

**RE-WRITING THE AMERICAN NATURALIST SHORT STORY:
ANNIE PROULX'S *FINE JUST THE WAY IT IS***

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This paper argues that Annie Proulx's Wyoming short stories can easily be read as one of the latest examples of the naturalist tradition in American fiction. The detailed re-presentations and pessimistic determinism that became the staple ingredients of this literary trend are very much present in her 2008 collection *Fine Just the Way It is*. It would be inaccurate and unfair, however, not to admit that Proulx brings into her short stories a number of innovative elements that in a way are seen to refashion this mode of fiction and to make it move in new directions. Her narrators tend to express more sympathy for the characters and most of the latter –who happen to be women– can be seen to show a courage and resilience rather unusual in earlier works in this tradition.

Keywords: Literary naturalism, short story, landscape fiction, Annie Proulx, geographical determinism, Wyoming stories, genre re-fashioning.

*There is a belief that pioneers came into the country,
homesteaded, lived tough, raised a shoeless brood and founded
ranch dynasties. Some did. But many more had short runs and
were quickly forgotten.*
Annie Proulx, *Fine Just the Way It Is*

*If Wyoming is protagonist in the Wyoming Stories, one could claim Proulx has
resuscitated a style of fiction prevalent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.
Many of her stories inscribe what could be called a neo-Naturalism, wherein environmental
forces (landscape and weather) larger than individuals trace the trajectories of their lives,
marking and reducing their choices.*
O. Alan Weltzien, "Annie Proulx's Wyoming"

Taking the cue from Weltzien's analysis of Proulx's earlier collections of Wyoming short stories, *Close Range* (1999) and *Bad Dirt* (2004), I intend to demonstrate in this essay that her latest collection, *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008), also presents another example of her own version of what has been termed 'landscape fiction'. Set mostly in the inhospitable territories of Wyoming's high desert, these stories repeatedly illustrate the dictum that man is just another creature in creation "whose course is determined by his heredity, by the effect of his environment and by pressures of the moment" (Furst and Skrine 1971: 18). Although many of the characters in Proulx's fiction set out with the high expectations that were characteristic of the pioneering spirits who moved into the American West during the 19th and early 20th centuries, it soon transpires that their efforts and determination are inevitably bound to crash against some natural forces and socio-economic conditions totally beyond their control.

As several reviewers have noted, the prevailing tone of the collection is rather depressing –if not, sinister– since there seems to be something fatal in the hardscrabble lives herein represented that drives them inexorably towards their eventual destruction (Carlson 2008; Valdes 2008; Adams 2008). Yet, despite the overwhelming and oppressive nature of the physical elements they face, Proulx's characters also show some courage and personal worth that will set them apart from the insect-like creatures we meet in the fiction of writers such as Stephen Crane or Frank Norris. In this regard, I would agree with Pizer when he states that, rather than completely debasing man, the naturalists “suggest new or modified areas of value in man while engaged in destroying such old and to them unreal sources of human self-importance as romantic love or moral responsibility or heroism” (1984: 29). Therefore, I cannot see eye to eye with Weltzien's judgment on Proulx's brand of “geographical determinism”, according to which “we observe the elevation of landscape imagery to a dominant, inhuman force, and a corresponding reduction of character to caricature” (Weltzien 2008: 100). While it is true that in many instances the reader feels that the extreme landscapes of the American West dwarf and wear down human beings, the author also reveals sympathy for those victims whose lives are unsparingly wasted.

The main aim of my contribution is to show how Proulx succeeds in both retaining a number of features that the reader will immediately associate with the naturalist –or ‘landscape’– fiction that we are familiar with in the works of Bret Harte, Stephen Crane or Jack London, and introducing some new ingredients into her Wyoming short stories that would encourage us to revise some of the tenets that we apply to this mode of fiction. Among the former, it will be noted that Proulx still reveals the keen eye, able to capture the smallest details of the environment, which became the staple of many late 19th century authors. Likewise, she habitually shows great fondness for those unexpected twists of fate that will doom her characters' lives since, no matter how hard they struggle to keep afloat, the land proves too overpowering and brutal to be subdued. As Teele explains, “though it may pain her to hear it repeated, the truest of her characters can never be divorced from their environment” (2008). It is not unusual, then, to hear scholars and reviewers accuse Proulx of a toughness and cold irony in her narratives that is reminiscent of the logic of “production and consumption” that Walter Benn Michaels has associated with “naturalism as a mode of writing” (1987: 28). It would be a serious critical blunder, though, to assume that Proulx is content with the imposition of ‘necessitarian’ causality and motive that some analysts have identified as the cornerstone of the naturalist vision (see Martin 1981).

