Dump Junk': the Art of Recycling in Annie Proulx's Wyoming Stories" in *Thy Truth Then be Thy Dowry: Questions of Inheritance in American Women's Literature*, edited by Stéphanie Durran.



in the prolonged narrative of her excruciatingly slow, miserable death. Tellingly, Mitchell's character stands out as one of the rare ones spared by Proulx's ruthless plotting, probably because he has the humility and wisdom to know his place, as both predator *and* prey:

As he drove on he let himself face the truth; that there was much more to understanding the place than driving back roads and fitting music to abrupt topography, and that he was too late. He longed to go on foot into the difficult terrain of the Absarokas, where there were still grizzlies and mountain lions, into [...] the Yellowstone backcountry, but was defeated by his ignorance of these most unforgiving, roadless wildernesses. (*Bad Dirt* 191)

In "The Half-Skinned Steer," the traumatic image giving the story its title keeps resurfacing in the frame mock heroic narrative with Mero as a protagonist. The animal in my opinion works metafictionally, pointing to the haunting power of symbols and tales. It is significant that Mero's sudden metamorphosis into a vegetarian should occur after hearing the story of the half-skinned steer, when he endures a horrific vision bringing about the analogy between ranching and the terrible fate of the steer, thus revealing an undercurrent sense of guilt: "[He] ordered a steak but when the woman brought it and he cut into the meat the blood spread across the white plate and he couldn't help it, he saw the beast, mouth agape in mute bawling, saw the comic aspect of his revulsion as well, a cattleman gone wrong" (*Close Range* 30). This symbol of a muted nature, at the heart of "The Half-Skinned Steer," points to the lasting power of story-telling itself which partly accounts for its presence amongst the *Best American Short Stories of the Century*, selected by John Updike.¹² Like most of Proulx's stories, her metadiegetic tale calls for attentiveness, humility, and awareness of one's place in the more-than-human world. The impossible apparition of the steer at the end of the frame narrative, whether real or whether the result of an optical, anamorphic illusion, in any case confronts both the protagonist and the reader in his wake with the haunting power of symbols: "... in the howling wintry light he saw he'd been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching for him all this time" (*Close Range* 40). In the end, there is something ominous and which may read as a warning in the realization that Mero and his family's guilty participation in the reckless exploitation of nature is not something he can simply run away from.¹³

It is no coincidence that in "The Half-Skinned Steer," Rollo, whose son is called "Tick," literally gets eviscerated by a "waspy emu" with "its big razor claws"

¹² John Updike explains in the introduction: "The Half-Skinned Steer" [...] revisits the West, the West that has seemed to this country the essence of itself. But an elderly former rancher finds it empty and murderous. The American experience [...] has been brutal and hard. The continent has demanded a high price from its takers, let alone from those who surrendered it." (xxiv)

¹³ For a more detailed discussion of this interpretation of the story, see my article in the *Journal of the Short Story in English*, "Unreal, Fantastic and Improbable Flashes of Fearful Insight in Annie Proulx's Wyoming Stories."



(*Close Range* 22-23). In a Shakespearian-like way, Tick and his family, the story obliquely suggests, get cursed through some sort of poetic retribution, for meddling with Nature's Sacred Hoop, a non-hierarchical, rhizomatic and indigenous vision of the great chain of being. Rollo and Tick disrupt the natural order as, amongst other things, they take part in transforming the failed family Wyoming ranch into a hyperreal tourist trap, quite ironically called "Wyoming Down-Under", with emus imported all the way from Australia. Thus the murderous emu in Proulx's story reads as a double for the eponymous half-skinned steer. The emu indeed accomplishes the Biblical-sounding retaliation on the second and third generations of ranchers prophesied by Mero's step-mother, as the punch line to her embedded, tall tale of the mutilated, magically vanished steer ("and he knows he is done for, and all of his kids and their kids is done for" *Close Range* 35-37).

Tick's name then significantly relies on onomastics. The multispecies entanglements at the heart of Proulx's representation of naturecultures also appear formally as her stories are intertextually related throughout the three collections. The rather suggestive name chosen for Rollo's son, Tick, adumbrates a passage in a later story from the collection *Bad Dirt*. Rollo's death indeed reads as a literal enactment of nature's will as expressed through a significant metaphor in "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?": "The country wanted to go to sand dunes and rattlesnakes, wanted to scrape off its human ticks" (*Bad Dirt* 111). To take up Weltzien's analysis: "That contemptuous metaphor renders human endeavor tiny and parasitic, and expresses the theme of nature's indifference as loudly as at any point in these stories" (108). More than that, I would argue, when read in relationship to "The Half-Skinned Steer", this passage frighteningly draws attention to the deep, rhizomatic intraconnections between apparently unrelated elements, be them textual, diegetic, or of the world.

