

LANDSCAPE IN *POSTCARDS*:
CONJUNCTION AND DISJUNCTION IN THE NARRATIVE OF ANNIE
PROULX
Memòria d'Investigació

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1. RESEARCH, IMMERSION AND TRANSREGIONALISM.....	13
1. 'Don't write about what you know': research as a creative principle.....	13
2. Nomadism in Proulx's words: a manual for the professional outsider.....	23
CHAPTER 2. AN ECOCRITICAL READING.....	31
1. Approaching ecocriticism.....	31
2. Improvers and pilgrims.	41
CHAPTER 3. CONJUNCTION, DISJUNCTION AND THE SENSE OF PLACE	57
1. <i>Postcards</i> 1: habitat.....	57
2. <i>Postcards</i> 2: identity.....	77
CHAPTER 4. LANDSCAPE AS A SIGN OF A NEW GENERATION.....	91
CONCLUSION.....	115
REFERENCES.....	125

INTRODUCTION

Their best times were always their explorations into the remnants of the vanishing world. They treasured discovering new country. She thought sometimes that they were seeing the end of the old world.

Annie Proulx, *Fine Just the Way it Is*

After the success of director Ang Lee's motion picture adaptation of her short story "Brokeback Mountain" (1999), Annie Proulx's name and work have attained wide dispersal in both academic and popular circles. Initially her name was virtually synonymous with the notion of breaking with traditional assumptions about the American West. She has described the proliferation of many different Wests, and the destabilisation of the status quo that manifests itself in various ways: focusing on the story of the cowboy hero, women in control of Western stories and mythmaking, homosexuals happily settled on the prairie, and extractionist individualism replaced by communal dreams of an ecosocial utopia. She has also called attention to a kind of nature-minded fiction that so intimately explores ethical drives and philosophical landscapes that it is inviting to examine just how closely this fiction is allied with the nature-writing genre. Her characters are constantly confronted with and subjected to a landscape –often, but not always, rural– that is far removed from traditional myths and assumptions. The relationship between landscape, place and human beings is the matrix from which all her narrative departs.

In view of her success in the form of awards and recognition, it is surprising that Proulx's narratives have received relatively little in the way of scholarly attention. Needless to say, revisions of her works regularly appear in magazines and newspapers for the general public, and her name features in numerous essays and papers, as well as references in a wide variety of articles. And yet Karen L. Rood's

Understanding Annie Proulx (2001) is the only full text devoted to revising her fiction and, within the framework of ecocriticism, a compilation of essays on her work, *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx*, appeared in 2009. In Proulx's fiction, literary regionalism and ecological sensibility are intertwined, with the focus on relationships between environment, humans and home. Proulx stands out as a clear example of David Mazel's conviction that although postmodern phenomena –globalization, internet, the demise of nature– render place obsolete, 'the alliance of regionalism and ecology remains as fruitful as ever.' (Mazel 2003: 136).

Annie Proulx has confided to a number of journalists from different media that all her writing begins with a landscape. 'Place is where it all starts' she stated (Bolick 1997). The start of the writing process involves getting to know a place: its biology, geology, and all the intricacies of ecological interconnection, on which her studying eye temporarily dwells. She accomplishes this through intensive and extensive research. Proulx had built up a solid reputation as a researcher before devoting herself to fiction, at the age of 53. When *Heart Songs* (1988), her first short-story collection was published, she had already written a number of how-to-books in order to make a living, and had held down a variety of jobs. During that time, she perfected her old college habit of researching by analyzing her subject –quite often nature– in detail, thus establishing a solid relationship with it. Chapter 1 of this dissertation is devoted to Proulx's methodology: how her process of research and nomadism shapes her fiction and the effect it has on the narrative process. A few biographical notes will also be included, to illustrate the parallelism between her real and fictional landscapes, and her own alliance with nature. The manner in which Proulx renders her palette of landscapes, the way she blends characters within those landscapes, and her obsessive attention to detail all go back to the manner in which she acquires her knowledge of her subjects. Exploration and inquisitiveness are the starting point of her creative

process, and they echo in her narrative technique. One of the chapters in that thesis corroborates the direct connection she achieves with her subject, namely landscape, in a kind of ‘autobiographical ecological awareness’. In this chapter the analysis will bring into focus personal yet relevant aspects of her writing process, which are closely connected with such issues as belonging, and the changing American landscape.

In ‘Contemporary Regionalism’ (2003) Michael Kowalewski analyzes the position of contemporary writers who confront the “vulgar” or overly dramatic attempt to establish regional distinctiveness that often seems to prompt a response in the opposite direction’ (2003: 11). He cites Annie Proulx and her landscapes as an example of interconnectedness and awareness of place. He draws attention to the regional distinctiveness employed by Proulx and other contemporary authors, not only as a means of confronting false preconceptions about the American landscape, but also to counter conventional regional assumptions. Proulx’s methodology of nomadism and near-immersion –Kowalewski uses the terms ‘transregionalism’ and ‘bioregionalism’ (Kowalewski 2003: 16), which will be examined later–evidences the multi-layered readings of landscape, and brings to the surface the uniqueness that local places have to offer, in the face of a uniformly ‘walmarted’ American landscape. In Chapter 2 attention will be given to significant examples in *The Shipping News* (1993) and *That Old Ace in The Hole* (2000), which illustrate not only the modus operandi she employs in her research, but also how her landscapes (both non-human and domestic), characters and stories have grown out of it. It is Proulx’s very personal way of expressing her respect for a particular geography, place and folk. She is no doubt one of those writers who, in Mark Treddinick’s words, ‘are taking part in the land, listening and being changed’ (Tredinnick 2005: 293).

At a time when the human subject is undergoing a dramatic period in when it comes to interconnectedness with non-human environments, and facing a bleak panorama on the horizon, it may be

worthwhile to scrutinize where we stand, to try to measure the gap between humans and nature, and, to re-evaluate and redefine our compromise. Fiction, though it does not have a monopoly on ecological awareness, would seem to be one of the most effective tools to power such an exercise in self-diagnosis. We are living in 'the age of environmental limits' and our destruction and extermination is only accelerating our journey to apocalypse (Glotfelty 1996: 20). In this light, I feel compelled to explain that my choice of Annie Proulx is not based on blind activism, but rather on compelling attention, as her fiction which centers on compromised nature-minded fiction function as a mirror, in the sense that she is not doctrinal but precisely eye-opening. Proulx explores landscape, human beings and the relations between them, and asks us how we perceive them. An ecocritical perspective would seem highly suitable, as this field of study is closely related to regional perspectives. A literature of place can be studied from both perspectives, but it is often approached in an interdisciplinary manner, as noted by Buell and Heise (2011: 420).

Chapter 2 will establish the theoretical framework of this study, formulating a definition of ecocriticism, and stressing the interdisciplinarity of the field and its connection with regionalism. Defined as the study of the relationship between literature and environment, a short chapter will introduce the rapid expansion of the field, its entrance into the canon of literary criticism, and the way ecocriticism shifted to social equality positions. Although the focus on fiction has been dominant, today the field of environmental studies is strong on nature non-fiction. Cheryll Glotfelty observes that today interdisciplinarity is one of the main features of ecocriticism, due to its non-restrictive nature (Glotfelty 1996: xxiii). In this expanding context, it may be helpful to describe a common motivation or underlying concept that unites all its different approaches and ramifications. Relations between humans and landscape should be envisioned in a context of 'contemporary living and interacting', together with a

constructive attitude towards nature that takes that modernization into account (Heise 2006: 508).

Other points in Chapter 2 that are worth examining include the relationship between literary authors and their environment, the way nature writers approach nature, and how they perceive it in their narratives. In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, Scott Slovic introduces the concepts of conjunction and disjunction to describe the two opposing ways in which humans can approach nature. We are encouraged to aim for conjunction, in order to gain awareness and connection. Ecopsychologist Laura Sewall discusses this connection and warns us about the dangers of dissociation. In her essay *The Skill of Ecological Perception* (1995), Sewall proposes five practices to reawaken our sensory systems, and help us connect with nature: learning to attend a spiritual practice, perceiving the relations, perceptual flexibility, re-perceiving depth, and activating the imaginal self. I will use these practices in my analysis of *Postcards* in order to demonstrate how through Loyal Blood, the protagonist in *Postcards*, illustrates the process of going from conjunction with nature to disjunction, due to an inability to reconnect or reawaken his sensory system.

As noted above, the starting point for this study in theoretical or critical terms is the ecocritical tradition, since the matrix of all her narratives – both short stories and novels – arises from the formation or termination of a relationship between humans and nature. The way they interact with, and are shaped by, landscape is the leitmotif of all her works. Her fiction can be broadly divided into one of two categories: fiction about disjunction and fiction about conjunction. *Postcards* (1992), the novel chosen for this research, falls into the first category. It is Proulx's first novel – 'spacious, after so much cramping' (Showalter 2009: 508)-, out of a total of four published so far. It documents the exodus of a man searching for a way to re-establish an attachment he severed in an instant of violent transgression. Though it may appear as

if the novel fits the matrix of 'crime and punishment', protagonist Loyal Blood's murder of his girlfriend is only the trigger for meditation on a calamity that is wide-ranging in its almost universal appeal.

Mere seconds after it happens, Loyal's crime is relegated to the fringes of perception, and barely acknowledged. At the scene of the crime the focus of the narrative skirts along the edges of Loyal's atrocious misdeed, but dwells melancholically and at length on Loyal's scarring and abrupt alienation from nature. In the immediate aftermath of the crime the entire novel is spelled out. It remains but for those moments of desolate prophecy to come to fruition. And yet, despite what one might expect, the bulk of the novel is far from redundant. In essence it represents a detailed case study of how the disease of disjunction reduces a man once enviously considered the epitome of the American farmer to a vagrant scrounging for leftovers in dumpsters. The rest of the Blood cast, once affixed to the nuclear farm unit, now dispersed, ultimately fail to connect or effectively interpret their web of attachments –I shall be dealing with this term below– with the landscape.

The novel outlines protagonist Loyal Blood's fall from a state of ideal conjunction and at-home-ness into a position of fatal disjunction with the land. *Postcards* allows the scenario to play out in a disconnecting way for its protagonist. In that regard, it could be maintained that the names of the characters –Loyal, Mink, Jewell, Mernelle and Blood– signify character correspondence. It also exposes a critical misalignment between these post-human subjects and their web of attachments, due to the disintegration of the Blood farm, which is triggered by Loyal's flight. Thus plot propulsion hinges on each character's attempt to harmonize his or her web of attachments, and the degree of achievement of resolution is proportionate to the character's success.

In much of Annie Proulx's fiction the conceptual representation of landscapes comprises human populations split along an axis

determined by the roles people assume within those landscapes (Hummelsund-Voie 2007: 41). In *The Land's Wild Music* (2005) Tredinnick identifies these opposing approaches in the writings of Barry Lopez. Tredinnick states that 'what counts is how you come: as a pilgrim or an improver¹, to learn or to manipulate, to surrender or to possess.' (Tredinnick 2005: 76) These contrasting roles –pilgrim or improver– explain the antonymous relationships with landscape. A pilgrim attitude is required to achieve what Scott Slovic calls 'conjunction', a condition of attachment to a landscape (Slovic 1992: 137); an improver attitude will result in disjunction². In Chapter 2, three narratives by Annie Proulx – *The Shipping News*, *That Old Ace in the Hole*, and the short story 'Hitchhiking on a Wheelchair' will be examined, prior to an analysis of pilgrims and improvers in *Postcards*. The concepts of conjunction and disjunction, pilgrim and improver will be used in the analysis of *Postcards* in Chapter 3, where the multi-layered treatment of landscape in the novel *Postcards* will be dealt with as a habitat, as an identity and as a symbol of a new generation.

In the first section of Chapter 3, which refers to the handling of landscape as a habitat, the analysis will bring to light the issue of the disconnection of the Bloods with their web of attachments, and the symbol of the farm as a common node in their individual alignments. Not only do they lose the farm, but they are all left without a sense of place, of belonging, of connectedness to the land. After Loyal's misdeed and subsequent forty-year-long flight, the family farm falls apart, together with the family unit. Proulx documents the decline of 1940s and 1950s dairy farms in the American Northeast, and the gradual but steady imprint on landscape generated by which agribusinesses. During the post-World War II period, old farms were untouched by the new economic impulse that pushed the country forward. It is the beginning

¹ "Improve" therefore refers to the person who selfishly seeks self-improvement, since the landscape is not improved, but rather the opposite.

of the end for the distinctiveness of many local places, like Cream Hill, the fictional small town where the Bloods live. These places surrender to what Kowalewski calls 'the geography of nowhere' (Kowalewski 2003: 12). With Loyal gone, the family fails to read the signs and, one by one, the Bloods lose their connectedness to the landscape. Mink, the father, failing to understand the impact of industrialism and the necessity of electrification –an key issue during this period– is unable to adapt to the changing physical and social landscapes. Mink decides to burn down the farm in order to obtain the insurance money, and is thrown into jail, where he hangs himself in a cell: a tragic ending for a man who cannot adjust to the new times.

During the forty years he is on the run, Loyal never succeeds in finding another home. The landscape he originally inhabited, the one he transformed and shaped according to the demands of the farm, is a symbol of his disjunction with nature. His holding on to the old farm makes him unable to reconnect, and he is incapable of settling down – paradoxically, he never returns and his only connection with it are the postcards he keeps on writing, unaware that everything is long gone. The older he gets, the deeper his disjunction is, and the more he misses the farm, of which he has a clear vision at the moment of his death. The metaphor of the farm serves Proulx as an interconnecting node in each character's web of attachments, and their inevitable failure is made intelligible through their indifference to the landscape. At this level, Proulx evinces a strong disapproval of the transformation of the American landscape, the result of a misreading of the new times and the excesses of the improvers who inhabit it.

In view of the time span, it could be argued that *Postcards* is the reflection of a fifty-year-long relationship between human beings and the American landscape, and the way it has shaped the contemporary American ethos. As we have seen, Proulx does so through the senses and perceptions of Loyal Blood, who fails to decipher its performance. A vast directory of characters appear and disappear: individuals misaligned

with their webs of attachments. They fail to create a partnership with their surroundings, and turn to landscape in a disjunctive way. The next section of Chapter 3 will deal with the issue of landscape as an identity. Here we return to Sewall's concept of the five practices for reconnecting with nature: learning to attend, perceiving relations, perceptual flexibility, re-perceiving depth and the imaginal self. The study will make use of Louis B. Palmer's concept of the post-human subject to analyze how Loyal's perceptions and the fundamental 'avenues' that connect him with the landscape –she uses the term 'ecological awareness' (Sewall 2002: 201)– undergo a degeneration which parallels his physical and mental decline. The significant images, memories, visions, and hopes that he carries along with him, emerge at crucial moments. These are rendered through the 'What I See' interchapters, a significant narrative device which, though not particularly relevant in terms of structure, serves to highlight perceptual issues. They refer directly to Loyal's perception of his surroundings, his desires, the subjective reality that permeates his senses. In Sewall's terminology, Loyal initially senses landscape in a variable and spiritual way, aware of its relations and flexibility (Sewall 2002: 202). Ultimately Loyal will shift from a clear pilgrim mindset to an inevitable, necessary-to-survive improver one. During the forty years that he is on the run, this unconscious process of becoming an improver provokes a disruption.

In keeping with the notion of identification with landscape, this section of Chapter 3 will also explore the set of connections which define the character of Loyal Blood and which are lost along the way. The analysis touches upon the misalignment of his web of cultural, economic, historical, somatic, genetic, and material attachments. Since his departure from the family farm, Loyal's quest for a reactivation of his sense of place is unsuccessful and his disjunction increases. This quest for what in environmental terms might be termed 're-perceiving the familiar' (Buell 1996: 675) is the matrix from which all connections are drawn. Louis B. Palmer describes a post-human model designed to

suggest the idea of an individual who would be part of a larger system to which he needs to be connected (Palmer 2003: 170). This post-human concept mirrors Loyal's displacement, and serves as a case study of his gradual loss of connection and his failure to take responsibility for the land. In my analysis, it will be argued that what dies is a matrix, a series of rich and vital connections that used to define Loyal as a part of a larger system, one which he constantly dreams of regaining. Ironically, Billy, his fiancée, who had always longed for a life away from the farm, and tried to persuade Loyal to leave with her, literally becomes part of the farm landscape. Loyal buries her on a hill overlooking the farm. Billy's body, which was never discovered, remains in Vermont soil, as a metaphor for the misconception and lack of partnership with nature.