In fact, far from using the sort of mechanical plots that the reader often finds in her literary ancestors, Proulx provides various ingenious ways in which the short-story form may be refashioned in the contemporary world. As noted by a reviewer of *Fine Just the Way It Is*: “Who says the short story is dead? In Proulx's formidable hands, the short story is thriving, a form that is by turns muscular and lithe, perfectly suited to portraying rough lives cut short that she makes so entrancing and heartbreaking” (Shank 2008: 39). One very distinctive feature of Proulx's short fiction is the flexibility and evocative power that she is able to endow to apparently simple plots of frustration and despair. This argument holds true, of course, for her well-known story of impossible cowboy gay love in “Brokeback Mountain”, but it also does for most of the tragic –yet, ostensibly moral– life stories in her latest collection. Given the space limitations, I will refer only to how her strong grip on the pulses of life and character of the region, and her reorientation of some of the traditional myths of the American West –violence and masculinity– may contribute to the refashioning and revitalization of the genre.

Let me begin, however, by referring briefly to those elements that would seem to connect Proulx to the tradition of naturalist writing. Furst and Skrine rightly argue that one of the features that most clearly defined the art of the naturalists was the fact that they “attached the greatest importance to the tangible objects of the visible world” (1971: 3). Any re-reading of a London or a Crane story will reveal the strenuous efforts they made to present reality in a highly objective and accurate way. The same could be said about Proulx who, as Hensher observes, is also “a densely realist writer. She wants to know exactly how the world is put together, and she evokes it not with broad strokes, but with the immense number of informed, exact, and often technical specifics” (2008). In stories such as “The Great Divide” or “Deep-Blood-Greasy-Bowl”, the prose is infused with details of landscape and emotion that are difficult to come across in any contemporary authors. As she explained about her fiction in an interview:

Everything comes from landscape. Every single thing I write, I start with 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 living, and so forth– and the story rolls out of the landscape. (Wyoming Library Roundup 2005: 7)

No doubt, this is the reason why a number of critics have described her as ‘a writer of landscape fiction’. It is not just that the author is extremely precise in her depiction of plants, animals, topography, utensils, etc., but we are also told about the bearings of those surrounding elements on the lives of the people inhabiting those areas. Any reader can tell that she derives great *jouissance* from the idiosyncrasies of the surroundings, which come to play a decisive role in the development of her narratives. As several reviewers have remarked, we readers are also invited to hear and smell these fierce landscapes, both to enjoy them momentarily and to discern their darkest premonitions (Adams 2008; Hensher 2008).

Indeed, if landscape comes to occupy such a central position in Proulx’s art, it is because of the inevitable –and yet unpredictable– impact that it is going to have on the lives of the few human beings who venture to settle in these forbidding territories. In Weltzien’s words, “Landscape represents the eternal Other that characters confront and never subdue. There’s no contest. Most of the time, its presence and force render characters into the lowest common denominator” (2008: 110). Curiously, though, and despite the evident cruelty of the land and the weather, it is fairly common to see many of her characters develop a sense of attachment to –and even affection for– a territory that is little short of the miseries in hell represented in two stories of the collection. In “The Great Divide”, for instance, Hi (Hiawatha) is seen to miss terribly the untamed landscapes of the region when he is forced by economic circumstances to move to a more industrial and urban community:

The coalmines were hard for a man who’d once owned his place and worked all his life outdoors. He was surprised to find he missed horse catching with Fenk, riding through the chill high desert, the grey-green sage and greasewood, the salt sage sheltering sage hens, pronghorn, occasional elk, riding up on ridges and mesas to spy out bands of wild horses, plodding through the sand dunes, seeing burrowing owls in a prairie dog town, wheeling ferruginous hawks and eagles, a solitary magpie flying across the quilted sky like a driven needle, the occasional rattlesnake ribboning away. (Proulx 2009: 114)

Ironically, when he is finally persuaded by his brother-in-law to return to those open and barely colonized spaces, it is only to find his death almost immediately. As is the

case with most of the central characters in the other stories, we have the impression that this finale has been prefigured throughout the narrative, since invisible forces of various kinds seem to be pushing Hi in the least desirable direction. As Jones sees it, "In these stories, terrain and seclusion define the lives of most characters, who have little but burden to anticipate on trajectories toward tragedy, heartbreak or just failure" (2008).