Proulx's writing takes it one step further using a rather wry sense of humor in the very comic "Swamp Mischief," where the Devil playfully gives life to pterodactyl birds in postmodern Wyoming, humorously presented as on a par with Hell. Significantly, the evil dinosaur creatures are endowed with "ghastly teeth," "shark teeth," and "great [curling] claws" (143-44). The dinosaurs in this fanciful story seem to have magically materialized out of the prehistoric quality of the monumental Wyoming landscapes observed in other stories. Indeed, in "Man Crawling out of Trees," as Mitchell contemplates "the empty reaches west and north of Muddy Gap," the scenery puts him in mind of dinosaurs: "They had been here in the ancient steamy swamps tearing foliage from tropical trees, kicking huge wounds in one another's bellies with claws like scimitars" (*Bad Dirt* 189). This overarching claw symbol also recurs in Proulx's novel *Postcards*, as a rich bear trapper tries to offer Loyal a deal in his unscrupulous business: "It's not that heavy a work, just cut them open and take out the gallbladder, cut out the claws. Hell, most of the time, we don't even bother with the hides. We don't have time" (246). As the novel reveals, bear poaching can bring a fortune since bear claws and gallbladders are sold on Asian markets as sexual performance enhancers.

Thus, Proulx's formidable claw leitmotif comes to catalyze Gaïa's power to backlash against lustful and greedy abuse. For Annie Proulx's stories seem to oppose



on the one hand, a Tennysonian vision of a violence inherent in nature, motivated by need and represented as participating in the continuum of existence, and on the other hand, a purely human form of violence, springing from stupidity and greed rather than need. The latter form of violence never failing to be cosmically or poetically retributed in Proulx's stories, it must in the end appear as morally condemned.

In another cynical and magical realist story,¹⁴ "The Hellhole," the reader at last gets a truly good laugh as a Wyoming game and fish warden discovers his magic power to send animal poachers directly to hell via a magic hole in the ground which he can open and close at will. Ironically, the hellhole unexpectedly disappears after a while, thus disempowering the protagonist and his fellow-wardens, as it gets obliterated with concrete poured over the land to build... a parking lot for tourists. The moral value of the story in this case is rather evident, as the main character is momentarily endowed with the power to directly retribute crimes against nature—a power which ostentatiously induces deep pleasure in the warden, and, by proxy, is quite enjoyable for the reader. Nature is probably at its most treacherous in another, magical realist story, "The Sagebrush Kid," where a grotesque, carnivorous sagebrush turns out to be responsible for an endless series of animal and human disappearances. Significantly, the sagebrush metamorphoses into a monster after it has been fed meet gravy and scraps by a hysterical, barren woman who has taken to the sagebrush as a surrogate child. Read ecopoetically, it is possibly suggested that the plant turns into an avid, hybrid degenerate as a consequence of the meddling with the natural order of things.

In one of her truly comic stories casting the Devil in Hell as the main character, Proulx makes a point that so-called modern civilization is headed for self-destruction. Referring to James Watt's development of steam engine technology—an invention that marks the beginning of the industrial revolution and is often identified in current debates as the starting point of the Anthropocene—the narrator accounts for the Devil's smug sense of anticipated satisfaction:

The kettle epiphany had booted a species—selfish, clever creatures with poor impulse control, suited to hunt, gather and scratch a little agriculture—into a savagely

¹⁴ In using the term "magical realism" I am referring to the merging of magical events within a realistic narrative, prompting readers to suspend disbelief and simply go along with the magic worked into the diegesis. For more on magical realism as a genre, see Wendy Faris' *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, and Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris' *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. In short, Faris lays down the five main characteristics of magical realism as a literary mode: "First, the text contains an irreducible element of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism details a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understanding of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space and identity." (Faris 7) For more on magical realism in Annie Proulx's stories, see my article, mentioned above, "Unreal, Fantastic and Improbable Flashes of Fearful Insight in Annie Proulx's Wyoming Stories."



technological civilization that got rapidly out of hand and sent them blundering toward The End.

“A few hundred years, they’ll all be here with me,” [the Devil] murmured. And while he waited for the self-reaping harvest he amused himself by manipulating those humans. (2008 136)

One after the other, her stories bluntly expose man’s arrogance and ignorance, deconstructing the myths that form the fabric of North American civilization, such as the dream of the West, the Pioneer ethos, and the Cowboy myth. Going beyond a local, neoregional inscription, Proulx’s satirical story here gestures to the global, apocalyptic scenario of Gaïa getting rid of its human parasites—a scenario of geological revolution that many scientists predict humanity has been headed toward.