After habitat and identity, Chapter 4 approaches landscape as the sad symbol of a new generation, mainly improvers: those who enter nature to exploit, possess, and extract it. *Postcards* reflects the invasion of landscape by economic powers and extractive improvers, which leads to the disappearance of a previously self-sustainable model of landscape: the family-operated dairy farm. Three types of characters reflect this change in the landscape; some endure it, others carry it out. The surviving members of the Blood family –Jewell, Dub and Mernelle – represent the impoverished pilgrims-dwellers forced to leave their land and relocate, with no choice but readjustment. A second group of newcomers who purchase and repossess the land, and then dramatically transform it, are personified in Witkin, a Boston dermatologist who buys part of the family farmland. The third group consists of viciously conscious improver-extractors, typified by the men and women Loyal meets in the course of his wanderings, whose sole aim is to squeeze nature dry.

Proulx refers to law officials and judges, and claims for action and responsibility. In *Postcards*, she stresses not only the disjunction between the new generations of American urbanites and nature, but also on the separation from the land that rural people themselves suffer

under. The lack of opportunities beyond the traditional rural ways of life has sudden and irreversible consequences for those who used to be in conjunction. A vast directory of characters come and go, always at the mercy of Proulx's dooming landscapes. The steady and extensive transformation of both rural and urban America since the 1940s has brought along about alienation, the abuse of the land and the need to take a different direction. It would seem that the mood of the land and the mood of human beings are part of the same matrix, which makes it possible to analyze them in this light.

Proulx's works include numerous examples of violent death, but these are neither a kind of literary divertimento at the expense of black humor, nor a simplistic determinist interpretation. They are a warning to those who choose to disregard landscape precisely in those posthuman terms. In this same section a number of examples will be presented.

A determining factor in my decision to focus on Annie Proulx and her novel *Postcards* was the opportunity I had to meet her personally in her home in Centennial, Wyoming. Our twenty-minute conversation evolved around aspects of art and literature, and ultimately focused on landscape. Her final suggestion, accompanied by a half-smile, was 'Why don't you write about landscape?' It was a message that went further than any scholarly reading: she was clearly pinpointing the most relevant feature of her work. Not only did she offer her encouragement, she also added that she had great regard for eighteenth-century Dutch masters and the way they handled landscape. I realized then how fortunate I was to be able to meet the author on whom I was going to write my thesis. But it was only later that it became clear how significant that encounter would prove. At that point I had only recently decided to focus on Annie Proulx, and was still debating what direction my research would take. After some consideration, I put the work aside for a while. In the meantime, the name of Annie Proulx became associated with Hollywood, when director Ang Lee adapted

'Brokeback Mountain'. It earned her worldwide attention. When I resumed my research, I was fully aware of the weight of landscape in her writings, having verified it through intensive readings of all her works of fiction -at that time four novels and four short-story collections- and decided to go back to the beginning: *Postcards*. Revisiting that work from the perspective of landscape has given new meaning to Proulx's words, which now seem more like a prediction than a suggestion.

CHAPTER 1. RESEARCH, IMMERSION AND TRANSREGIONALISM.

When you live a long way out you make your own fun.

Annie Proulx, *Close Range*

This chapter attempts to highlight the importance of research in Annie Proulx's writing process by mainly –but not exclusively– focusing on a number of relevant interviews where the author expresses her preference for this method of working. Quotes in this section tend to be long for the sake of perspicuity. Attention should also be given to the fact that as a consequence of that research practice, the author has become virtually a nomad or, to use Kowaleski's term, a transregionalist. In this context, the second part of the chapter seeks to set Proulx against the background of contemporary regionalism, in order to outline her literary characterization and explore how connected it is to nature writing, the actual theoretical context of this investigation, which will be fully developed in Chapter Three. According to Mahoney and Katz, regionalism has 'its focus on locating oneself in the space lived in, inhabited, made home, or traveled through. This emphasis is itself rooted in man's fundamental interaction with nature: the land, climate, flora and fauna, and the physical environment.' (Mahoney and Katz 2009: ix). Writing about place means examining nature, human landscapes and the role of humans within them.

1. 'Don't write about what you know': research as a creative principle

It would not be an exaggeration to affirm that everything in Proulx's narrative stems from research. Even though this is a technique

widely used by contemporary authors, in Proulx this *modus operandi* is taken to the extreme. Her research is both intensive and obsessive. This might very well be the definition of her working process. Before publishing *Heart Songs* –a compilation of stories previously published separately in 1988– at the age of fifty-three, she had already built a solid research background. Her habit of researching down to the last detail was acquired in her college years, while she was doing doctoral work in Renaissance economic history, although she never finished her doctoral degree. She has repeatedly explained that during graduate school she was attracted to the French Annales school of history, ‘which pioneered minute examination of the lives of ordinary people through account books, wills, marriage and death records, farming and craft techniques, the development of technologies.’ Annales historians look for the evolution of everyday life in the context of larger social, economic and even geological change rather than focusing on the narrow definition of history as a record of the activities of the alleged great men. Proulx’s statement that she is ‘keenly interested in situations of change, both personal and social’ (Rood, 3: 1996) and her focus on individuals living in periods of major social and economic upheaval – of which *Postcards* is a clear example –verifies the extent to which her academic training has shaped the course of her career as a novelist. In her online autobiography she confirms that ‘all this was invaluable training for novel-writing and it set my approach to fiction forever, the examination of the lives of individuals against the geography and *longue durée* of events, that is, that time and place are major determining factors in human life’, and she has repeatedly declared that she was a historian before she was a writer.

Proulx’s eagerness for research and fascination for detail was initially developed at the beginning of her literary non-fiction career, when she wrote a number of articles on such varied subjects as fishing, apples, cider making, hot peppers, canoeing techniques and syrup making, for magazines such as *Gourmet*, *Horticulture*, *Outdoor Life*,

National Wildlife, Gray's Sporting Journal and Country Journal. She also wrote a number of books on apple cider, growing grapes, dairy foods or fence-building. Rood (2001: 5) argues that all this non-fiction, which Proulx now rejects³, offers the historical perspective that she often brings to her subjects, as we repeatedly find detailed stories of the cider, the dairy, birds, accordion tuning techniques, boat-making, trapping or fence-building. Proulx has always admitted that her academic background has been instrumental in the research that goes into her fiction: 'It became second nature to me to explore how and where things were done', she states, and what is displayed in her literature is the result of 'serious academic hours in libraries and archives and an inborn curiosity about life' (Bolick 1997). Through her obsession for detail we learn about her knowledge of fly-fishing, canoeing, and bird hunting in *Heart Songs* or *Close Range* (2000), for example, while a lot of historical research comes to the surface in *Postcards* and *Accordion Crimes*.

When analyzing her style, many critics praise this wealth of detail, although a few others are critical of this fascination for accuracy. Rood gives the example of how she reflects the changes in cooking over history in her books to refer to her fascination with these important aspects of everyday life as a key element that adds depth to characterization. One cannot imagine anyone writing the detailed account of how an accordion is made on the first page of *Accordion Crimes* without a great deal of background research:

He had cut the grille with a jeweler's saw from a sheet of brass, worked a design of peacocks and olive leaves. The hasps and escutcheons that fastened the bellows frames of the case ends, the brass screws, the zinc reed plate, the delicate axle, the reeds themselves, of steel, and the ages

³ Rood explains that Proulx dismisses those books, even though they are now in demand by collectors, as they came from assignments 'for hire that she wrote to earn money'. It is interesting to mention that Proulx won a Garden Writers of America prize in 1986 (Rood 2001: 5)

Circassian walnut for the case, he had purchased all these. But he had constructed and fashioned the rest: the V-shaped wire springs with their curled eyes that lay under the keys and returned them to position in the wake of stamping fingers, the palette rods. The trenched bellows, the leather valves and gaskets, the skidded kidskin gussets, the palette covers, all of these were from a kid whose throat he has cut, whose hide he had tanned with ash lime, brains and tallow

(*Accordion Crimes* 17)

Research on accordions for *The Shipping News* became a challenge. ‘There were no books on accordions available’, so she turned to oral traditions after not finding much in libraries. Even though research proved hard and long, it was ultimately fruitful and didactic. Graeme Smith insists on this aspect when discussing Proulx’s musicology: ‘In *The Shipping News* she instructs the reader on such matters as thwarts and gunwales⁴. Similarly, in *Accordion Crimes*, she captures her obsessiveness with accordion makers and players in her fastidious descriptions of constructions and tuning technologies’ (Smith, 1998). In his review for *The Adelaide Review* (January, 2004) Kerryn Goldsworthy goes even further when reviewing *That Old Ace in the Hole* by stressing the fact that it is detail from research that eventually reflects the power of the narrative: ‘Proulx is fascinated by the way that the density of material detail can reveal the history and culture of a place – cooking, windmills, music, weather.’

That didactic tone can be found in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, where she realizes how much research Proulx has done on plastic jewelry and related materials:

⁴A ‘thwart’ is a structural piece forming a seat for rowers in a boat and ‘gunwale’ refers to the upper edge of the side of a boat or a ship (from the *New Oxford American Dictionary* 2-0-3, 51.5, 2005-2007: Apple Inc.).

Within specialties there are often subsets of rare specialties, and so it was with Bromo Redpoll and Tam Bapp. Bromo had collected a dozen phenol parasol handles with fancy metal bands. Tam sought out the British urea resin from the 1920s known as Beetleware –the forerunner of melamine. Silicone, polyurethane, epoxy were what they wanted but never would they buy anything for more than a few dollars. A side specialty was Bakelite jewelry from the 1920s.

(That Old Ace in the Hole 19)

How accurate then is this research in terms of literary result? Does it hinder readers? Howard Norman, in his review of *The Shipping News* (*The New York Times Book Review*, April 4, 1993) agrees that Proulx is not ‘showy’ in that sense, although he describes *The Shipping News* as ‘almost an encyclopedia of slang and lore. The way her Newfoundlanders talk, the most factual account seems as high-spirited as gossip over a supper of snow crab, cod cheeks, lobster salad and seal-flipper stew’. The book has not escaped controversy, especially in Newfoundland. In his analysis of *The Shipping News*, Newfoundland scholar Stuart Pierson acknowledges but criticizes her research and the deliberate use of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (DNE):

But the book that one meets on every page is the DNE. Proulx loves words, and especially she loves archaic words with abrupt consonants in them –stokawn, scuddy, taggled, pecked, squiddy, komatik, slindeer. All carefully cleaned from the DNE. But she does this rather mechanically, without taking into account the nature of the DNE, how it was compiled or how it stands in relation to how people speak. It is as though everyone who lives in Killick-Claw has all the entries in the DNE ready to hand.

(Pierson 1995)

He concludes by describing the book as ‘a musky portrayal of Newfoundland’. It is interesting to note that the Dictionary of Newfoundland English became Proulx’s night-table reading during the whole process of writing the novel, as a key part of her methodology (Varvogli 2002: 12).

Proulx expounds this methodology as a part of a standard operating procedure that she seems to replicate with each of her novels. As she relates in *The Missouri Review* ‘I spend a year or two on research and I begin with the place and what happened there *before* I fill notebooks with drawings and descriptions of rocks, water, people, names. I study photographs. From place come the characters, the way things happen, the story itself. For the sake of architecture, of balance, I write the ending first and then go to the beginning’ (Morris 2000). In the same interview she admits that she devotes long periods of time to it, and confesses that her approach to research is ‘my main pleasure. Since geography and climate are intensely interesting to me, much time goes into the close examination of specific reasons’. Later, she supplies an endless list of sources where she finds that information:

“I read manuals of work and repair, books of manners, dictionaries of slang, city directories, lists of occupational titles, geology, regional weather, botanists” plant guides, local histories, newspapers. I visit graveyards, collapsing cotton gins, photograph barns and houses, roadways. I listen to ordinary people speaking to one another in bars, stores, Laundromats. I read bulletin boards, scraps of paper I pick up from the ground. I paint landscapes because staring very hard at a place for twenty to thirty minutes and putting it on paper burns detail into the mind as no amount of scribbling can do.”

(Morris 2000)

The final stage of Proulx's 'established obsessive researched method of working' (Edemariam, 2004) consists of squeezing the vast material accumulated. For the most part, the numerous interviews, painted landscapes, lists of names from phonebooks and the large amount of photographs result in a sentence or short paragraph. Sometimes this amount of research still proves insufficient for her purposes, as in the case of *That Old Ace in the Hole*, for which she was carrying out a study of windmills. She was trying to characterize a windmill repairman as the protagonist, and she would rather give a story a different twist than venture to write about something of which she does not have a proficient knowledge. The following quote shows her desire to acquire the deepest possible knowledge of her subject: 'I intended the story to revolve about a windmill repairman, but was unable to gain the expertise in the craft needed to create a convincing character. So the windmill man, Ace Crouch, though central to the story, is not the major protagonist.' (Mudge 2002) In this particular case she admits to a case of overindulging: "Yes, I like research. For this book I did too much, really, and have boxes and boxes of material I could not use." These boxes are undoubtedly heaped up together on her cherished 'project shelves' (Steinberg 1996), waiting to be carefully and accurately used in a story or narrative still to come.

Language is another distinguishable element in Annie Proulx's research, since the representation of the regional and local speech is one of the main features of her prose. She often connects geography with language, through study and observation. She carries it out as a very conscious action that has become another act in the libretto of the methodology just described.

As said before, when immersed in the writing of *The Shipping News*, Proulx virtually slept next to the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* during the time she was writing the novel. She makes use of

reference books as well as telephone directories, although her most powerful tool is perhaps her hearing and her habit of making herself unnoticed. It is something that she has learned and improved throughout the years of research. "The attention to local patois and regional turns of phrase is second nature at this point. When I hear a vigorous and lively phrase I write it down or try very hard to remember it. I do keep notebooks of phrases and expressions. When I'm working on the text of the novel, I go through these lists and try and incorporate words and phrases one might hear" (Mudge 2002). This is how she fine-tunes the language to each area. *The Shipping News* is soaked in Newfoundland English, just as Wyoming English is prevalent in *Close Range* and the Texas drawl in *That Old Ace in the Hole*. The range is no less than splendid in *Accordion Crimes*, an encyclopedia of immigrant English dialect variations. Proulx transcribes the vernacular directly, keeping any grammatical errors for the purpose of characterization.

Language research goes much further than the study and direct transcription of the regional speech. The use of the different levels of language is another technique at which Proulx is adept. In *The Shipping News*, for example, she makes use of newspaper articles, commercial letters, traditional folk songs and dialogues on boat building or children's vocabulary. This handgrip on various linguistic levels appears in *Postcards* at the beginning of each chapter. The opening postcards mirror not just the semantic, but also the phonological skills of the people who write them, thus creating a chronological social picture: the postcards from protagonist Loyal to his family are full of grammatical mistakes and his handwriting is nearly unintelligible, whereas the ones from companies are neatly and correctly typewritten, and family postcards are familiar in tone.

