

ANNIE PROULX'S *BIRD CLOUD* AND 'LITERATURE OF HOPE'

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Abstract. *The paper focuses on Annie Proulx's non-fiction work Bird Cloud and explores some of the ideas Proulx has postulated in her fiction, novels and short stories: a sense of place, home-ness, the history and archaeology of place, the sense of (non)-belonging, or conjunction and disjunction to use Slovic's terms. Travel and relocation, prominent features of Proulx's work, are what Barry Lopez describes as means of overcoming disjunction in remote locations and of cultivating intimacy with the landscape. Eventually they give rise to a fictional representation of landscape. We may conclude that for Proulx landscape writing becomes a "literature of hope" that stimulates the characters and the readers to "awareness" of place.*

Key words: *landscape, place, home-ness, literature of hope, Proulx*

1. INTRODUCTION

In many interviews about her novels and short story collections, including the 2006 interview to the Norwegian television channel NRK, or the 1999 interview about the book *Close Range*¹, Annie Proulx explains that she draws inspiration for her stories and novels from a place. The place she considers her writing place is Wyoming. In an interview to Michael Williams about her new book *Bird Cloud*, she says that it is a place that definitely triggers her into writing. She describes her creative process in the following way:

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¹ Apart from the cited interview in this passage, other interviews that I refer to include:

Proulx, Annie, interview (1999). Wheeler Centre/ Melbourne Writers Festival. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1Tsj2IXESI>

Proulx, Annie in discussion with Wheeler Centre's Michael Williams, Melbourne Writers Festival. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MM3rtGlaQ4>

Wyoming Library Roundup (WLR). (2005). "More Reader than Writer: A Conversation with Annie Proulx". Wyoming Library Roundup. 5-8.

When I'm doing research everything comes out of landscape. I spend a lot of time trying to understand the geology, the climate, the weather; the forces that shaped a particular area, how people made their living in the past, how they do it now. Once I understand those kinds of things the story more or less falls out of the place. (Proulx in an interview to NRK 2006)

Her 2011 non-fiction book, *Bird Cloud* reflects exactly the same idea she introduces in her interview mentioned above. The way humans and writers in particular write their stories onto the landscape reflects the way the same landscape shapes the history of the people who strive to influence, exploit, or inhabit it. In Proulx's stories, the landscape even defines the identity of her characters because, according to Proulx, everything that happens to a character comes out of a place.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF PLACE WITH REFERENCE TO PROULX

Among many definitions of place, we would refer first to the meaning of place in Proulx's work and would say that it is a human artifact rather than a natural phenomenon. Even in the wilderness of Wyoming, place is "space that has been given meaning and borders, and so a location with a human-created ensemble of features" (Katz & Mahoney 2008, x). For Proulx, place is a home which carries with itself its own spirit, "the spirit of place", which in D. H. Lawrence's view springs from a sense of belonging and human attachment. In the first pages of *Bird Cloud*, Proulx gives an emotional background of her desire for a dream house. Her endeavors to build a house and have an estate are related to landscaping. The relationship to land and landscape can be explained in terms of land already being "ordered and shaped by human perceptions and action" (Katz & Mahoney 2008, x). This definition implies power that people assert over environment and a kind of a control over nature. To be aware of place means to know place which requires experience. Many naturalist writers (Thoreau, Lopez, and Proulx in *Bird Cloud*) deal with the direct and intimate experience with place. In her essay "Dangerous Ground: Landscape in American Fiction" Proulx explains that landscape is "geography, geology, archaeology, astrophysics, agronomy, agriculture, [...] climate, black squirrels and wild oats, folded rock, [...] landscape is rural, urban, suburban, semirural, small town, village; it is outports and bedroom communities; it is a remote ranch" (Proulx 2008, 10). For Proulx, landscape is both land and the creation of human mind and efforts.