Nevertheless, while admitting that there is a grain of the "pessimistic determinism" (Pizer 1984: 9) typical of naturalist stories in Proulx's collection, quite often we also see her trying to express a sense of the worth of human attitudes and behaviors –even when the surrounding reality places serious constraints on human volition. It is true that most of her characters are not among the best-educated or the most genial people, but one cannot deny that, when facing the ordeals that befall them, they may demonstrate levels of resilience that we would never have expected. This is the case of Archie and Rose in "Them Old Cowboy Songs", who, when still very young abandon their homes to settle on their own in Wyoming in the mid-1880s, but soon discover that life on their isolated farm is not as easy as they had thought. With Rose already pregnant, Archie is forced to leave their place to do extremely taxing work on ranches and in mining towns. The baby, however, arrives two months ahead of time and Rose, having nobody to help her at childbirth, loses it. Although she is slowly bleeding to death, her only concern is to have her stillborn child properly buried:

Clenching the knot of the dish towel in her teeth, she crawled out the door and toward the sandy soil near the river, where, still on hands and knees, still spouting blood, she dug a shallow hole with the silver spoon and laid the child in it, heaping it with sand and piling on whatever river stones were within reach. It took more than an hour to follow her blood trail back to the cabin, the twilight deep by the time she reached the doorstep. (66)

It could be argued that only a mother would spend the last drops of her blood in such a futile enterprise, and yet the whole scene is suggestive of her extreme care and her resistance to give in easily to her and her baby's fate. Of course, other readers might contend that the fact that in her dying hour "she heard the coyotes outside and knew what they were doing" (66) signals her defeat at the hands of a natural environment that proves mostly indifferent to human aspirations. Nevertheless, I would still stand by Pizer when he states that naturalists are not only interested in showing the huge power of material forces but they are often seen to represent "the intermingling in life of controlling force and individual worth" (1984: 28).

Another clear departure of Proulx from the more conventional features of naturalism is to be found in the fact that the bravest and most fascinating characters in her collection are women. Shank (2008) notes that, although "Proulx has usually been known for her male protagonists, many times in this collection it's women who emerge as the strongest and most haunting characters". This can be said of Catlin, the protagonist of "Testimony of the Donkey", who, after unexpectedly breaking up with her long-time boyfriend, Marc, embarks on a fated excursion on the dangerous Jade Trail. Although she does reach the summit of the cliff, on the return journey she steps on the wrong stone and her leg gets caught between two huge rocks. The last section of the story tells us of Catlin's desperate efforts to survive and release herself from the rock through three scorching days and freezing nights up in the mountains:

"Come on, come on", she begged the sun, which rose with interminable slowness. At last sunlight struck the ridge to the west, but she was still in cold shadow. An hour passed. She could hear birds. One perched on the edge of the cruel rock just

out of her reach. If she could seize it she would bite its head off and drink the blood. But the air was slowly warming even if the sun rays were still not touching the rock. Her leg felt like a great pounding column. At last the blessed sun fell across her body, and gradually the shuddering slowed. (171)

As happens with the old fisherman in Hemingway's well-known novella, the reader feels fully involved in the protagonist's struggle to keep alive and liberate herself from the rather stupid trap. Although we gradually begin to sense that her desperate efforts will find little reward, her endurance and determination keep a glimpse of hope in front of our eyes right up to the very closing lines of the narrative:

In the long struggle to get her painful shirt off, through the buzzing in her ears, through her cracking skin she heard Marc. He was wearing the hobnail boots and coming up the trail behind her. This was no illusion. She fought to clear her senses and heard it clearly, the hobnail boots sharply click-click-clicking up the granite section of trail. She tried to call his name, but "Marc" came out as a guttural roar, "Maaa...", a thick and frightening primeval sound. It startled the doe and her half-grown fawns behind her, and they clattered down the trail, black hooves clicking over the rock out of sight and out of hearing. (175-76)

To conclude, I hope my analysis has managed to demonstrate that, while there are reasons to maintain that Annie Proulx's short fiction can be productively studied as part of a continuing naturalist tradition in American literature, there are also elements in her latest collection of stories that suggest that she is investigating new literary spaces for her usually tragic plots. Not the least important among these, although I have not had the space to dwell upon it here, is her interest in how particular regions and peoples see their future determined by changes in the economy and socio-cultural structure that, again, are totally beyond their control. On this particular point, some of Walcott's ideas regarding naturalistic catastrophes may prove particularly useful: "the destroying forces are no longer mysterious [hereditary and contextual] but clearly *social*, for which the spectator shares the responsibility and therefore experiences guilt" (1963: 10; original emphasis).

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