The use of non-linguistic elements is another feature that comes directly from research and has an immediate influence on the formal aspects of the narrative, either as a characterization device, a means of filling in missing parts in the story, or as relevant elements in the

structure. They appear notably in her first three novels – although not in *That Old Ace in the Hole* – and they are placed at the beginning of each chapter or section, serving as an unmistakable narrative ingredient. They have been carefully chosen, studied and analyzed. The chapters in *Postcards* open with a print of the back of a card written by characters that do not always appear in the main story. They help the reader help to fill in the blanks. Proulx's inspiration for these postcards was a collection of mug shots of prisoners, printed for the Vermont penitentiary. Research here proved as relevant as to provide the novel's title, as it refers to a structurally relevant constituent as well as a metaphoric, narrative and symbolic one. The chapters in *The Shipping News* are launched by printed knots with their name and explanation, taken directly from *The Ashley Book of Knots*, *The Mariner's Dictionary*, and *Quipus and Witches' Knots*. Apart from narrating a part of the story, they also 'knot' it, and tie it together. There are other knots, smaller and without description, that link the different parts within each chapter. In the same way, the eight sections of *Accordion Crimes* are introduced by a print of an accordion, together with its name, and the evolution of the instrument throughout the whole 20th century.

Proulx's extensive acknowledgements at the beginning of her books reveal the relationship between each of her works and the type of research carried out –scope, length, location– and directly invite the reader to examine and question the investigative process that the writer has carried out in the pursuit of her subject matter. These long lists of greetings and recognitions also allow him see the exact junction where knowledge meets imagination and creativity in the literature of Annie Proulx. According to Alike Varvogli, writing these endless lists of acknowledgments is a practice more associated with academic and other non-fictional works, even though some writers do thank editors, institutions or family members (Varvogli 13: 2002), something that might very well have its origin in her academic background. The list of resources is often overwhelming. In *Postcards*, for instance, Proulx

expresses gratitude to librarians in Wyoming and New Hampshire. In *The Shipping News* there is a mention to the Coast Guard Search and Rescue Unit, a member from the Horticultural Society Library who ‘confirmed some obscure horticultural references’ (*The Shipping News, Acknowledgements*), as well as fishermen, loggers, and people she met and talked to in Newfoundland. The list is even longer in *Accordion Crimes*, where the four-page acknowledgments include musicians, scholars, librarians, bookstores, accordion makers, storytellers, hotel clerks and waiters. In *That Old Ace in the Hole*, after a three-page list of acknowledgements –ranchers, managers, publishers, workers, mothers and daughters, haymakers, wardens, artists and cockfight participants– she humorously closes with ‘that about does it’ (Proulx 2002: xii). Those pages not only testify to the extensive research carried out, which she describes as ‘pleasurable finds’, but also explain the road she has taken in fiction writing as opposed to the write-about-what-you-know approach. She finds this ‘a constipated, navel-picking approach to the world that does not encourage growth of the imagination. Use your imagination. That’s all writers have got. In a very awful way, this demand that you write about your own experience is to ask you to smother what’s genuinely interesting about you and your mind and how it works”, as she told Katie Bolick in an interview for *The Atlantic Online* (November 12, 1997). Proulx insists on research as one of the necessary tools in composing literature, and she is contemptuous of “this very unpleasant trend that one should only write about one’s own personal experience. That’s the worst piece of advice ever given to students. If only people would write about what intrigues them, what they *don’t* know, would do a little research, would become questioning as well as observant. That’s the pleasure in writing” (Steinberg 1996). This is precisely the genesis of her work and the essence of her methodology.

2. Nomadism in Proulx's words: a manual for the 'professional outsider'.

As noted in the previous section, instead of writing about what she already knows, Proulx prefers to go somewhere new and write about what she finds. This is precisely the connection between research and nomadism, and this might be the right moment to explore that link, not in order to provide a theoretical framework for this investigation, but to connect her compulsion for research with the habit of travelling back and forth to the places she writes about, and to situate her in a regionalist perspective.

Regional American writers have always written about what they know best, their environment. There are countless examples from the past: Faulkner's Lafayette County, Twain's Mississippi, and Steinbeck's Salinas, California are among the most famed. Twain claimed that the writer should only write about the place he was from (Wonham 1996: 14) as only the 'native writer' was able to offer a rigorous description of his intimate relationship with his country, soul, speech or thought. Literary creativity, according to Twain, depends on the subconscious accumulation of the local knowledge: the author is more competent when observing his own people. In *What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us* (1899) he referred to it with the term 'absorption': 'years and years of unconscious absorption; years and years of intercourse with the life concerned; of living it, indeed; sharing personally in its shames and prides, its joys and griefs, its loves and hates' (Twain quoted in Wonham, 1996: 13). Wonham argues that Twain himself did not exactly commit to his theory, as he successfully published travel books and frequently used foreign settings in his fiction. This traditional theoretical compromise with a local perspective defines initial American regionalism in its own context, but it certainly does not seem to explain the road taken by myriad authors in the contemporary literary mainstream, who write about specific places without committing to any

of them. Sven Birkerts explains how in the second half of the 20th century, American society shifted from cities to the outskirts and conversely, just like writers, and this shift is clearly reflected in both their lives and their works. Birkerts argues that the necessary revision of this literary tradition is due to the 'ubiquity and instantaneousness of electronic communications' (Birkerts 1997: 20), which has made not only people, but also writers multiregional nomads.

Very few American writers today spend their life in one place, and not being part of a community is the standard status. Richard Ford, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Paul Auster, Richard Powers and Annie Proulx are prominent and permanent examples. Among these, Birkerts distinguishes two opposite trends. One group of writers portrays a homogenous image of America, obliterating particularity and geographic rootedness, a group which would include postmodern writers Don DeLillo, Paul Auster and David Foster Wallace. They generally illustrate an America with a dissolute 'immediacy of place' and in which places no longer seem unique, as large areas have come to feel identical. This out-of-homeness homogeneity is best depicted in Midwest towns, suburban areas or parking lots that could very well be anywhere in America. It is a common feature that Kowalewski calls 'postmodern Planet Reebok world of convenience', also described as 'the geography of nowhere' (Kowalewski 2003: 8, 12). Ray Suarez gives the striking example of a person who has been kidnapped but not blindfolded: if he escaped, he could tell the police very little about the surroundings precisely because of this homogeneity (Suarez in Kowalewski 2003: 12). It seems Americans have grown numb to the uniqueness of both rural and urban landscapes, while communities have become 'commodities to be purchased rather than entities to be created through collective effort' (Kowalewski 2003: 12), with look-alike suburbs and corporate superstores that are equally present in both American life and fiction. Annie Proulx clearly belongs to a different group of writers, who are fascinated by the uniqueness of a place. She

has made of her nomadism a *modus operandi* and the physical point of departure for her fiction. As discussed in the previous section, her research is closely allied to her nomadism or transregionalism. This contemporary type of regional author focuses on more than one region or area, and the concept does not exclude authors who write about urban areas, such as Ivan Doig, Louise Erdrich, Mary Oliver or nature writer Wendell Berry. Kowalewski underlines the common interest among regionalist writers in ‘capturing the texture of contemporary existence’ (Kowalewski 2003: 13), which would make it difficult for an author not to address aspects of urban life.

In this light, Annie Proulx conforms to the type of regionalist writers who offer a response to traditional or ‘vulgar’ distinctiveness, that is, assumptions, preconceptions, myths and overdone stereotypes on the landscape –often, but not always the American West– by creating ‘ne’er-do-well anti heroes’ who are unlikely to appear in brochures from the Wyoming Visitors’ Bureau (Kowalewski 2003: 11). She makes this distinction very clear when recounting her travels to the Texas Panhandle, while doing research for *That Old Ace in the Hole*:

“For years I had been driving through the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, and always found panhandle places interesting, especially the northeast corner of the Texas handle with its long, long views, windmills, abandoned houses, acres of antique farm machinery, shady groves of trees and nodding pump jacks. But other people I encountered, particularly Texans, said ‘The panhandle? God I just drive through there as fast as I can,’ in dismissive tones. Of course this made me more interested in panhandles, and I finally decided to write a novel set in the Oklahoma and Texas handles.”

(Mudge 2002)

Not every critic and reviewer seems to get the point when confronted with a different perspective of the American landscape. In his review of *Bad Dirt* Terry Rafferty states that ‘she has every right to come down from the high country and see what Wyoming looks like from a stool at Pee Wee’s’ (*The New York Times*, December 5, 2004). And he adds: ‘Proulx appears never to have brooded over the mythic West and its passing –the lives she evoked so eloquently in “Close Range” just seemed hard and sad on their own terms, with no suggestion that their rigors might once been nobler.’ Rafferty clearly misreads Proulx’s dismissal of the rancid regionalism that reclines on a melancholy for a landscape that never existed, which is the old preconceived myth about the American West. In her review of Richard Avedon’s photographic essay *In the American West* (2005), Proulx speaks from the critics’ corner of the ring, to vehemently defending Avedon’s work against some of those traditionally-minded Western residents who did not like the series, due to their predetermined images and ideas on the American Western landscape: ‘These touchy people did not see the stern beauty in the portraits. They did see the dirt and the unsmiling faces. Avedon’s work was called vicious, sick, sensational, cruel, by people who did not understand anything beyond photography than that it was representational. They did not get it that they were seeing Avedon’s observations rather than likenesses, art rather than tourism photos’ (Proulx 2005). She knows the subjects very well and has explained before that ‘most of the people here are those who do the worst and hardest work, the common labouring hands of the country. They are as they came from work, encrusted with the detritus of their jobs. We see a menu-card of ages and shapes, the subjects’ scars, lank, greasy hair, tattoos, fluffy girlie hair. Many are scraped and scratched, one-armed and mangled, if not by job-related accidents, then by tough lives in tough places’ (Proulx 2005).

Annie Proulx has travelled extensively inside and outside the United States –Vermont, the Middle East, Newfoundland, the Texas

Panhandle or Wyoming, in addition to Europe- and has attempted to filter the singularity and the concept of awareness and sense of place of different communities in her stories. In a 1999 interview with Ellen Kanner, Proulx described herself as a 'professional outsider' to explain some of the intricacies of her writing method, while maintaining that writers should not write about what they know, but experience life before they commence to write, which in my view is her idea of what a writer should be: a transregionalist, a nomad, a wide-open-eyed itinerant. Richard Lacayo singles Proulx out as a different type of nomad: 'Not content to be confined in one place, she's that odd literary bird, an itinerant regionalist, a writer who moves from one locale to another but in each setting nests until she makes it her own" (Lacayo in *Time*, January 20, 2003), and compares her to James Michener in terms of predisposed mobility. At an evening reading in 1999, she was asked whether she moved to the any of the numerous communities that she wrote about in *Accordion Crimes*, her answer was clear: "Why would I have to do that? No I didn't. It's enough to visit and use your eyes and ears, to observe very sharply" (transcribed by Kerry Morris, *Writers Online*, Vo. 5 no. 1, March 17th, 1999).

Her trips to Newfoundland prior to *The Shipping News* are another relevant example of her itinerancy as a part of her research. Sara Rimer interviewed Proulx in her Vermont home in 1994 for *The New York Times* explains how Proulx travelled to Newfoundland at least nine times, 'camping or bunking in bed and breakfasts. She hung out in kitchens and boatyards, listening and getting a feel for the place' where 'meeting people was as easy as breathing, and she never felt shy about hanging around'. Another part of being a professional outsider is, in her own words, that she is 'at an age where I can be invisible. Nobody notices older women. It's assumed that they're just there" (*The New York Times*, June 23, 1994). This habit of not being seen is something that she has a liking for:

“This is great, this is great! Especially when your main desire in life is to find out things and overhear. I can sit in a diner or a cruddy little restaurant halfway across the country, and there will be people in the booth next to me, and because I’m a woman of a certain age they’ll say anything as if no one were there. People will say absolutely outrageous, incredible things. I once overheard people talking about killing someone.”

(Rimer 1994)

To research *Postcards*, she went back and forth across America, stopping in all the states where the protagonist worked or stayed. She told Sybil Steinberg “that was my road book” of invisible eavesdropping, and it has also proved useful when travelling for research.

Itinerancy surprises her at times, and in unexpected ways. It might suggest new turns in the story or help to complete it. While she was travelling across Wyoming and researching the short-story collection *Bad Dirt* – attempting to illustrate attitudes, behaviors, and character types, she decided to write a story about homophobia, so she included ‘Brokeback Mountain’ in the collection. She figured out that the best way to do it would be

“through telling the stories of two men who loved each other but were themselves so infected with homophobia that nothing could ever happen. Then, too, I’d been going to a lot of ranches and there’s always, at a ranch, some old guy, who stands back, keeps to himself, very quiet, very competent, never married, always alone, always watching the younger guys, not in a lascivious or lustful way, but just watching them. After I’d seen my tenth old guy at the back of the corral I began to wonder what it must have been like for a ranch kid who grew up in this kind of world who was gay.”

(Morris 2000)

This professional outsider is permanently on the road. She obviously has a home, which is where she writes once she has researched and travelled. She will go back and forth as many times as needed. Once the story is finished she will not go back to the places she has written about. She does not get involved in the communities she writes about nor does she set roots. Vermont first and now Wyoming are her two literary hideouts, the two places she might call home:

“I do not become involved in the communities I’m writing about. I look. I watch. I invent. I listen. But I do not become part of that community. I can never be part of that community. I move on to the next thing. I’m literally rootless and rolling on. I have no permanent place that’s mine, many writers do but I am not one of them, and I am a professional outsider. It’s that simple. So there are no ceremonies and no tears of regret; there’s always another place, and that’s where my heart is.”

(Morris 2000)

CHAPTER 2. AN ECOCRITICAL READING

He flushed the toilet thirty times a day just to see the water cascade.

Annie Proulx, *Accordion Crimes*

In this chapter I will establish the theoretical framework of my thesis, namely ecocriticism, as defined in the introduction. The nature-minded fiction of Annie Proulx, which has still not received a great deal of attention from scholars -essays, reviews-, is commonly studied within the framework of the literature of the American West, a discipline of American Literature which is closely allied to the study of literature or of the environment. It would not be realistic to study Annie Proulx's fiction from an approach that remains distant from the literature of place, due to her active engagement with and perception of landscapes - research, habitat, and the clear wake-up call which her work carries over. Very close to non-fiction nature writers such as Barry Lopez, you could say that in her fiction she puts into practice what environmental scholars call for: attention, awareness, and action.

1. Approaching ecocriticism

Ecocriticism entered the theoretical canon quite recently and, according to Ursula K. Heise, its rapid expansion is one of its most striking features. It could be broadly described as the study of the literature of the environment, although this definition confines its scope and future development. Its branching into other disciplines and constant redefinitions make it an ever-changing field, just like the landscape it gives attention to, and the ethical, and this expansion has blurred any

line between human and non-human nature (Johnson 2009: 7). Cheryl Glotfelty defines it as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies' (Glotfelty 1996: xviii). In that same year, Lawrence Buell published *The Environmental Imagination*, in which he defines "'ecocriticism' as "[a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell 1996: 430). There is an almost inevitable uncertainty about what the term actually covers: Buell argues that 'if one thinks of it [...] as a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions, then the neologism becomes a useful omnibus term for subsuming a large and growing scholarly field.' (1996: 430). According to Simon C. Estok, Buell's definition is valid, as it continues both in the increasingly interdisciplinary tradition of inclusiveness and the making of connections, while maintaining an ethical stand for effecting change (Estok 2005: 204).

Although the focus on fiction has been dominant right from its emergence in the 1990s, Murphy reminds us that 'ecocriticism can be employed in studying any literary work insofar as that work reveals or reflects something about nature and humanity's place in, with, or against it' (Murphy in Werner 2010: 23). Thus environmental studies address literary fiction, but also the undervalued genre of nature

writing, a form of nature-oriented non-fiction. Within the framework of American literature, this tradition runs from Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, John Muir, Mary Austin, Rachel Carson to Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams and Barry Lopez, among many others. As Glotfelty celebrates, 'nature writing boasts a rich past, a vibrant present and a promising future, and ecocritics draw from any number of existing critical theories –psychoanalytical, feminist, Bakhtinian, deconstructive– in the interests of understanding and promoting this body of literature.' (Glotfelty 1996: xxiii) The term 'ecocriticism' was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Here he defined the word as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature", a definition concerned within the science of ecology and, in today's light, more restrictive than the approaches and relations of literature and physical world carried out today, which necessarily include a focus on the cultural dimensions of humans' relationship to the environment (Johnson 2009: 8). In Kent Ryden's words, 'ecocritical stance reconnects literary study to both the processes and the problems inherent in living on this heavily burdened planet, focusing our attention anew on the ground beneath our feet, on our complex relationship to that ground, and on the implications of our behavior toward that ground'.