In Proulx's sense of a word, place and landscape can be used interchangeably. Though the notion of place has attracted much attention in theory and cultural and postcolonial studies where it has been defined in a narrow sense "as the 'land' or the natural physical environment" (Keahey 1998, 4), when discussed in literature, we talk about the impact of the landscape on the mind. As Keahey suggests, "the land itself is assumed to be a preexistent reality that we have immediate access to, unmediated by language or the structures of human perception" (Keahey 1998, 5). Place is usually viewed and discussed in relation to the self and home as a central concern of self. The individuals' readings of the land or place may be burdened by their own cognitive structures and social, psychological, cultural, political and other relationships individuals establish towards particular landscapes or physical spaces. In that sense, place becomes created place and reimagined as a creation of the social, psychological and cultural relationships that people have to particular physical spaces or landscapes.

3. DISCUSSION

Proulx's approach to landscape resembles the approach of Barry Lopez, a great analyst and appreciator of nature. Nature writers heighten our awareness of a place in the natural world undercutting the relationship between the human mind and the natural world. According to Lopez, whom we will briefly refer to in the paper, there are two approaches to the natural landscape. Lopez calls the two complementary modes of "understanding" of natural places, the *mathematical* and especially the *particularized* or (experiential) mode, which are keys to mental elevation, or deeper awareness of the self and the place we live in. Nature writers insist on awareness which contributes to the author's awareness of the self and the non-self. By confronting the realm of nature, by becoming aware of the other, the author himself becomes aware of his own self, his own limitations, capacities, and the way he can put up with the unknown.

In the words of one of the most distinguished promoters of American eco-criticism, Scott Slovic, man's relationship to nature is defined as *conjunction*, a state of belonging within landscape, and *disjunction*, man's severance from land that is regarded as meaningless, absurd and destructive (Slovic 1992, 137). Proulx overcomes *disjunction* by cultivating intimacy with landscape and travel becomes a tool to connect with the chosen destination. Proulx and her characters travel physically, from city to rural region, or vice versa, but also mentally from one ideology to another. Proulx's move to Wyoming goes in line with the trend of the 1990s when a number of affluent property buyers moved into the remote rural areas and small towns in the West (Dorman 2012, 196). The trend was aided by the development of technology. Newer technologies (the Internet, cell phones, cable television, and fax machines) allowed wealthy people to live and work from far-away places. Most of the new technologies were installed at Bird Cloud along with stained concrete solar windows. Proulx's home Bird Cloud and her deep engagement with land in Wyoming has resulted in a fictional representation of landscape that feels alive to the reader as her memoir of place *Bird Cloud* is. The notion of home could be read in relation to place. It may entail the notion of belonging and it is possible not to be "at home" at home. There might be a disjunction between the real experienced home and the abstract idealized home. Such discrepancy between reality and ideal is not unusual to the idea of home. If a person is at home, does that refer to the ideal or the actual?

Why would Proulx leave the city and settle in the wilderness for a year or why would modern man turn his back to the life in big cities and settle in the far-flung locations? There may be numerous reasons. One of the reasons might be that most of the big American cities nowadays seem to look identical and that people lose a sense of community; they are neither interested in the history nor in the cultural background of the place they live in. The local distinctiveness of the American landscape has disappeared. This is especially the case of urban places although the rural ones are under the same threat as well. Another reason might be the lack of mobility and the phenomenon that many people think of other places in terms of visualizing images of landscape they know from television programs, magazine covers, advertisements, etc., without actually setting foot on a physical place. Barry Lopez uses the term *false geographies* to describe this phenomenon (Lopez 1990, 55). The commercial flat images of a place obstruct a reliable knowledge of it. On the other hand, apart from a direct experience with a distinctive landscape in the rural area, people know what they can expect, how to act and what their place is; they might not feel lost there anymore as they feel in big cities where life might

be pervaded with a sense of desperation and anxiety as well. For Proulx, life away from a big city simply meant an opportunity to carry out her dream as she describes in *Bird Cloud*. Moreover, in her fiction Wyoming is a great source of inspiration:

Everything comes from landscape. 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 people eat, how they make their livings and so forth – and the story rolls out of landscape. (Proulx 2005, 5-8).

With the firm belief that “geography, climate, and time dictate human culture” (Proulx 2008, 8), Proulx is convinced that human imagination pulls literature and mythologies “from the glassy cliffs and burning ground of the wilderness, the unknown territories” (Proulx 2008, 8).