In the same collection, “I’ve Always Loved This Place” comes as a mythopoeic palimpsest rewriting Dante’s *Inferno* from the *Divine Comedy*. Instead of Dante and Virgil, the main characters exploring the nine circles of Hell in Proulx’s version are the Devil and his demon secretary, Duane Fork. As it goes, the Devil has established the need to modernize Hell and make it more infernal, competition with the Upper world making Hell seem tedious in comparison: “Nothing has been done with this damn place for eons. It’s old-fashioned, it’s passé, people yawn when they think of Hell. Slimy rocks and gloomy forests do not have the negative frisson of yesteryear—there are environmentalists who now love such features. [... Deserts,] melting glaciers, inundations. We’re starting to look frumpy in comparison” (36). The story thus offers a comic satire of our postmodern world, on a par with Hell. As the Devil contemplates the idea of adding a tenth circle “to accommodate an increasing number of Total Bastards, most of them American businessmen,” he eventually concludes quite sarcastically: “In the long run there was probably no need to build an extension; since nearly all humans were inevitably damned, a simple inversion would do, much like turning a length of intestine inside out and using it as a sausage casing. The earth itself, with no labor on his part, would become Hell Plus” (36).

Proulx’s light, sardonic tone and unrealistic mode in these Devil stories make them the most amusing in the collections. In contrast with the sharp language prevailing in her Wyoming stories, these tales resort to trivial comparisons, thus deflating the seriousness of Dante’s original allegorical writing. It is a case of “*travestissement burlesque*” to take up Gérard Genette’s term, that is an imitation and rewriting of a text in a lowly language, with more common themes, and with a more satirical intention. This is made clear for instance with the sausage casing simile quoted above, or with another unexpectedly funny comparison, when the bear biologist experiences a kind of mock epiphany at the end of “Swamp Mischief”: “[he] had grappled with the searing truth when he understood in his marrow that demons were sprinkled throughout the world like croutons in a salad” (2008 147). From the point of view of academia, it might be telling too, that Proulx’s scientists such as the defeated bear biologist are dealt rather grotesque fates. The botanist in “The Sagebrush Kid” is literally blanked out from the page with a foreboding reference to the “muscular and strangely warm branch” of the monstrous, carnivorous sagebrush he has come to measure out and document (2008 91). Could it be then,



that Proulx's stories cast the vanity of modern science, obsessed as it is with measuring, categorizing, and exploiting nature? Overall, Proulx's stories invite us to tackle a different type of discourse with which we approach the world, that is the myths we humans use to make sense of the world.

Besides, these Devil stories offer metadiegetic hunches. The Devil's cunning use of *contrapasso* –inflicting punishments on humans which reiterate or contrast proportionately with their sins– is not without similarity to the activity of the demiurge writer, who like the Devil “[amusing] himself by manipulating those humans” (136), metes out tragic falls in relation with the moral, emotional, or intellectual failures of her characters. The Devil's use of poetic justice indeed provides a metaphor for Proulx's devilish retribution of sin in her stories. Brandishing her own magic wand, Proulx indeed plots sordid turns of events so as to punish blindness, foolishness, greed, violence, cruelty, abuse of one's brother or neighbor, transgression against nature, etc.

In this light, “Swamp Mischief” offers a telling paradigmatic reading. The Devil intercepts people's emails looking for mischievous inspiration. He taps into a frustrated ornithologist's mail, ranting to a friend about how little attention he gets compared to his colleagues specialized in wolves, mountain lions, and bears: “The ones that count are the guys who deal with big animals that can kill people. What I need is a big dangerous bird. I'd sell my soul for a pterodactyl” (2008 138). As a kind of *Deus ex machina*, the Devil concocts makeshift pterodactyl birds, or “shark-mouthed flying horrors” (142), made from “biologically modified and enlarged” English sparrows fitted with shark teeth stolen from a natural history museum. He modifies the natural landscape where the ornithologist lives, adding swamps and cicadas to approximately recreate the dinosaur birds' natural habitat. In so doing, the Devil/implied writer amuses herself with experiments, giving life to grotesque hybrids patched up with recuperated bits and pieces that fit the needs of her story. Poetically capitalizing on the performative potential inherent in language, Proulx taps into the imaginative possibilities contained in idioms, metaphors, and myths, literalizing here what was at first simply an expression of frustration (“What I need is a big dangerous bird. I'd sell my soul for a pterodactyl”), now turned into tangible matter. The story ending moreover adds to this metafictional dimension, as the pterodactyl birds from hell suddenly vanish, metamorphosing back into their initial forms: “Abruptly everything changed. There was a shower of shark teeth. Four sparrows flew over the lake” (146). About the evanescence of his dinosaur birds, the Devil concludes: “Illusions are a real bastard to hold steady. [...] You got to know when to fold them” (2008 146). While Proulx's story is simultaneously being brought to a close, it is then tempting to read the Devil's words as a self-reflexive comment from the implied writer on storytelling as a subtle art of make-believe.