The new critical field originated during the 1980s, with projects and articles that focused on the links between literature and the environment, while 1992 saw the founding of the ASLE –the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. Journals and associations –such as ISLE, and EASLCE– followed and multiplied rapidly, together with the publication of groundbreaking texts and

anthologies: Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Kate Soper's *What is Nature?* (1995), Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), and specific journal issues (*Ecology; Ecocriticism*). This first wave of scholarship favored the identification of environment with nature, and emphasized nature preservation and human attachment to place, i.e., the ethics and aesthetics of attachment to place on a local or regional scale. This ecocentric commitment to preservationist environmentalism emphasized place-attachment at a local or bioregional level, prioritizing the self-nature relation (Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011: 419). Heise points out the increasing urgency of environmental problems when referring to the apparent belatedness of the irruption of ecocriticism. Most relevant social movements of the 1960s and 1970s had a significant and lasting effect on literary criticism long before environmentalism made itself felt. She argues that the reason for this holdup resides in the development of literary theory between the late sixties and the early nineties. It was in the context of an expanding matrix of coexisting projects, at a time when no dominant framework ruled the field of literary criticism, that ecocriticism found its place, amongst a diversity of political and cross-disciplinary influences.

In the decade that followed, the field of environmental criticism shifted its focus to sociocentric positions. The second wave of scholarship entered the realm of environmental justice (Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011: 419). These texts showed an interest in literatures related to urban landscapes and industrialization, and focused on movements that address the unequal distribution of the environmental benefits and access to natural resources. Heise describes the shift from deep ecology – the evaluation of rural and untouched wild spaces, sense of place, exurban areas, and local knowledge – to social ecology, which attempts ‘to value nature primarily in its human uses’, with affinities with political philosophies, from anarchism to feminism (Heise 2006: 507). At the same time, ecocritics are turning their attention to other

genres besides nature writing, such as the visual arts, music, cinema, and such forms of expression as reports from NGOs and legislative documents. Even the field of environmental rhetoric studies came to the fore after the publication of Killingsworth and Palmer's *Ecospeak* in 1990, a rhetorical analysis of scholarly conventions across the disciplines, from science to the humanities. Ecocritical concerns have ceased to be the assumed monopoly of the white Anglo-Saxon, and now extend to a number of literatures, ranging from Native American to African-American, post-colonial, feminist or posthumanist literatures, thus broadening the canon.

Today, in the context of its numerous aspects, subdisciplines and ramifications, ecocriticism is not an easy field to summarize. It might be a more realistic endeavor to describe a common motivation or underlying concept that unites them all. What is then the shared node that holds together the matrix of environmental studies? A recurrent concept in all fields of criticism of place is a common awareness of the multiple diseases that afflict the planet today. Glotfelty identifies it as 'the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are finally there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse.' (Glotfelty 1996: xx). Lynn White Jr. refers to an 'orthodox Christian arrogance and dominating attitude towards nature.' (White 1977: 3) This common concern is ample in its definition and universally understood as a warning standpoint.

This is precisely the realm where the critique of modernity exerted by ecocriticism lies, which makes it part of the problem. According to Heise, ecocriticism attempts to go beyond the conceptual dichotomies that Modernity, the Enlightenment, and science were thought to have imposed on Western culture – 'the separation of subject and object, body and environment, nature and culture'– and sought

therefore 'to define the human subject not so much in relation to the human others that subjecthood had traditionally excluded as in relation to the nonhuman world.' (Heise 2006: 507) Ecocriticism also aims this criticism of modernity at its assumption of knowing the world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploiting it economically, and thereby ultimately to create a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually labeled "progress". Heise nearly rephrases Glotfelty when she complains that 'this domination strips nature of any value than as a material resource and commodity and leads to a gradual destruction that may in the end deprive humanity of its basis of subsistence.' She also agrees that such command deprives human existence of the meaning it had acquired from living in and with nature, and uproots and alienates individuals and communities (Heise 2006: 506). It is obvious that modernity should at least give it a thought. Ecocritical scholarship in general envisions nature today not as an opposite or an alternative but as entwined with and indivisible from contemporary living and interacting, not just in the conceptual discourse but 'in the material shape in which we experiment it today', and the aim to reach an authentic relation is a consequence of modernization (Heise 2006: 508).

Even though it would mean opening another door in the context of this project, it is worth mentioning the historically controversial and long-discussed yet undeniable set of close connections between humanities and sciences and, in this particular case, ecology and ecocriticism. It is pertinent to call to mind what biologist Daniel B. Botkin in *Discordant Harmonies* (1990) brought to our attention as a crucial feature of landscape that only science can account for: the ever-changing aspect of it. Ecosystems, with their ability to self-balance after human intervention, are not a still life or a tourist postcard, but are in a constant process of change; they are dynamic not static, and accepting these natural changes is the only way to solve environmental problems. Even though science is often viewed as a 'root cause for environmental

deterioration' it is also true that 'environmental politics and their own insights depend on science', as Heise points out (Heise 2006: 511). Glen A. Love highlights the unique ability of ecocriticism to benefit from 'interdisciplinary crossovers with the sciences, and to avoid the two-culture conflicts of the past.' Furthermore, and in consensus with Glotfelty, he argues that it promotes interdisciplinarity –with science in particular– while it also involves interrelationships and ecological awareness, and enhances and expands our sense of interrelationships (Love 1999: 561). This is why most critics and theorists adopt a dialectic perspective in their analysis of the relation between culture and the sciences, as several authors –Buell, Mazel, Heise, Glotfelty, Thornber– attest to.

The relationship between literary authors and their environment is a subject of consideration in ecocriticism. The field draws attention to the environmental conditions of an author's life. Although this seems patent among non-fiction nature writers, it is also the case for fiction authors. Ecocriticism analyzes the diverse linkages of place-writers and how they shape the imagination. In the case of this project, chapter two focuses on Annie Proulx's relationship with place and its influence on the imagination. How relevant is the way a writer 'feels' landscape? Scott Slovic claims that instead of the traditional and careful attentiveness to the non-human that we see in nature writing, emphasis should be put on "inwardness". As Glotfelty observes, Slovic claims that the nature writers most often look inside. Following Wordsworth devotion to the English Lake Country and Thoreau's attachment to Walden Woods –his 'in wildness is the preservation of the world' is considered a touchstone in ecocriticism– nature writers such as Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez turn to nature in order to 'induce elevated states of consciousness within themselves, and in their accounts of the phenomenon of awareness they are as much literary psychologists as they are natural historians.' (Glotfelty 1996: xxxii) In his view, writers should look at nature writing

as a means of examining their own psychology. In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, one of the main texts I will use conceptually in the course of this research, Scott Slovic suggests that much nature writing can be seen as ‘a kind of private murmuring in pursuit of the intensification and verification of experience’ (Slovic 1992: 172). Nature writing is more about the experience of nature than about nature. This study of representative authors of nature writing –Thoreau, Berry, Abbey, Lopez – is more about perception than about experience itself. This awareness tool may help readers to think through complex and uncertain situations with practical examples and to shy away from mere theoretical indoctrination. It draws attention to how we understand the non-human world. It is more a psychological approach, connected to the senses, rather than a moral one: awareness, consciousness and understanding. This approach has been criticized by pragmatic ecocriticism, as it does not go so far as to make decisions and take action (Werner 2010: 46). Slovic studies how some authors visualize the world as exterior and interior landscapes, and examines the influence of the exterior landscapes on interior ones. Ultimately, he suggests that nature writing is in fact the mind studying itself in its responses to nature. This stress on proprioception, referred to by Barry Lopez and indirectly by ecopsychology –Sewall, Roszak – is the key to gaining attentiveness and ultimately intimacy (about which more later on). Estrangement from nature is mental illness; Slovic refers to the syndrome “disjunction” and its antonym “conjunction”. These two concepts will be analyzed and fully developed in the following section.

Another text that in my opinion deserves careful consideration and is closely connected to the concept of awareness just alluded to, is Laura Sewall’s ‘The Skill of Ecological Perception’ (1995), in which she illustrates how perception can contribute to ecological awareness. She describes how our senses are the fundamental paths of connection between ourselves and the world, and argues that the deadening of our senses is at the core of the environmental crisis. Sewall presents five

perceptual practices that will help us to ‘come to our senses’ and to overcome the ‘collective myopia’ she refers to when quoting David Abram: ‘The ecological crisis may be the result of a recent and collective perceptual disorder in our species, a unique form of myopia which it now forces us to correct.’ (Sewall 1995: 202) Sewall introduces the concept of the ecological self as opposed to the traditional concept of identity in which ‘inner and outer worlds become an arbitrary distinction’. She argues that the ecological self experiences a ‘permeability and fluidity of boundaries [...] with the whole of the non-human world’ (203) and suggests intentional practice to carry out reconnection –Slovic’s “conjunction”– and achieve ecological perception. She defines it as ‘the perception of dynamic relationships’ with the external world, both human and non-human (204). She suggests the following exercises:

There are five perceptual practices that I have identified as both modifiable by experience and directly relevant for perceiving our ecological conditions. These practices include (1) learning to attend, or to be mindful, within the visual domain; (2) learning to perceive relationships, context, and interfaces; (3) developing perceptual flexibility across spatial and temporal scales; (4) learning to re-perceive depth, and (5) the intentional use of imagination.

(Sewall 1995: 204)

Proulx refers directly to these practices directly when addressing such issues as the disconnect between humans and characters, when confronted with the lack of conjunction with nature. She refers to the role of literature in that sense: ‘The novel should take us, as readers, to a vantage point from which we can confront our human condition, where we can glimpse something of what we are. A novel should somehow enlarge our capacity to see ourselves as living entities in the jammed

and complex contemporary world' (Morris 2000). *Postcards* analyzes Sewall's conception of reconnecting with landscape through these practices is directly related to Louis B. Palmer's idea of the posthuman subject, which is often defined as a node set in a web of attachments (Palmer 2002: 167). Ecocritical thought would consider it ecosystemically immersed: affixed to and defined by both the human and non-human environment surrounding it. In 'Expanding the Subject in Ecocriticism', Palmer analyses a model of subject 'connected and articulated to a system that both reflects and modifies it, plugged into flows of information from a variety of sources, environmental, bodily, elsewhere.' The point here is the author's focus on individuals as a part of a larger system in which they share responsibility. 'We can no longer keep refuge in our separation, our distance, our objectivity, our individuality' (172). These are the ideal conditions to achieve conjunction, what Sewall calls 'communion' (Sewall 1995: 214).

These concepts and arguments –connection with and disconnection from nature, conjunction and disjunction, and the importance of perception in achieving ecological awareness – will be examined in the light of *Postcards*, which will show that the awareness statement Proulx conveys through fiction is not only identical to those made by these theorists, but also analogous to the ideas of fellow nature writers such as Barry Lopez, Proulx's personal friend for whom she wrote a review on the back cover of *Light Action in the Caribbean*: "this is a collection of subtle and mysterious stories, maps of an animistic world where travellers move beyond the reality of the senses toward spiritual recognition. The reader cannot leave Lopez's fictional territory unchanged." (Proulx 2000)

2. Improvers and pilgrims

Chapter One evidences how Annie Proulx has repeatedly maintained that all her writing starts with a landscape, and that she begins the writing process by getting to know a place, its biology and geology, all the intricacies of ecological interconnection on which her studying eye temporarily settles. The relationship between humans and nature is the matrix out of which a Proulx story arises. It can be argued that the formation or termination of that relationship becomes the focal point of the narrative. She stands at the intersection between regionalism – relevance of place– and nature writing –awareness of landscape. In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* Scott Slovic summarizes the aim of Barry Lopez’s nature writing as follows: “To overcome the absurdity –the meaninglessness and destructiveness– of man’s estrangement from the natural world” (Slovic 1992: 137). Slovic describes the condition “disjunction” as a severance of human from land, and its opposite “conjunction” as a state of belonging within landscape, two ‘modern variations of Thoreau’s two opposing modes of response to nature.’ (Slovic 1992: 6)

Following this idea, Proulx’s fiction can be roughly divided into one of two categories, namely fiction about disjunction or fiction about conjunction. According to Hummelsund-Voie, in her novels the conceptual topography of her landscapes contains human populations split along an axis determined by the roles people assume within landscape (Hummelsund-Voie 2007: 40). The split in Proulx’s novels is similar to the opposite approaches to landscape that Mark Tredinnick distinguishes in the literature of Barry Lopez. In “The Edge of the Trees” Tredinnick writes: “What counts is how you come: as a pilgrim or an improver, to learn or to manipulate, to surrender or to possess.” (Tredinnick 2005: 76) Improvers use, take advantage of and abuse the land, whereas pilgrims observe it and merge with it. These two very different mentalities signify different relationships with landscape. The

choice of role is imperative. A pilgrim mindset is a precondition for achieving the conjunction. By contrast, an improver attitude will simply lead to disjunction (Tredinnick 2005: 137).

Lopez and Proulx both recognize disjunction as a serious, but unaddressed modern-day social malady. Obviously the answer to a detrimental condition of severance is reconnection. While Lopez writes to bridge the gap between human and nature, Proulx frequently explores the chasm of disjunction, instead of crossing to safety on the other side. Disjunction is taken seriously, seen not as the source of sentimental longing for simpler times, but as a severe problem that needs to be looked in the eye. Proulx is closely examining what Lopez in *The Rediscovery of America* calls “an assailable beast, another in our history like Tamerlane or the Black Death” (48). In “Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair” and *Postcards* disjunction becomes a lifelong affliction, only properly diagnosed when all hope of remedy is beyond reach. *That Old Ace in the Hole* and *The Shipping News*, on the other hand, follow the pattern of describing the pathway across this psychological chasm of disjunction, to the light of conjunction at the end of the tunnel.

The Shipping News and *That Old Ace in the Hole* are basically stories of the journey from extreme urban disjunction to meaningful rural reconnection. They contrast the old ideal of the simple life with inhuman urban complexity. Like the songs that protagonist Bob Dollar listens to on his car radio in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, as he drives into the Texas panhandle for the first time, the two novels are stories of “staying home, going home, being home and the errors of leaving home” (*Ace* 1). In the chapter “Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair” from the novel *Accordion Crimes*, the author revisits the same narrative premise, allowing an analogous scenario to play out in a different way. It narrates the story of Dolor Gagnon, an orphan who sets off in search of his place and identity. Similarly, *Postcards* recounts the journey of protagonist Loyal Blood, from at-homeness and state of conjunction on the family farm, to fatal disjunction with landscape and his utter inability to

reconnect. This section examines four narratives by Annie Proulx, which are representatives of this pilgrim vs. improver contrast, i.e., the way in which characters successfully reach conjunction or get lost in fatal disjunction with the landscape.

“Hitchhiking in a Wheelchair” is the story of Dolor Gagnon, an orphan without a known origin in search of a place to call home. He leaves at 18, finds an old accordion that had been his father’s, and after the army he returns to his hometown, where he is ‘The Stranger in his Birthplace’:

He did not expect to recognize everything. He knew only that Random was situated between woods and potato fields and that he had been born here. The light in this place was the first light he had seen after the blindness of the womb. His eyes kept filling with tears. He felt he might be slipping back into an archaic time when clans roved the forest and he was running along behind them, yet an outsider.

(Accordion Crimes 225⁵)

As Dolor obsesses about learning the French language and music, he gets more and more depressed. He takes on a job that he despises, entering nature to work in the woods. Confined to a wheelchair following a strange illness, he marries a woman who wants to make him “more American”.