The relocation from urban space to open rural landscape in Proulx’s work very often makes the beginning of ideological transformation. Proulx’s landscapes, Wyoming in particular in *Wyoming Stories: Close Range* (1998), *Bad Dirt* (2004), *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008), are indifferent, adverse. The short story “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” describes a Wyoming landscape as “dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing, although the signs of misadventure are everywhere” (Proulx 2000, 107). Proulx’s characters very often perceive landscape as inhospitable and adverse, and they often want to possess and own the land which is a means of conquering it. In “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?”, Proulx describes her archetypal hero as a person whose “feeling for the land was the strongest emotions that had ever moved him, a strangling love tattooed on his heart. It was his. It was as if he had drunk from some magic goblet brimming with the elixir of ownership” (Proulx 2005, 72). The land is viewed as the object of possession which reflects the private-property mentality as part of the nation’s collective consciousness. The ideology that construes the land as property usually turns the beauty of the land into a property: “What he saw was the beautiful deep land and he saw it his, aimed to get as much of it as he could. He bought and stole half a hundred cows, and with pride in this three-up outfit, declared himself a rancher” (Proulx 2000, 109). That kind of mentality destroys the land, but Proulx’s world is not without hope. Hope is to be found in growing intimacy and loving the land. Hope is in the antidote to the disease of disjunction. In “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water”, the narrator says: “Only 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” (Proulx 2000, 108). It is earth and sky that God owes us, and nothing beyond that. Thus, hope is to be found within “earth and sky”, in nature.

Hope is evidently bound to nature and landscape and is an antidote to the sense of *disjunction*. The roles people assume within landscape in Proulx’s fiction fall into two different relationships. It depends how you come: as a pilgrim or as an improver, the terms Tredinnick uses for man’s relationship to nature in his essay². A pilgrim has a deep reverence for nature, while an improver manipulates and owns landscape and nature. A pilgrim achieves what Slovic calls *conjunction*, while an improver causes *disjunction*, i.e. an alienation and severance from nature. The ownership ideology transforms land into a production facility, which leads to the devastation of landscape and nature. In that sense,

² See Mark Tredinnick’s essay “The Edge of the Trees” in *The Land’s Wild Music: Encounters with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest William, and James Galvin*, San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2005.

many of Proulx's stories carry the message of hope which is to be found within an intimate sense of place and pilgrim mentality cultivated through the attention to details of landscape and story.

In his work, Lopez focuses on the connections between man or the self and the natural world and on the ways of coming to know a specific place intimately. He demonstrates and explains the process of achieving closeness with a landscape by emphasizing the need to see nature and things consciously, to become aware, or "watchful", in his terms, which underlines the role of literature in inspiring and guiding "awakening", (as Thoreau would say), in its readers. Watchfulness is enhanced by the process of writing. Writing makes both the writers and the readers "intimate and familiar" with a place. The growing sense of a place produces the deepening sense of attachment and an awareness that man belongs to a place and a deeper understanding of nature. Keeping a journal and an account of what a man saw or experienced brings nature closer for the reader, for example. In the interview to Kay Bonetti, Lopez explains that "the sorts of stories that I'm attracted to in a nonfiction way are those that try to bring some of the remote areas closer for the reader by establishing some kind of intimacy with the place, but also by drawing on the work of archaeologists and historians and biologists" (Lopez in an interview with Bonetti 1988, 59). In *Bird Cloud*, in a similar way, Proulx ventures into unknown, harsh, rarely experienced landscapes, describes terrain, flora, fauna, and human inhabitants, and reports to the readers in a detailed mode of storytelling.

Bird Cloud is a piece of land in Wyoming, a property of 640 acres of wetland and prairie, between west of Saratoga, between Elk Mountain and the North Platte River. That piece of land is something that Proulx simply loves and it suits the requirements of her soul. She describes her estate in the following manner:

The landscape was bold. Not only was the property on the North Platte River but the river ran through it, taking an east-west turn for a few miles in its course. The land was a section, 640 acres, a square mile of riparian shrubs and cottonwood, some wetland areas during June high water, sage flats and a lot of weedy overgrazed pasture. On the lower portion, about 120 acres, Jack Creek, an important spawning place for trout, came down from the Sierra Madre, thirty miles distant, and angled through the property to enter the North Platte. [...] Top and bottom the land was seriously overgrazed and neglected, yet the day I first saw it I also saw a small herd of mule deer, pelicans, bald eagles, great blue herons, waterfowl, ravens, scored of bluebirds, a harrier, a kestrel, and, glued to the cliff, thousands of swallows nests. I knew most of Wyoming's wildlife kept to the riparian areas, but this was astonishing. The place was already a diverse wildlife habitat. (Proulx 2011, 46-47).