In most of her Wyoming stories, Annie Proulx resorts to a mordant, grotesque sense of humor and scathing (eco)poetic justice –often carried out via a disturbing use of magical realism– imbuing all her stories with a frightening sense that transgressions against nature shall invariably be requited through poetic-cosmic retaliation. In the end, Proulx's ruthless and cynical stories, with little, if any redemption in sight, can themselves feel to the reader at times like a “claw in



the gut". Her story endings are often abrupt, ambiguous and understated, in a way that forces the reader to muse over the various possibilities, both in terms of plot and significance. If reading Proulx's short fiction may be experienced as quite traumatic, it nevertheless confronts readers with forceful nature descriptions, haunting symbolism, and implicit moral stances that may very well offer an example of the "literature of humility, a movement beyond the self" which Mark Tredinnick has envisioned (54). Mark Treddinick's contribution to the analysis of nature writing posits the latter as follows: "The world that nature writing engages with is not bounded by society; it extends to the universe that came before, that goes beyond, that contains the human world. The world it deals with includes geology, weather, plants, animals, the lives of rivers, the fate of men and women as though they were shaped by the landscapes and weathers, which they also shape. [...] So, nature writing is, to use the jargon, biocentric" (24).

If Proulx's fatalistic short story endings rarely suggest an epiphany on the part of the characters, her overarching uses of brutal poetic justice and sarcastic narrative voices bring about reader epiphanies, working as shock therapy over the long run. Undermining Western ideologies and philosophies holding man as on top of a natural world which he shall control and exploit at will, Proulx's fiction, by dint of horror, humor, cynicism and awe, confronts her readers with the limitations of our current attitudes and policies as regards nature. Clearly, literature functions here as an open space inviting us to deterritorialize and reterritorialize our very conceptions of nature. This remapping may well be the meaning of Proulx's quotation of Antonio Machado as an ironic epigraph to her tragic story of stubborn arrogance in "Testimony of the Donkey": "Traveler, there is no path. Paths are made by walking" (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 151). Thus, Proulx's Wyoming stories offer one of the best examples of "narrative ecology," to take up the term coined by Alex Hunt, or what Adrian Rainbow calls "ecoliterary texts" in that they engage in a real relationship with the world. In so doing, they bring about readers' awareness of the need for new paradigms and mythologies. Aware that "the short story [...] can be a powerful reading experience," Proulx acknowledges its potential social impact: "Storytelling trumps social issues. [...] And fiction can bring about change" (*The Paris Review* 14, 4). O. Alan Weltzien ventures that the "lesson in humility" Proulx's fiction contains is one that "Americans desperately require [...] in the twenty-first century." (110) The urgent need for awareness and change may well be global, rather than limited to the United States, and it is to be hoped that ecoliterary writers with universal resonance will keep being translated, adapted, and analyzed worldwide. Fiction, Proulx's writing demonstrates, can participate in bringing about change. In the same vein, Proulx's political concerns are exposed in the non-fiction coffee-table book, *Red Desert: History of a Place*, which she has edited, with landscape photographs by Martin Stupich. Dealing with Wyoming's endangered lands, the album provides visual experiences of the beauty and the sublime in nature, but also of the industrial despoliation of certain areas, thus advocating urgent respect and preservation of the land.

Interestingly, Annie Proulx's neoregionalist writing can be likened to her contemporary Barbara Kingsolver's because both writers seem to rely on story-telling as a medium for a good read, but a good read which also serves to raise awareness.



Drawing from history, ecology, as well as folktales and myths, it is my claim that writers like Kingsolver and Proulx are taking part in a movement including nature writers and narrative ecology scholars, spreading a biocentric perspective in which humans are no longer perceived as separate from and superior to nature, but within and dependent on nature. I am furthermore investigating the idea that the short story, in its postmodernist and mythopoeic form, is destined to gradually replace what myths used to do, reinvesting story-telling with the functions of mythology within postmodern society, and thus helping us make sense of the world we live in and of our roles within it.

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