Dolor’s arc of character development proceeds from estrangement to estrangement. Proulx deliberately names him Dolor, a name that has a defining significance – most protagonist names in Proulx’s work signify character correspondence – and it is premonitory of his tragic fate. His roots were taken away as a child. Together with the old accordion, he inherited from his father his alienation from the land,

⁵ Novel quotes will be referenced by using the title in parenthetical reference.

the people and the place. His father, however, left: 'He was gone for good, back to France, with a life and a family and a half-learned language to forget'. (*Accordion Crimes* 218) Dolor is stuck between two cultures, unable to feel at home in one or the other. He feels close to a cultural identity he has heard of but has never really known and fails to attain. He seems completely out of tune with his surroundings. For him Hometown Random –an appropriate and significant name– means disconnection and depression, into which he was born: 'Even at this time, barely out of infancy, hours of depression visited him when the only thing possible was to sleep, or lie still with his eyes closed, inhaling, exhaling, breathing in, breathing out, in, out, slow, slow, slow.' (*Accordion Crimes* 211) His orphan state is a metaphor for his isolation as a rootless subject. His inability to feel affection for the place is stressed by his incapacity to hang on to his own name. The other boys call him 'Dollar' or 'Doughnut' and the director of the orphanage changes his name: "You know, I think you should get a regular boy's name. Which do you prefer, Frank or Donald?" "Frank" he whispered.' And so he was renamed, and another fragment of self fell away like a flake of rust. (*Accordion Crimes* 219)

Dolor's immersion in the land is performed only in economic or materialistic terms. He has no personal disposition to become intimate with the landscape or does he acquire any 'ecological perception' (Sewall 1995). Rather, he enters it as an outsider, analogous to protagonist Loyal Blood in *Postcards*. The limber job – branch trimmer– that he takes on in the woods, chainsaw in hand, has a clear meaning in terms of character definition.

Through the autumn and into the winter he worked, bent over the felled trees with his chain saw, cutting limb after limb, hauling them to brush piles, monotonous, physically difficult work, his clothes covered with pitch and bark dust, but except for the chain saw exhaust, work done in the

midst of resinous fragrance. He saved his money, ate at the café where they gradually recognized him, then knew his name, and finally heard that he had been born in Random but taken away as a baby, that he didn't know the whereabouts of any living member of his family.

(*Accordion Crimes* 229)

Dolor is clearly an improver, not a pilgrim. He clearly fails to absorb what Barry Lopez calls "the being of the place". (Lopez in Tredinnick 2005: 74) He takes the land for granted and is incapable of observing it or learning from it. His progressively increasing mental anguish begins to manifest itself physically, as inexplicable and crippling pains shackle him to a wheelchair. Pushed by forces beyond his control Dolor marries the sister of the woman he loves, who shapes him into an identity that he really does not wish for: she calls him Frank, corrects his accent and suggests leaving small town Random for metropolitan Portland –his accent, his name again, his interests, his job, all change once more. He also convinces him to sell his father's old accordion -his only attachment to his French heritage- At this point he is totally bound by the ideology his name signifies and that destroys him at the end, after having crippled him and given him false hopes in terms of acquiring a new identity: eventually he chooses to terminate the downward spiral of his sequestered existence with suicide. Dolor kills himself leaving a note –'I am happy'- and in the next section we read that he has cut his head off with a chainsaw, probably aware that the only thing he comes possesses is his sadness.

From the standpoint of improvers and pilgrims, it could be argued that protagonist Bob Dollar from *That Old Ace in the Hole* was as intended as a reappraisal of the character of Dolor Gagnon. Significantly, both characters are orphans, which often serves as a metaphor for the sequestration of humankind from landscape, an isolation they both

suffer unknowingly. In *That Old Ace in the Hole* Proulx presents Bob Dollar, a pig farm scout for an evil company, Global Pork Rind, who is in charge of finding locals who want to sell their land in the Texas panhandle area. Bob Dollar goes through a transformation, learning from and about the land. Gradually he is unconsciously taken over by the place and its people, eventually quitting his job and becoming part of that place, where he finally grounds his identity.

Initially, Dollar seems to replicate Dolor's unsuccessful pattern. Like Dolor before him, he is misdirected by the capitalist view his name implies. While his undercover job is finding land for sale, he will be exposed to the old ways of the West, its people and its landscape, ultimately merging with the region. He is initially an improver, as he comes in order to possess, to manipulate and to develop. The journey of conquest, however, turns into a pilgrimage. Initially Dollar strives to dispossess the Texas panhandle of its secrets, to learn the lore of the place, to become better at selecting factory locations. In learning he comes to love, however, and his surrender to the place becomes inevitable. The idea of improvement becomes detestable. Surrendering to the place, Dollar becomes incapable of performing his job. Towards the end of the narrative the two poles of attraction clamor loudly for attention. He is under pressure to make a permanent choice: locals claim nature protection against corporations and Global Pork Rind demands immediate results. He is trapped between his strong sense of obligation and his sense of justice.

Bob Dollar has a direct connection with the history of the region through one item in his luggage: the journal of Lieutenant Abert – a real-life character and one of the first Western explorers and topographical engineers. The journal –which in many ways reads like nature writing– is pivotal for Dollar's life turn, teaching him about the place, the landscape and weather. He starts an alternative reading of the Panhandle, alongside the instructions that keep coming in from Global Pork Rind. Like Dollar, he quickly and eagerly becomes a traveller, and

the conflict between his improver duty and pilgrim attitude brings mounting pressure: “Finally Bob Dollar tossed and turned at night, unable to concentrate on Lieutenant Abert’s observations of rugged cliffs and prairie dogs, a sentence drumming in his head, ‘get a property, get a property’” (*That Old Ace in the Hole* 243). From early childhood, Dollar has been schooled to measure himself in economic terms. His disjunction stems from his inability to earn a full income. Gradually, however, this improver disjunction is debunked through the widening scope of his experiences.

As for writing, Dollar frequently updates his employer on his progress, or lack thereof, in language and words that have far more to do with nature writing than business reports: “Every ranch and every town has acres of exhausted machinery” (*That Old Ace in the Hole* 119). Dollar observes and astutely notes the significant facial features of the landscape. He draws on his observations in order to articulate private thoughts on local character: “I think that saving this junk is linked to the frugal German habit of holding on to things that might come in handy someday.” He continues, trapped by his romantic nature: “The derelict machines strike me as private museums of past agricultural work” (*That Old Ace in the Hole* 120–21). This goes on in correspondence after correspondence. His letter does not amuse his boss Ribeye Cluke, however: “Nor are we paying you for a sociological analysis of the panhandle” he complains (*That Old Ace in the Hole* 190). When Dollar does not veer off track, Cluke tries sarcasm: “Comment on everything you can think of, and tell us what you intend to do next week. Hot dog, you’ll really give us fits of joy then!” Finally, in despair, he attempts a simple message: “More business and less letter-writing” (*That Old Ace in the Hole* 238). Nothing derails Dollar’s train of thought. What neither of them seems to realize is that Dollar is not writing business reports or letters at all. He is mailing Cluke pages of what were intended as updates on progress, but have metamorphosed into a Thoreauvean journal. The inescapable yoke of obligation is removed when an

unstable panhandle local runs berserk with her guns. Justice prevails, setting Dollar free to follow his heart. Ironically, the murderess who liberates him is a rancher, one of the people Proulx usually typecasts as improvers, and thereby doomed to failure.

Bob Dollar has a clear personal disposition: he surrenders to the land and finds connection. Until the point when he arrives in exotic territory, Dollar's life is an relentless process where every day means 'sloughing off layers of self-reference.' (Tredinnick 2005: 78) He comes as an empty receptacle. 'The being of the place' enters him automatically. Like Dolor before him, Bob Dollar is badly misdirected by the capitalist worldview his name implies. Yet, Proulx jostles Dollar out of the dangerous ideological rut in which he finds himself. Exposure to a nature journal, the landscape itself and its indigenous culture, all catalyze a metamorphic process that transforms the former capitalist Bob Dollar into a refined version of the nature writer.

In the same manner, *The Shipping News* samples the path from extreme urban disjunction to meaningful rural reconnection. Protagonist Quoye's road to conjunction departs from an estranged and forsaken life in New York City, where he is at the mercy of his neglectful parents, an aggressive and abusive wife, and an offensive employer who persistently reminds him of his uselessness. After his parents inform them via a recorded message that they have decided to commit suicide, since they are dying of cancer, and his wife abandons him after two years of disaffection and indifference, Aunt Agnes convinces him to start a new life for himself and his daughters in Newfoundland, near the old family home. She tells him all about his ancestors, a sordid family tale with episodes of violence and sexual abuse. Quoye finds a job with a weekly newspaper in Killick-Claw, a small fishing town, where he will be responsible for the car accidents section –his wife was decapitated in a car accident– and later the shipping news: information of any kind related to maritime transit. Quoye is afraid of the water and cannot swim. His job at the newspaper *Gammy Bird* confronts him with his

inner fears but also connects him with the human and non-human landscape around him.

Quoyle and Aunt Agnes try to get the family house repaired before the harsh, freezing winter sets in. And as the weather worsens he digs into his past, learning of the atrocities of his ancestors. He is filled with personal disposition and after a near-drowning experience, he is no longer the character that everyone mortified in New York, but someone who is slowly touching the hearts of the people of Killick-Claw. His transformation into a pilgrim accelerates the process of conjunction, which by the end of the story becomes an achievement of at-homeness. Just like Bob Dollar in *That Old Ace in the Hole*, he finds his life evolving towards completion, as the process of becoming intimate progresses. As Tredinnick puts it 'what seems to count is how we choose to be present in the land, how deeply and subtly we look.' (Tredinnick 2005: 77) Proulx creates a sort of 'field of study' to depict this process leading to intimacy with the place. Quoyle 'experienced moments in all colours, uttered brilliances, paid attention to the rich sounds of waves counting stones, he laughed and wept, noticed sunsets, heard music and rain, said I do' (*The Shipping News* 397). This enthusiastic description shows Quoyle complete. He has acquired Thoreauvean awareness and this has become his normal state, without effort or human agency.

A big storm rewards him with the washing away of the family house, taking away Quoyle's internal demons and the damned print of his ancestors. At the same time, his marriage to a local woman also marries him to place and grounds him permanently to a state of at-homeness. The attainment of at-homeness is signaled by simple metaphors: in his new home Quoyle has 'the first tub he'd ever fit in' (*The Shipping News*, 321). As Millard puts it, instead of a nostalgia for an idyllic past –*Postcards*– *The Shipping News* is about 'the desire of organic connectedness with family and place.' (Millard 2000:28)

Like Barry Lopez in *Arctic Dreams*, Proulx sends Bob Dollar and Quoyle to exotic territories, where they set up camp, embark upon

expeditions, and venture not only into nature, but into areas where they meet locals, who also form part of the multitude of interconnected contexts of interrelation that we often refer to as “landscape”. Lopez calls them ‘local geniuses in whom geography thrives [...] for whom the land is alive’, and whose knowledge of the place is ‘intimate rather than encyclopedic’ (Lopez cited in Tredinnick 2005: 79). The characters engage in conversations with those local geniuses, who give voice to stories of the region, stories that make the place come alive, stories that model a way of living close to the land. Quoyle and Dollar discover home as their journey towards intimacy ends in at-homeness. Geography lives in them. Conjunction borders on the inexplicable: “He felt spasms of joy. For no reason that he could think of, except the long daylight, or the warmth, or because the air was so clear and sweet he felt he was just beginning to breathe “ (*The Shipping News* 376).

In this section I deal only briefly with *Postcards*, as chapters 3 and 4 will examine it at length. In *Postcards* Proulx puts protagonist Loyal Blood under the microscope and sends him on a forty-four year journey in search for the ‘being of the place’, something that he abruptly lost when he fled the family farm. Although he never seems able to recast nature, he fails to find at-homeness anywhere else. Along the way he takes on an endless number of jobs that expose his inner tense juxtaposition of roles. Loyal wanders with a pilgrim’s mindset, struggling to reconnect in the body of an improver striving for survival. Nature turns into an adversary as he joins the path of improvers and teams along with the environmental culpability of the employers that hire him. For Loyal the rural ideal achieved by Bob Dollar and Quoyle plays out as the symbol of an unattainable past. He is cut off from what Barry Lopez calls ‘relationships with the physical and cultural places they might call home’ (Lopez 2001: 9). Loyal’s is the minute chronology of a disjunction of someone who has been looking for a lost at-homeness since the very moment the plot was set in motion on page one. Proulx describes it as a still image from a Kodachrome shot:

The place was as fixed as a picture on a postcard, the house and barn like black ships in an ocean of fields, the sky a membrane holding the final light, and there were blurred kitchen windows, and up behind the buildings the field, the rich twenty acre field propped open toward the south like a Bible, the crease of the water vein almost in the center of the ten acre pages.

(Postcards 12)

The sense of place is lost at the very moment of his abhorrent misdeed –the rape and accidental killing of his fiancée–, and all along the descent into the ill-fated way of improvers, Proulx creates a sympathetic character who clings to an idyllic place and past that no longer exist. The land left behind becomes a token of an unattainable but true conjunction with the land, which suggests the intimacy and connection that he once felt. Ironically, his skills and prior knowledge of nature prove helpful in the process of becoming an improver, as he stumbles into all types of jobs, most of them related to extraction from the land – miner, factory, trapping, digging for bones or looking for uranium – which allow him to live hand to mouth. He is seemingly caught in a downward spiral of disjunction, a process that Juliana Menges identifies as ‘a depressing cycle of determinism’ (Menges 200: 162). He nearly dies when working in a mine, his money is either stolen or lost during a tornado, and his new farm goes up in flames.

A sailor that Loyal picked up hitchhiking steals the first good money he has saved. This episode increases his misalignment with both human and non-human landscapes around him. The Indian makes him notice it:

"You think this is funny?" shouted Loyal. "You think it's something to sing about to see a man robbed and trying to get his money back?"

"I'm singing The Friendly Song. It goes 'The sky loves to hear me.' I want to be friendly with the sky. Look over there." He pointed to the southeast where the sky was a bruised blue with purple swellings like rotten spots in peaches. Loyal got out of the car. In a minute the Indian, singing under his breath, got out as well. The aspen leaves, green wet silk, tore loose from the trees. The Indian caught a cluster, rubbed the new leaves, as soft as the thinnest glove leather, between his thumb and forefinger. (...)

"See that." Said the Indian, pointing. A monstrous snout dangled from the cloud. There was a howling roar. The yellow air choked them.

"Tornado," said the Indian. "The sky loves to hear me," he bawled. The snout swayed like a loose rope and came across the immense landscape towards them.

(Postcards 60)

These ill-fated economic endeavors and several near-death experiences end up in separation from the land. His escaping from the farm –that no longer exists as such at one point– only makes him yearn for the farm as he unsuccessfully tries to reenact this old way of life somewhere else. Looking back does not allow him to look forward so his future is a permanent reference to his past. This dream of an unchanging farm becomes obsolete –Menges calls it 'fictional'– as agribusinesses and technology are taking over the whole country. He fails to read the signs or, as Menges suggests, to evolve along with human and non-human landscapes, which do not match his conception of at-homeness (Menges 2000: 161, 162). This is why he constantly

finds himself in environments where he is distinctly out of place. In this disharmonizing journey, with the physical and human world around him, Proulx constantly situates Loyal in regions where he is clearly an outsider unable to perceive, in environments where he lacks all physical and cultural grounding. He is unable to make any place his own, since he is incapable of achieving –to use Barry Lopez' terms– any intimacy with the place: 'If I want the comfort of intimacy with it, my only choice is to learn from it by participating' (Lopez 2009: 6). Unlike Bob Dollar or Quoye, no place enters him automatically nor is he an empty receptacle, as he does not see like a pilgrim. In the end, Loyal collapses physically and emotionally, as he is unable to maintain his attachments in an ever-changing nature. Proulx uses flat postcards as a metaphor of frozen time and space, the long-gone environment Loyal has always longed for. After twenty-two years he tries to set up a farm again, which will burn down on a windy day. Relocation remains inaccessible:

The old man put his foot to the floor and the stake truck picked up speed. Loyal craned around, looking out the rear window, but they were two miles east before he saw the flame of the house shoot up the smoke. He kept his hand on the dog's neck, quieting her tremors. Down to a truck and a dog. Not even a change of clothes.