This passage represents the richness and subtlety of words and the beauty of landscape combined. While language can never capture fully the essence of the ranch land, we fully rely on language for meaning. The landscape was bold and powerful, says Proulx. This description foreshadows our discovery of the beauty and power of nature. One feels calmness and tranquility of the superiority of landscape over man and language and the language which holds together the same landscape. It is Proulx's piece of construct of landscape which is both real and imagined.

The landscape of Wyoming is a place from which she knows and speaks her beliefs. Hope comes from a sense of home-ness she finds in the Centennial house, her first home – log house, and later her estate *Bird Cloud*, which may parallel Lopez's term *querencia*,

an expression which means “a place in which we know exactly who we are. The place from which we speak our deepest beliefs” (Lopez 1990, 39). Hope is bound to a sense of intimacy with the landscape, a sense of belonging. Proulx’s relocation to Wyoming seems to be a personal urge to perceive and experience that landscape and to realize her dream – to build a house with a library big enough tailored according to her desires and needs. The urge comes from what Lopez describes in “Landscape and Narrative” as a notion of “unimpeachable” nature (Lopez 2004: 8). Neither society nor civilization impels her to such a relocation, but her own drives and needs.

Proulx and her children became the owners of the Bird Cloud estate in December 2003, and in July 2004, she records: “Gerald and I signed a contract for the James Gang to build Bird Cloud” (Proulx 2011, 78). She hired the architect Harry Teague who made the first sketch for the house which “showed a long, dark building as lengthy as the old barn I fancied” (Proulx 2011, 55). Then she goes on describing the house:

There was no basement, a good idea as radon gas is a problem in this part of the world. The house was to be built on a slab with an interior ground floor of polished concrete. I had once mentioned to Harry that I was drawn to asymmetry in all things. So I was delighted to see the design was a long and narrow structure, but not a rectangle, incorporating interesting angles in its walls and the front and back entrances. The largest room, forty-eight feet long, was at the west end and destined to become the library. Moving toward the east was the dining-seating area with enormous windows facing the cliff. Then came the compact kitchen with very deep stone counters. A short hallway opened to the fishing room on the north and the front entry to the south and the two-vehicle garage at the end. (Proulx 2011, 55-56).

She decided with Deryl on the phone they would start construction the first Monday in August. Then she describes different phases of building the house. After laying the foundation, the work continued for six weeks.

On the 1st of November the forms came off concrete. [...] On Pearl Harbor Day, it was thirty below zero and clear; the floor package was delivered. [...] Gerald and crew put up walls all through December in fluctuating weather. [...] The framing continued through cold and windy January and every few weeks [...] In mid-February Gerald worked on the roof of the fishing room entryway in twenty-below-zero weather. [...] It was a builder’s nightmare, the owner moving in before the house was finished, but I had no choice. (Proulx 2011, 92, 95, 96, 100, 115).

For Proulx the building of the house is also an expression of the need to make a new start. The process of building the house and settling in reminds a lot of Thoreau’s building the house at Walden Pond. For Thoreau the cabin is built in accordance to the natural seasons, and each phase represents a phase of the narrator’s inner growth. As winter comes, Thoreau withdraws into the house, namely into the self, for contemplation and meditation. Proulx also feels the urge to move from Centennial to Bird Cloud at the end of the year and moves into the new house even before it was finished. Additionally, for her, the house is also an object of art and poetry. She thinks of it as a kind of wooden poem and when it was finished, she knew “it was a poem of landscape, architecture and fine craftsmanship when one of those yellow thunderstorms swept in near sunset with gold light spilling onto the ground and a rainbow” (Proulx 2011, 67-68). The house was a kind of shelter and protection against harsh weather and the wilderness threats:

From the big windows I watched as the cliff went saffron as a candle flame, thunder marched around and hot lightning slammed the cliff. Pods of wind burst against the house with a side dish of chattering rain. In the east the towering bulk of the storm was a sulky purple-blue the shade of new denim, but in the west the sky was opening, showing a tender blue like the lining of an antique Chinese robe. (Proulx 2011, 68).