"Yes, a man works from can't see to can't see and this is what he gets" intoned Wally. "I guess you had some kind of insurance, didn't you Mr. Blood?"

There wasn't much to say.

(Postcards, 202)

The expedition on which Proulx sends Loyal to is carried out in entirely different terms from those of Quoye or Bob Dollar. Even though he, too,

ventures into nature and into areas where he meets the locals, Loyal keeps his distance and avoids those contexts of interrelation. He has not regained the 'ecological self' that Sewall refers to (more on this in chapter 3), as he has not achieved empathy and/or identity with the human and non-human world (Sewall 1995: 201). In the last scene Proulx places Loyal, who is dying, in a landscape with a revealing vision of what he has been misreading so far:

The Indian's book falls open. He is astonished to see the pages are the great, slanting field. At the top of the field black scribble of trees, a wall. And through waves of darkening he sees the wind streaming down the slope of land, rolling down the grass, the red awns combing the sunlight, flashing needle stems, the close-stitched earth, the root, the rock.

(*Postcards*, 309)

Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical basis of my research by first approaching the field of ecocriticism from a historical perspective. I have established a link between Annie Proulx's narrative and this field of study and linked it with the theories of regionalism seen in chapter 1.

The second part of the chapter deals with the concepts of improver and pilgrim, according to Tredinnick's concept. These refer to the interaction of humans with landscape, and the extent to which it is successful, in Barry Lopez' definition of the term. Four relevant examples in the narrative of Annie Proulx show that most of her characters fall into one of the two categories. Bob Dollar from *That Old Ace in the Hole* and Quoyle in *The Shipping News* are examples of characters who gradually surrender to the land, achieving at-homeness and connection. Dolor Gagnon in *Accordion Crimes* and Loyal Blood in *Postcards* personify two cases of disconnection, as they approach nature

with an improver mind. In the case of Loyal Blood, that may be an oversimplification, and his process of disengagement from the land will be fully developed in the next chapter, as it constitutes the main focus of this research.

Chapter 3 is an in-depth analysis of *Postcards*, taking into account the concepts developed here and relating them to the opposing notions of 'conjunction' and 'disjunction', which are closely related to the definitions of pilgrim and improver. This is followed by an analysis of landscape in *Postcards* on three levels: as habitat, identity and the symbol of a new generation.

CHAPTER 3. CONJUNCTION, DISJUNCTION AND THE SENSE OF PLACE

All the complex wires of life were stripped out and he could see the structure of life. Nothing but rock and sea, the tiny humans and animals against them for a brief time.

Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*

Postcards 1: habitat

As noted previously, in *Postcards* Proulx handles landscape on a number of different but complementary levels. The present chapter first deals with the treatment of landscape as a habitat, with all its effects and implications. An ecocritical perspective intertwines with the regional approach, as seen in Chapter 2, and the concept of sense of place. In this section I will analyze landscape from this perspective, stressing the characters' disjunction from it.

Defining sense of place or merely trying to arrive at a common scholarly approach could no doubt constitute the sole object of an investigation. It could be broadly referred to as what Kowalewski calls 'a sense of belonging and human attachment' (Kowalewski 2003: 17) to a particular landscape or environment. It goes further than just background color or 'local seasoning', and it is also related to the importance of place in people's lives. Low and Altman first used the term "place attachment" to refer to the bonding experience of humans to place, which includes different kinds of elements: emotion (affect, emotion and feeling), cognition (thought, knowledge and belief), and practice (action and behavior) (Low and Altman 1992: 3-5). Later, Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) suggested that place attachment is a constituent of a wider concept called "sense of place", which would include place identity (cognitive dimension) and place dependence (conative dimension). Other concepts used to describe humans'

attachments to their home environments and communities include “rootedness” and “insidedness” (Kyle and Chick 2007: 210). Tuan suggests that rootedness implies “being at home in an unself-conscious way” (Tuan 1980: 4), where much of the landscape is taken for granted. Place-identity concerns not only rural or in-nature habitats, but also urban or densely human-populated landscapes. Finally, Kowalewski argues that human behavior and ethical deliberation take place within the context of local communities. As a consequence ‘individuals and communities come into consciousness *through*, not apart from, the natural environments they inhabit.’ (Kowalewski 2003: 16) However, one has to take into account what Mahoney and Katz emphasize in terms of constant transformation: a postmodernist notion of place-sense implies that the ‘the region is a dynamic and relative construction’ (Mahoney and Katz 2009: xii). In *Postcards*, Proulx uses the notion of sense of place and belonging —psychological attachment to and physical detachment from the family farm— as an allegory for the changing postwar American landscape, and draws attention to the attachment to/detachment from familiar landscapes, the loss of familiar habitats, and uprootedness as a malady against environmental awareness. She demonstrates what Kowalewski says about a number of contemporary writers: the fact that the spirit of place is ‘intimately wrapped up with the spirit of time’ (Kowalewski 2001: 242).

In *Postcards*, the old family farm stands for a node of connection, not only between all the members of the Blood clan, but also between them and their webs of attachments. Gradually, they leave the farm but fail to settle anywhere else, due to the misreading of the signs that the ever-changing landscape reveals to all of them. Proulx also uses the case of the disintegration of landscape as a habitat as an injunction, which compels contemporary Americans to reexamine the ethical and political terms in which they stand with their familiar landscapes. It is also a metaphor for the profound historical changes taking place, both in the land and in those who inhabit it.

Protagonist Loyal undergoes a physical and mental deterioration as he wanders westward through the American Midwest, in search of an old ideal of at-homeness that has long since vanished. Mink, head of the clan, finds himself in a prison cell to which he was confined after burning down the barn in order to claim the insurance money. Jewell, the matriarch of the clan, finds freedom after the disintegration of the family farm, when she moves to a trailer park, and learns to drive, but dies in the midst of nature during a mountain car ride. Dub, Loyal's crippled younger brother, also leaves Vermont to establish a home in Florida, from which he later has to escape due to investigations by tax officials. Mernelle, the youngest daughter is, like Loyal, a product of her landscape, and the only one who seems to understand the value of the family farm as a buffer against. Throughout the story she blames Loyal for the break-up of the family, but she is the only one who seems to survive in an environment she has managed to stay in harmony with. She is more attached to it as a pilgrim –one who enters nature to learn and surrender– rather than an improver, who approaches it in order to possess and manipulate (Tredinnick 2005: 76).

In *Postcards*, Annie Proulx intended to write about someone without a home, and how a person's life can be washed away. She illustrated it by spanning the diaspora of the Bloods over a long period of time: the epic of the fast metabolism of the American landscape during the second half of the 20th century. Proulx also uses *Postcards* as a warning against what Kowalewski calls 'historical amnesia' (Kowalewski 2003: 7): the loss of a person's sense of belonging and human attachment, the main elements that define human habitat in a non-human landscape. *Postcards* opens with a dreadful scene in a seemingly pastoral setting. Loyal Blood rapes and kills Billy, his fiancée, against a stone wall near his farm in Vermont, a landmark of the New England landscape. Proulx uses his sense of guilt to set the story into motion, and keep it going for forty-four years. Loyal's runaway journey

of disjunction with the homely landscape starts in the first line of the narrative:

'Even before he got up he knew he was on his way. Even in the midst of the involuntary orgasmic jerking he knew. Knew she was dead, knew he was on his way. Even standing there on shaking legs, trying to push the copper buttons through the stiff buttonholes he knew that everything he had done or thought in his life had to be started all over again. Even if he got away.'

(Postcards 3)

His perception of and harmony with landscape, the one he knows and is part and a product of, becomes an antagonist after his crime. This familiar environment has witnessed his atrocious crime and does not read like a partner anymore. Proulx expresses with lyrical description how close he is to it at in the beginning. With her fiancée buried next to him, what comes to his mind is his understanding and perception of the terrain, cultivated during a long process of learning, experience, ancestors, family, senses:

"If I get away," he said, dragging breath in his constricted throat, and briefly seeing, not what had happened beside the wall, but his grandfather spraying the tree with Bordeaux mixture, the long wand hissing in the leaves, the poisoned codling moths bursting up like flames, the women and children, himself, on the ladder, picking apples, the strap of the bag cutting into his shoulder, the empty oak-splint baskets under the trees and the men loading the full baskets into a wagon.

(Postcards 4)

Back in the house, the family unit is introduced in the atmosphere of a symbolic domestic environment, the kitchen, and it is presented as a cluster that understands and feels the land. The conversation evolves around the farm and the immediate, familiar landscape. Mernelle reads the signs effectively and makes her little a bit of money by selling pods: 'And guess what, Da, some of the kids turned in milkweeds that was still green, and they only give 'em ten cents a bag. I let mine all nice and dry up in the hayloft first.' (Postcards 7) The Bloods' kitchen is described through the perception of Loyal as a rather uninviting one. The mood of tension that Loyal's description conveys propels the plot, and anticipates estrangement and disaster:

The kitchen seemed to Loyal to be falling outward like a perspective painting, showing the grain of the ham, the two shades of green of the wallpaper ivy, the ears of drying popcorn joined together in a twist of wire hanging over the stove, the word COMFORT on the oven door, Jewell's old purse nailed to the wall to hold bills and letters, the pencil stubs in the spice can hanging from a string looped over a nail, Mernelle's drawing of a flag tacked to the pantry door, the glass doorknob, the brass hook and eye, the sagging string and stained cretonne covering the cavity under the sink, the footprints on the linoleum, all flat and detailed, but receding from him like torn leaves in a flooding river.

(Postcards 8)

The 'COMFORT' sign on the oven adds irony to the tense atmosphere, which is unbearable to Loyal after his crime. This account of the core of the domestic space is at odds with the landscape around it, and signifies the beginning of Loyal's disunion from the rest. He perceives the kitchen as a picture he is not part of; he is now an observer rather than a participant in the familiar space. Hurtado

equates the hopelessness of the Bloods' kitchen with Loyal's own (Hurtado 2002: 44). As Loyal flees from the farm, he dramatically cuts the physical bonds with his 'familiar' landscape, the one that embodies the sense of place for him. In the same way as he sees the kitchen, he perceives the farm as a still life composition: 'The place was as fixed as a picture on a postcard, the house and barn like black ships in an ocean of fields, the sky a membrane holding the final light, and there were blurred kitchen windows, and up behind the buildings the field, the rich twenty-acre field popped open toward the south like a Bible, the crease of the water vein almost exactly in the center of the ten-acre pages.'

| (*Postcards* 10)

On leaving, visions of the place — like Polaroid shots — bring back memories of how he took care of the land, making it more fertile and productive. There is a strong image of place-sense, through the idea of Loyal's stewardship of the land. Hurtado suggests that he belongs to the land as he has molded and shaped it, and that his contouring of the land will haunt him and not allow him to rebuild his life anywhere else (Hurtado 2002: 34). Going back to Sewall's theory of the perception of the land, as discussed in the previous chapter, it can be argued that at this stage Loyal is deeply connected with the territory, both spiritually and through his senses. Until now, his mark on it has been careful and thus productive, as carried out in partnership with the land: 'Beautiful pasture, four or five years of his work to bring the field up, none of Mink's labor, draining the boggy place, liming and seeding to clover, plowing under the clover three years running to build up the soil, get the sourness out, then planting alfalfa and keeping it going, look at it, sweet good stuff, nutty, full of nourishment, That's what made those cows give butterfat...' (*Postcards* 13)

It is 1944 and Loyal had figured out exactly how to adjust their old farm to the rapidly changing landscape. A major issue was the electrification of rural areas, which was slowly being carried out, after urban centers had been supplied. It was a time when small dairy farms

across rural New England were disappearing at a fast pace, and in the face of the expansion of agribusinesses. Proulx inserts a subplot in which she denounces the disintegration of many family farms after the war, and the rapid abuse and transformation of familiar landscapes (more on this topic in the next 2 sections). Low productivity in postwar times – in most cases due to the lack of electricity – leads many people to leave their farms. And there are no jobs available, as everyone is either at war or working in the war industry for ‘high wages’. “You won’t find nobody. Ronnie tried last winter, this spring and summer, and I guess he got to know everybody for twenty mild around that could hold a pitchfork, and I tell you, the best he could find was school kids and hundred-year-old grandpas with wooden legs and canes. Some places they’re taking on girls.” (*Postcards*, 21) In the argument with his father when he is about to depart –he lies about Billy wanting to get away from rural life, and Mink reminds him of the plans he himself had for the farm, which included adjusting to the changing American landscape and times, by specializing and making it more efficient:

“For ten years I been hearin’ about what you wanted to do with this place, how you wanted to switch off the Jerseys over to the Holsteins, ‘get a milkin’ machine after the War as soon as we get electricity in, specialize in dairy.’ Get the pastures and hayfields up, alfalfa, build a silo, grow more corn, concentrate on commercial dairy farmin’. Profit. Put the time into dayrin’, don’t bother with no big garden, no pigs or turkeys, it’s quicker and efficienter buying your food. I can hear you sayin’ it now.”

(*Postcards* 10)

Loyal drives his brother’s car from Central Vermont into the Adirondacks. He does not know where he is heading. He has left Billy’s

body buried under the stone wall. Ironically, both physically and metaphorically she has 'become' part of the landscape – a recurrent metaphor in Proulx's fiction – and will lie buried there for forty years until it is discovered and mistaken for ancient bones. Billy had always wanted to leave Cream Hill and its rural life, begging Loyal – without success – to take her away. The paradox is solved when Loyal – who had never intended to leave his farm – was forced to carry out Billy's original idea of moving west. From this point on, Proulx constructs a narrative that parallels the literature of the west in terms of rite of passage, and sets it in a period when assumptions on time and space were changing. As Proulx herself explains in her essay *Dangerous Ground. Landscape in American Fiction*, around the 50s Americans began to perceive landscape from their cars:

From inside the automobile, the landscape was transformed into a swiftly streaming mass of soft color, whether thick tunnels of eastern maple and oak, the pale soil and spiky herbage of the southwest, the khaki-colored plains, or the massy conifers of the northwest rainforest. In a landscape always receding or approaching, individual trees, small animals, and lesser streams disappeared in the blur. The pictorial, the framed but vague windshield view, replaced the particular and the specific.

(Postcards: 18)

Even though this is a quote, we should perhaps return to our discussion of 'the particular and the specific'. It is worth referring to now, as it summarizes Loyal's new perception of landscape. The filmic effect of the car windows does not allow him to interpret what he is seeing and, as time goes by, he will find it increasingly difficult to read and interpret what he sees. Landscape does not enter him. This vision of the rapidly

changing American landscape –with both human and non-human elements– is best seen in the following Panavision-like image:

Loyal, going along the roads, the shadows of white poplars like strips of silk in the wind; pale horses in the field drifting like leaves; a woman seen through a window, her apron slipping down over her head the hairnet emerging from the neckhole, the apron faded blue, legs purple mosquito bites no stocking runover shoes; the man in the yard nailing a sign onto a post; RABBIT MEAT; a plank across Potato Creek; a swaybacked shed; the door held closed with a heavy chain, white crosses, windmills, silos, pigs, white poplars in the wind, the leaves streaming by as he drove. A fence. More fence. Miles and miles and miles of fence, barbwire fence.

(Postcards, 62)

Loyal starts writing postcards –taken from a roadside café after an incident with the woman who owns it–, which will be the only link with the familiar landscape of his Vermont farm during the 44 years he is on the run. Some of them appear at the beginning of the chapters, performing a narrative function together with those from other characters in the story. The last still image of the home farm will remain an immutable image in the manner of the postcards he sends. His father Mink refuses to hear from his son by not reading the cards, thus cutting him off from the Blood circle, his circle of blood.

Misplaced and out of his habitat –landscape and surroundings– after one year on the run, Loyal has saved some money to start off. He picks up two hitchhikers on the road, a chatterbox soldier –‘flood of words’– and a strange Indian who writes in a book. The soldier takes all Loyal’s earnings, to his despair, and the Indian starts behaving in a spiritual manner, singing and writing things in his notebook. Proulx uses

the metaphor of out-of-place country folk taken advantage of by people who are apparently more worldly-wise. The Indian seems to understand the land around them in a deeper way than Loyal, who admires it for its productivity – ‘damn good farmland’ (*Postcards* 56) – and warns him about not reading the signs. He is alluding to transformation of the landscape over the centuries, as he gets the larger picture:

“These fields is so level,” said the Indian, “you can stand on your running board and see from one end to the other. But you oughta see it if the flood comes, if the rivers goes over the banks. Everything, it’s like a mirage, houses, tractor sheds sticking out of the water, it’s like the ocean, no place for the water to go but spread out. A little wind ruffles it you see it move along for a mile.”

(*Postcards* 57)

The Indian symbolizes Native American cultures that have been stewards of the land and, like Loyal, were driven away from their familiar landscapes and habitats. Buell stresses the more trustworthy aboriginal place-sense (Buell 1999: 701), and Proulx warns not to dismiss the history of a place. A tornado is coming their way, and in its aftermath Loyal wakes up, injured, only to discover that the Indian has taken his car and his shoes (with the last of his money in them), and has partially scalped him. It is the first in a series of hostilities that Loyal will suffer in unfamiliar landscapes, places with which he has no close connections and no sense of at-homeness. While he is recovering in hospital, Loyal cannot run away from his aching urge for his Vermont home:

But it was Mink’s fence work, the four strands, one more than anybody else used, the familiar flat-headed staples came from the barrel in the barn. A sense of his place, his

home, flooded him. It was easy enough to follow the fence line. He recognized the far corner of the woodlot when he came to it, even in the half dark, and smelled the faint applewood smoke from the kitchen range half a mile away.

(Postcards 76-77)

Around 1950 Loyal is working in the Mary Mugg, a dangerous mine where the workers are mostly 'cripples and outlaws'. He gradually starts thinking of going back to the landscape, finding himself a new farm once he earns some money. But disaster strikes and his endeavor turns into nightmare. The mine collapses, and for five days Loyal and two other workers are trapped in a wet, dark passage. One of them dies and Loyal thinks the end has come for him as well, which triggers images of his farm. He remembers the final moments of Billy's life, and how he felt her curse on him, which forced him out of his family farm and into the process of severance from his familiar landscape, the process of ripping out his sense of at-homeness:

And now he knows: in her last flaring seconds of consciousness, her back arched in what he'd believed was the frenzy of passion but was her convulsive effort to throw off his killing body, in those long, long, seconds Billy had focused everyone of her dying atoms in to cursing him. She would rot him down, misery by misery, dog him through the worst kind of life. She had already *driven him from his home place*, had set him among strangers in a strange situation, extinguished his chance for wife and children, caused him poverty, had set the Indian's knife at him, and now rotted his legs away in the darkness. She would twist and wrench him to the limits of anatomy.

(*Postcards* 92, emphasis added)

After five days in the mine, an unfamiliar and hostile landscape, a place for improvers rather than pilgrims, the three men are rescued and Loyal moves on. He is thirty-six years old and his only travel companion is the notebook that the Indian left in his car after robbing him and scalping him during the tornado. Although at first Loyal is hesitant and does not know what to write, the Indian's book somehow connects him with home. As seen in Chapter Two, differently from Bob Dollar and Quoyle who take up writing –in the form of journals– at first Loyal can only imagine what to write, but through the strange lists of ideas and concepts that the Indian wrote Loyal subconsciously remembers the nuclear farm, the idyllic harmony of the familiar environment, the convenient freeze of time and space. After a time, words finally pour out and the Indian's book becomes a travel journal: 'Many nights that winter he wrote, sometimes only a few lines, sometimes until the wind shaking the window frame chilled his hands. Things he planned to do, song lyrics, distances travelled, what he ate and drank.' (*Postcards*, 97)

All this time, Loyal has only a spiritual and psychological connection with the farm, as his family and home place disintegrate. Letters from home do not reach him, as he does not have anything he can call his new home. Always on the run, he will remain forever unaware of the drastic changes that both the farm and the family are going through. He will never know that his father and brother burned the barn down in an attempt to get the insurance money, and were put in jail, where his father Mink hanged himself, or that years later his mother died in a car accident while driving in the mountains. The lack of regular contact widens the chasm between what is in Loyal's memory and what actually happens to his old home. In the back of his mind there is still the old idea of an economic turn-around that would make it possible to get a farm, and the subconscious wish to reconnect with or re-establish a familiar landscape, and develop a kind of place-sense, now

seems to be part of a larger picture. There is potential in Loyal's plan, but his self-exemption means that from everywhere procrastinates the setting of a new home. On the other hand, the physical loss of place has not deprived him of what Kowalewski calls the 'spirit of place' (Kowalewski 2003: 7).

Loyal is still able to read places, even though he does not inhabit them. He possesses what Barry Lopez calls 'attention to nuances' (Lopez 1997: 22). Since childhood he had learned to use his senses to achieve intimacy with the land, and he knows about the geological history of landscapes. Now, digging for dinosaur bones in Utah with a university expedition, his trained knowledge surpasses that of the experts, since they are improvers who have no connection with the land other than a scientific one, and are not attuned or responsive to the nuances. He performs the role of a 'mediator', to use Buell's term, between local and scientific forms of knowledge, both indispensable (Buell 1996: 673):

All the pictures show the sucker with his legs hung out at his side like a lizard. All the experts say the animal just waddled along dragging himself from one mudhole to another. But I look at those tracks and I can see the width between the track lines doesn't match up with that idea. Looks to me the animal's weight was under it, that the legs wasn't hung out at the sides at all. Christ, measure the lateral distance between the tracks. If the suckers'd had lizard legs the tracks would be two feet farther out on each side.

(Postcards 161)

Ben Rainwater, an alcoholic and a well-known but not respected scientist, is the only person to come Loyal's way who establishes some intimacy with him. He provides him with a kind of home environment

while they are engaged in building an observatory together. Loyal becomes his best friend and confidant, and drags him home when he falls down drunk, as he does most evenings. Ben is also the only one who senses the weight on Loyal's shoulders and the latter's inability to connect. 'There's something haywire about you. There's something truly fucked up about you. I don't know what it is, but I can smell it. You're accident-prone. You suffer losses. You're far-off center.' (*Postcards* 172) Rainwater reads Loyal's readiness for disjunction and his vulnerability: "I see the way you throw yourself at trouble. Punish yourself with work. How you don't get anywhere except to a different place." (*Postcards* 172) Proulx uses Rainwater to confront individuals with the real dimension of human beings as a part of a larger system, far beyond familiar and national landscapes. Environmental awareness includes attention to the universe and to solar systems, where the secrets of the human mind lie. The quote is long yet compelling:

"We are losing the sky, we have lost it. Most of the world sees nothing above but the sun, conveniently situated to give them cancerous tans and good golf days. The stinking clods are ignorant of the Magellanic cloud. They know not the horsehead nebula, the collars of Saturn like metal coils around the neck of a Benin princess, the black vast sinks of imploded matter like rain holes in outer space, the throbbing light of pulsars, atomizing suns, dwarf stars heavily beyond relief, red giant, the uncoiling galaxies. [...] The study of space unwraps the strangest and most exotic realities the human mind can ever encounter. All is strange and wondrous in that nonhuman void. This is why astronomers do not seek the company of any but their fellows, for no one else has seen the mysteries as they have. [...] They know the dim light of a star filtering through our

filthy, polluted sky has been on its way to that moment for a thousand years”

(*Postcards* 171)

Unconsciously Rainwater seems to appeal to Loyal’s vulnerability to keep from disconnecting completely. Lopez puts it like this: ‘The key, I think, is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy will come a sense of belonging, a sense of not being isolated in the universe.’ (Lopez 1997: 11). For Loyal any attempt at creating intimacy is doomed when Ben’s wife, warned by an anonymous postcard, kicks Loyal out of the house. He will never regain ‘the being of the place’.

At 51, he verifies his slow but steady physical decline in a mirror. Just like each time he is on the move, the exotic landscapes he passes draw him back to the farm. He longs for it so badly that he has not yet been able to set up a new one. His physical and mental attachment to a place that does not exist anymore –a disjunctive sense of place– keeps him from reconnecting anywhere else. He feels that ‘he had not yet made a start on the farm [or] on curing his trouble with earth’ (187). Looking back, he recounts the path from conjunction and calls it ‘exile’: ‘But the old urge for the farm was like the heat of a banked fire, the time was slipping down. Fifty-one years old. The prospecting, the barroom nights, the summers digging with bullet, the climbs up to the passes in the mountains, moving through the breast-high rabbit brush, his way had been that of an exile for a long time.’ (*Postcards* 186) Unconsciously resisting the sense of displacement, Loyal decides to come to terms with the landscape. He feels ready to settle, so he buys a farm in North Dakota. He somehow has trouble referring to it as a farm, so he calls it ‘the place’.

It seems that this time conjunction will take place, although to achieve it he might need external assistance. He does not know the North Dakota landscape, nor is he familiar with new developments in

crop-growing. He needs advice about which grain to choose, plague-resistant seeds, the machines he ought to use, and whether he should raise cattle. Dairy farming is what he's most familiar with, but the new place has little to do with the natural environment he was born into in Vermont. Even the farmhouse lacks a homely feeling: 'It was not a good place to sleep at night, that metal bed, paint chipped iron, sheets trailing on the floor. An *uneasy house*. There was always a fine grit on the linoleum, soil blown from across the world, brown roils that rose from the steppes of central Asia and ended lying on his windowsills,' (*Postcards*, 189, emphasis added). The farmhouse and the unfamiliar landscape make Loyal feel uncomfortable. Slowly, he tries to become involved in the process of 're-perceiving the familiar' (Buell 1996: 673), regaining awareness, and becoming part of a landscape he recognized. Proulx exposes his inability to achieve familiarization, which Buell refers to as a somewhat complex endeavor. Obviously, Loyal's immediate surroundings are a sign of a new habitat he fails to 'recalibrate' (Buell 1996: 673).

The tension between the polarities of pilgrims and improvers is exemplified in Loyal's closest neighbors, the Shears, a farming family economically adjusted to the new times. They possess expensive farm equipment -'big, quick machinery'. Proulx depicts old Shears as an improver farmer who is 'violently progressive about new farm machinery' (*Postcards* 189). Loyal settles but does not seem to adjust. Initially, he appears to come to terms with the landscape, following that old feeling of 'curing the trouble with earth'. He fixes up the farmhouse and manages to put in his first bean field, as if he is slowly regaining a measure of harmony with his surroundings, as he apparently seems on the right track to completing the journey of at-homeness. While Proulx gives his protagonist a moment of peace after all the estrangements suffered, disaster soon strikes again. In a streak of geographic determinism, a fire breaks out, provoked by a McDonald's employee who was trying to burn a pile of tumbleweeds in the middle of a

windstorm. Fire spreads rapidly and Loyal helps his neighbors to move their cattle and save their belongings. Then suddenly the wind changes direction and the fire destroys his bean field and the farmhouse: 'Down to a truck and a dog. Not even a change of clothes.' (*Postcards* 202)

After this harsh blow, Loyal is left with nothing, just when he was in a state of temporal harmony and struggling to regain an 'awareness of place' (Kowalewski 2003: 16) or its *genius loci*. Proulx stresses the inability to reconnect: the fixed sepia image of an old sense of place is still alive in Loyal's psyche. His life at this point is 'like a weak chain, the links breaking one by one.' (*Postcards* 209) Homeless and on the road again, Loyal uses his old familiarity with the land to make a living from trapping. For six seasons he lives in a wagon, setting his traps for coyotes. He becomes acquainted with the Sagines, a couple who owns a large piece of land and have a deep sympathy for Loyal. After trapping on his own for a while, he goes to the Sagines' ranch, and learns that Jack has died. Starr – his widow – suggests that Loyal should move in with her. The possibility of the longed-for home comes within reach: "I feel like I've got the liveliest part of my life still ahead. I could stay on the ranch, Loyal, but not alone. A man is needed." She couldn't say it much clearer.' (*Postcards* 264) But once more Loyal rejects the offer of a home. It is not 'his farm', and he continues his aimless journey, earning a living from trapping. The place does not seem to provide them with what Tuan refers to as a sense of coherence of inner life with the outer world (Tuan's quoted in Wendy and Katz 2009: xiv). His uprootedness comes to the fore again, when he sees a newspaper picture of a Basque family and wonders what it would have been like to have a family of his own: 'This is what it comes down to, the study of photographs of strangers' (*Postcards* 266).

In 1982 Loyal is suffering from lung problems, and is almost constantly sick. His physical decline parallels his inability to settle down. His next move is Colorado living space is reduced to the trailer attached to his truck. He has become a full-time nomad, an image that mirrors a

large section of American society during the eighties, for whom landscape had become homogenized. He gets lost in its sameness: 'so many roads look the same' (*Postcards* 278). The bland uniformity of American landscape is a metaphor for the massive loss of a sense of place and the future of the land. Proulx is issuing a warning against the carelessness of Americans when it comes to where they live and work, and 'the conditions of American life that threaten to destroy or utterly alter individual places and distract them from appreciating them' (Kowalewski 2001: 242). Loyal has his wagon stolen from the truck: the last token of something that symbolizes a home has vanished for good. 'Busted, broke, he drifts into the stream [of migrant labor]' (*Postcards* 279). For a short while he works for a man who exploits migrant workers who, like him but for different causes, have become displaced from their home environments and suffer the estrangements caused by their struggle to survive. Loyal lives in his truck, which is in bad shape, like himself. His intimate space has been confined to a truck bench seat, which contrasts sharply with the vast spaces around him that he cannot call home. Ill and confused, he is driving in an unknown direction when the truck breaks down. 'Worn out, worn down, used up. That's all folks.' (*Postcards* 298) He writes the last postcard he has left, in which he still dreams of his old farm, now long gone. Wandering through the fields with his remaining possessions – a bedroll and a few old tools – he momentarily feels the land and seems to regain his senses. His mind develops an awkward familiarity with the landscape around him, and he dances and sings. He has a homely vision of himself, an outburst of at-homeness in a moment of hopelessness:

He imagined: a man and a woman sitting at a table. A fringed cloth hangs to the floor, their feet are hidden in the folds. The woman chooses a heart-shaped strawberry, not a wild strawberry, from a bowl of fruit. Her hand, her arm, her face half erased, but the strawberry gleams brilliantly, she

holds its stem between index finger and thumb, the tip of the thumb touching the puffed cap. The black seeds are like commas embedded in the red pores. The man is himself.

(Postcards 301)

If we regard landscape as a habitat, it will be clear that, through the character of Loyal, Proulx is drawing attention to regional landscapes, even as she dramatizes the typical ecocritical idea that modern people have had their connection with the land severed, and have become rootless, permanently on the move, and unable to settle anywhere. From this viewpoint, *Postcards* can be read as the story of what happened to millions of farmers, not only in Vermont but in the whole of the United States during the second half of the 20th century: they were driven out of their home environments by economic upheaval and promises of urban prosperity. It also suggests the lack of attention paid to the land in times of extreme nomadism or critical economic flux. Kowalewski reminds us of what endures: 'one neighborhood, one river basin, one metropolis, one region at a time.' (Kowalewski 2003: 23). In this light, we can say that in *Postcards* Proulx stresses the concept of awareness and interaction that Kowalewski has summarized as follows: 'An awareness of "place" as a living, interactive force in human identity helps create a more richly textured and multilayered sense of volume and depth in any region's history and art.' (2003: 23)

Postcards 2: identity.