This almost hyperrealist description of nature and landscape seen through the eyes of the narrator reveal humble relation to place and nature of an individual. Sheltered within a house, the narrator watches nature raging and threatening around. "The hyperrealist representations of place mark Proulx as a postmodern novelist" (Hunt 2009, 6), while her description of landscape reveals a sense of "psychic fragmentation" (Hunt 2009, 6). There are wild bursts of wind and thunder against the house and the cliff juxtaposed to the opening of the sky in the west, "showing a tender blue like the lining of an antique Chinese robe", the calmness of the sky and of tranquility which is yet to come. The comparison of the sky to the tender blue like the Chinese robe point to something oriental, exotic, mysterious, unknown, calm and peaceful among the roaring stormy rain that slams the house and the cliff.

4. CONCLUSION

Proulx's building the house in the West could be read as an illustration of the westward settlements in the American history. The American West has often been perceived more as an idea, or even a myth, than an actual place. The history of the U.S. has been considered "a succession of frontiers that differed in character" (Viehmann 2010, 395) and the development of American democracy has always embodied the spirit of American expansion, the American dream of individual opportunity, freedom and greatness. As such, the idea of the West has been explored in literature, film industry, and art in general. Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" set the foundations to the idea that the West is associated with certain values and that it has a deep significance for the nation. In that sense, Proulx's temporary relocation to the West can be a microcosmic project of what her forefathers did almost centuries ago. Her house, designed as a kind of *bibliothèque*, would symbolically stand for a place of conservancy of knowledge and science on which life should be based and which, besides the rise of the city and the westward movement, was one of the forces that helped create American society.

The focus of Proulx's text is the house project while all other aspects of the book are related to the landscape, Wyoming. The history of the land, the archaeological trips and excavations, dinosaur trackways, the ecological disaster of the largest insect infestation in North America, the descriptions of flora and fauna are related to the landscape; the facts and conclusions are drawn from the land Proulx inhabits. Her memoir is the memoir of place and she, as a shy person, reveals little of herself on the page. The house, which stands out in the Wyoming wilderness and defies its harshness and beauty, is the embodiment of human efforts to subdue the hinterland. The text itself, as human creation, with its decorative sentences and phrases like rare Wyoming wild flowers, springs also from the gorgeous land.

*The place was so beautiful, the great slab of cliff so vivid with birdlife, the plants and weeds so intriguing because unfamiliar, the rare *Penstemon gibbensii* still to be located, the night sky so full of constellations and meteors that even satellites, long-distance jets and the orange horizon glow from Saratoga's 1970s mercury vapor lights could be ignored.* (Proulx 2011, 66).

This passage and even the whole text *Bird Cloud* is Proulx's fascination with landscape and geography, her insistence that human culture must be understood as the achievement of interactions with place. Further, this text shows that, as we consider the issues of literature, culture, land, economies, human products, we must attend to and better understand the issue of place we inhabit.

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OBLAK PTICA ENI PROUL I 'KNJIŽEVNOST NADE'

Rad se bavi dokumentarnom fikcijom Oblak ptica američke spisateljice Eni Proul i istražuje neke od ideja koje je Prulova postavila u svojim romanima i kratkim pričama: osećaj za mesto, dom, istorija arheologije mesta, osećaj (ne)pripadnosti, ili osećaj saživljavanja (conjunction) i otudjenja (disjunction) po terminologiji Slovica. Putovanja i relokacija, istaknute osobine stvaralaštva Proulove, jesu način da se prevaziđe osećaj otudjenja u udaljenim mestima i da se izgradi prisnost sa prirodom kako ističe Bari Lopez. Autor ovog rada dolazi do zaključka da za Prulovu pisanje o prirodi postaje „književnost nade“, koja kod književnih likova i čitalaca razvija „svest“ o mestu življenja.

Ključne reči: *priroda, mesto, dom, književnost nade, Proul*