Proulx's treatment of the landscape in *Postcards* performs other revisions, one of them being an interpretation from the viewpoint of identity. The novel addresses landscape as an identity, paralleling the physical and mental decline of Loyal Blood, the ruin of his family farm and, by extension, the decline of a way of identifying with landscape that needs to be re-evaluated, rethought and, ultimately, reintroduced. Where the previous section dealt with region, landscape and sense of place, here we will focus on the loss of human interconnectedness with the landscape, through the character of Loyal Blood, and the inevitable consequences of uprootedness and displacement.

As noted in Chapter 3, eco-psychologist Laura Sewall's theory of environmental perception can be a helpful theoretical tool when examining Proulx's depiction of an ongoing process of detachment, and the dangers and consequences of not re-perceiving nature. When dealing with sense of place, we refer to the senses, whether consciously or unconsciously. Sensing place, regaining connection, and achieving at-homeness would seem to be best achieved through perception. The five steps that Sewall suggests for perceiving nature are directly related to the senses – taste, smell, sight, hearing and touch. Learning to attend, perceiving relations, perceptual flexibility, re-perceiving depth, and the imaginary self are the 'fundamental avenues of connection between the self and the world' (Sewall 1995: 201). This route, together with multidisciplinary ecocritical practices, would seem to be a suitable approach to literary criticism. In this stage of my investigation, I intend to cross Sewall's proposition with the concept of the post-human subject developed by Louis B. Palmer, who emphasizes the importance of finding new ways of reading canonical modernist texts. While post-humanism could in itself serve as the point of departure of the entire thesis, I will use Palmer's concept of the post-human subject, which is

generally defined or understood as a node set in a web of attachments.

Ecocriticism sees the post-human subject as ecosystemically immersed, affixed to, and defined by both the human and non-human environment surrounding it. Proulx endorses this idea when she contends that 'we may speak of the rural landscape as an independent (though shrinking) entity, but it is only possible to isolate rural countryside in the mind. For everything is linked.' (Proulx 2009: 10). *Postcards* gives careful consideration to what it means to inhabit such a nodal position in the world. According to Palmer, this model suggests not only subjectivity (individual consciousness), but also subjectness, i.e., being 'subject to' forces beyond the control of the individual (Palmer 2003: 167). Such a reading involves scrutinizing the interconnectedness of all natural systems, but here Palmer also proposes getting rid of such privileged concepts as 'individual autonomy, the uniqueness of human knowing, and the difference between the artificial and the natural.' (Palmer 2003: 171). As we are all implicated, articulated and connected, the key to this model is not taking 'refuge in our distance, (...) our individuality. Thinking according to such tropes helps us to see who we are as part of a larger system rather than as transcendental and separate from where we are.' (Palmer 2003: 167) The matrix proposed by Palmer and – by extension – post-humanism can prove to be an interesting tool for analysis, as it can stand for both a point of connection, and the background against which connection takes place (Palmer 2002: 172). As stated above, I will integrate this concept into Sewall's theory of perception channels. Proulx uses this point to address her reader's perceptions directly: 'If landscape as a space modified to suit humans orders our perceptions, it may partially explain why place description in fiction can draw the reader into the story' (Proulx 2009: 13).

It could be argued that the name of Loyal Blood, the protagonist in *Postcards*, is a form of character correspondence, exposing the misalignment between the subject and his web of attachments. It is

significant that Loyal is a loner, as in Proulx's work this often serves as a metaphor for the sequestration of humankind from nature, an isolation which he himself undergoes. Dollar in *That Old Ace in the Hole* and Quoyle in the novel *The Shipping News* are both orphans. Thus throughout the narrative, plot propulsion is contingent on Loyal's attempt to harmonize his web of attachment, while the degree of unhappiness which results is proportionate to the character's success in his endeavors. The narrative documents the migration of a man searching for a way to re-establish an attachment he severed in a moment of violent transgression.

Although the novel may appear to delve into the matrix of the crime and its inescapable punishment, protagonist Loyal Blood's murder of his girlfriend is but a prod for meditation on a disaster that ranges far wider in its almost universal appeal. Mere seconds after it takes place, Loyal's murder of his girlfriend is relegated to the fringes of perception, and barely acknowledged. At the scene of the crime the focus of the narrative skirts the edges of Loyal's heinous misdeed, but dwells melancholically and at length on Loyal's scarring and his abrupt alienation from nature. In the immediate aftermath of the crime, the entire novel is spelled out. All that remains is for those moments of desolate prophecy to come to fruition. But the bulk of the novel is far from redundant. Proulx successfully shapes a case study of how of disjunction, misalignment and an incapacity for what Sewall calls 'reperception' reduces a man once enviously considered the epitome of the American farmer to a vagrant scrounging for scraps in dumpsters. Loyal's arc of character evolution bridges from alienation to alienation. His web of attachments disappears as his perceptual abilities diminish and ultimately fade. Once a connected and alert pilgrim, he turns into an improver, and the subsequent severance from nature becomes inexorable.

Loyal first appears as a pilgrim whose identity with landscape is genetic, somatic, cultural and material; Proulx intentionally merges

Loyal and the land, thus establishing certain points in the matrix, his connectedness and interaction with it:

His blood, urine, feces and semen, tears strands of hair, vomit, flakes of skin, his infant and childhood teeth, the chippings of finger and toenails, all the effluvia of his body were in that soil, part of that place. The work of his hands had changed the shape of the land, the weirs in the steep ditch beside the lane, the ditch itself, the smooth fields were echoes of himself in the landscape, for the laborer's vision and strengths persists after the labor is done. The air was charged with his exhalations. The deer he'd shot, the trapped fox, had died because of his intentions and commissions, and their absence in the landscape was his alteration.

(Postcards 77)

This suggests that Loyal *becomes part of* the landscape. Initially he is fully aligned with and connected to his net of attachments. Sewall's avenues of interconnection between the self and the world, i.e. his sensory capacities (Sewall 1995: 201), are fully functioning. Proulx launches a character who is not only fully aware of the environmental conditions, but also emphasizes his concern and regard for what he sees around him and what he is part of. He rehearses perception, consciousness and behaviour, first reading the landscape and then adapting the farm to the new needs. The narrative will then expose one by one the misalignment of his web of attachments, as he mutates from a pilgrim to an improver.

As we saw in the previous section, Loyal's first disruption occurs within his home environment. A major thematic element – crime and guilt – not only draws him out of his natural surroundings, but also

triggers an inner rebellion and an initial imbalance in his sensory systems. Sewall's concept of 'ecological self' is inclusive in the sense that it closes the gap between ourselves and non-human nature, and 'experiences a permeability and fluidity of boundaries' (Sewall 1995: 203). Proulx confronts Loyal with his surroundings in a moment of brutal rupture, which physically and psychologically deprives him of the 'empathy with family, friend, lover, community, humanity, and similarly, with the whole non-human world (...) -a recognition that to tread heavily on the earth is to tread heavily upon one's self.' (Palmer 2002: 203). Loyal's strong sexuality leads him to commit an absurd and involuntary crime, which results in an incapacity for sex. From then on he is fearful of his own physicality, something which he does not acknowledge until many years later: "I can't be around women" [...] There's something. I choke - like a kind of bad asthma - if I get around them too close. If I get interested in them. You know. Because of something that happened long time ago. Something I did." (*Postcards* 172) Loyal's web of attachments starts to misalign when he kills Billy, who wanted to take him away from his home, and finally - and dramatically - succeeded in doing so. Proulx, who is not blind to the obvious irony, ties Loyal to her image up until the moment of his death, when he, too, becomes part of the landscape.

Sewall's initial perceptual practice is what she refers to as a kind of spiritual practice, which includes learning to attend: an attention that she divides into endogenous and exogenous (Sewall 1995: 204). Endogenous attention unconsciously focuses on inner desires, needs and priorities. Loyal's primary issues shift from attachment to his lover, farm and family to escape and survival: 'nothing seemed changed except the uncanny sharpness of his vision and the tightness that gripped somewhere under his breastbone.' (*Postcards* 5) This 'sharpness of vision' is the alarming consequence of an inner re-evaluation of priorities: 'He saw and heard everything with brutal clarity; yet the thing that had happened up beside the wall was confused.' (*Postcards* 5)

Endogenous attention has to do with a focus on the familiar, which is what orients attention towards certain stimuli. Loyal's endogenous attention will work in reverse, as he gets attention from what he knows but cannot see: the old petrified image of the family farm.

Exogenous attention, on the other hand, has to do with how humans are 'drawn to novelty or change within the visual field' (Palmer 2002: 206). It implies not only perception but also some form of learning, as it refers to noticing changes in the - ever-changing - landscape and being able to perceive threats or opportunities. Loyal's first interactions with landscape could be traced back to attentiveness and perception gained during the years in Vermont. And yet he fails to recognize where his skill comes from: 'His own feeling for where to look he couldn't explain. It was like trapping, part instinct for the way the animals might move through a country, part feeling for the millennial landscape, an interior knowledge that suggested where lakes and mud wallows, where sinkholes and fissures had been in that vanished world.' (*Postcards* 157) Loyal's shift from pilgrim to improver is based on that premise, and although his attention remains numb, he can still perform extraction from nature, thanks to his remaining skills. This new state, in which attention is lacking, stays away from the visible world. His attachment to landscape means: first get a farm, and then barely survive. While he's working in the Mary Mugg mine, he discusses the matter: "Yeah, and you get your farm. If you're still crazy enough to want one" "I just want a little place I can work myself." (*Postcards* 88)

Perceiving the relations –not mainly 'things'– is Sewall's second practice regarding environmental awareness. She contends that the materialistic culture in which we are immersed does reveal anything beyond what we can see, due mainly to our cultural tradition (Sewall 1995: 207). Post-human thought corroborates this concept as it 'destabilizes many of our most cherished assumptions about what we are and where we live' (Palmer 2002: 171), blurring the distinction between the physical and the non-physical. Loyal takes exotic

landscapes for what they are: literally, the Western model of the 'solitary knower'. He praises productive farmland 'looking over the richest soil in the world, a million years of decomposing grass layers, unrolled in earthy floors on each side of the road' (*Postcards* 56). He perceives the things, what he sees, in a reductionist mode, insensitive to any interface between 'media and forces' (Sewall 1995: 207), whereas the Indian comments "'These fields is so level [...] you can stand on your running board and see from one end to the other. But you oughta see it if the flood comes, if the river goes over the banks. Everything, it's like a mirage, houses, tractor sheds sticking out on the water [...] I know people fell in it and never get up.'" (*Postcards* 57) The Indian attempts to show him the broader view of dynamic relations, which adds a dimension of complexity and liveliness.

Proulx suggests that the natives have a distinct relationship with the land, in terms of reading it and perceiving it. They read the signs and bring 'conscious participation to the moment of observation' (Sewall 1995: 209). Barry Lopez, in *A Literature of Place*, agrees, pointing out that

as a rule, indigenous people pay much closer attention to nuances in the physical world. They see more: from a paucity of evidence, carefully observed, they can deduce a great deal. Second, their history, both tribal and personal, is rooted in a particular place, and those roots are invariably deep. These histories create a temporal dimension in what would otherwise be a purely spatial landscape. Third, indigenous people tend to occupy the same moral universe as the landscape they sense.

(Lopez 1997: 11)

Tredinnick also reminds us how native cultures –the Inuit, for example– continually perceive context and relations, as opposed to the more

archetypal Western behaviour. Sewall maintains that the key to 'being part of' or 'in relationship with' lies in that practice (Sewall 1995: 209).

Loyal's attempt at harmonizing his web of attachments has one more step to go: an ecological way of seeing. Sewall calls it "perceptual flexibility", a concept that takes us back to the post-human notion of the interconnectedness of all natural systems, without any privileged concepts. If one has to be perceptually flexible and have 'freshness of vision', this is clearly not Loyal's case. To achieve that, Barry Lopez suggests the term 'companionship' to distinguish it from notions of ownership or power: 'It may be more important now to enter into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with everything around us than to continue to work toward the sort of control of the physical world that, until recently, we aspired to.' (Lopez 1997: 12) Sewall discusses the relevance of a different concept of time in nature: 'forest time', as opposed to the scheduled, hourly urban concept. If forest time involves perceiving the measurements or points of reference such as temperature, soil composition, rainfall, seasons and logging (Sewall 1995: 212), then Proulx's portrait of Loyal presents the image of an individual who does not perceive forest time. His perception of time is frozen, which results in a lack in his foresight capability and, more important, in his perspective of time. He has no relative perspective of time 'beyond that of a human lifetime' (1995: 211). His landscape is timeless, cryogenized, unchanged. Loyal's reluctance to perceive forest times alienates him and detaches him still further from nature. He displays a kind of imbalance with respect to the land, since he does not relate to time and space, forest time and landscape, although he is able to feel the history of the place:

He hears the slipping twinned voices canted at each other in fifths, the Stamping Dance of the Oglala, the voices whirling away and dropping, together, apart, locked in each other's trembling throats. The fast war dance, hypnotic and

maddening, has irradiated the sandstone. He has only to hold a mass of stone in each hand and bring them together again and again, faster and faster, twice the speed of the beating heart.

(*Postcards* 250)

Ultimately, he does not interact with the pace of the earth processes around him but takes advantage of the few economic rewards he needs for survival: "Hey, what's the government pay for uranium, anyway?" (*Postcards* 88) However, there was a time when the language of the land was not strange to him, when he was more of a companion, a pilgrim: 'He saw beyond the ravenous appetite and the knowing mind to a shifting world of coyotes staking out of their territories, coyotes in love, courting, raising families, playing cards, visiting each other. Coyote territories like nations. He'd listened to their yipping talk for almost thirty years, and felt he knew some of the language.' (*Postcards* 250)

In Chapter 2, I referred to Barry Lopez' remark about proprioception as a key to attentiveness and a means of gaining intimacy with the landscape. It refers to stimuli that are produced and perceived within an organism, and which replicate what Sewall refers to when he addresses the practice of re-perceiving depth. Loyal has moved from fine perception to ultimate disjunction, detachment and an inability for perception, living, and he never regains his 'sense of inclusion' (Lopez 1997: 12). The change of worldview suggested by Sewall here is precisely the joke played on him. Less and less Loyal is able each time to recognize the matrix he is part of, which in Sewall's Gaian reading would mean the realization of being part of the biosphere instead of *on* a planet (Sewall 1995: 212). Ben Rainwater attempts to approach Loyal in these terms when he affirms that "most of the world sees nothing above the sun" (*Postcards* 171), but fails to get the message across. Loyal does not allow himself a sensual response; he is vulnerable but not receptive, which results in an imbalance. His inability to re-

perceive being part of the new landscape stems from his sense of still being part of the old one, and yet he notices some disconnection and wonders about it: 'Why the hell, thought Loyal, did it always turn into a mess?' (*Postcards* 167) Sewall contends that 'sensing our embeddedness within the biosphere may also be practiced with imagination: imagine being seen by trees, boulders, and stones, by rivers and animals. Imagine they are watching. It produces a notable sensual experience of 'being part of', within something magnificent and much vaster than ourselves.' (Sewall 1995: 213) This approach to sensing the landscape around us is compatible with Palmer's definition of the post-human subject, which suggests connection and articulation to a system 'that both reflects it and modifies it' (Palmer 1995: 171). Loyal cannot hold on to any new environment, since his old connection to the land keeps him from doing so. Thus he can never be part of anything. He is not permeable to the changing landscapes and, as a consequence, cannot perform any kind of communication or exchange. At the very end of the narrative, Loyal thinks he has finally found a nice old bone by chance – he can't read landscape - which in turn is a fulgurite.⁶ He immediately goes to a university and tries to cash it in, but he's told that "this is just not the way it's done, old-timer." (*Postcards* 294) His ongoing process of mental decline foregrounds this misalignment, emphasizing how the lack of genuine deep perception can lead to a devastating aftermath.

According to Sewall, the fifth element that paves the way for a rationale of environmental awareness is imagination: 'the practice of visual imagery' (Sewall 1995: 214). Learning to work with it empowers us to distinguish between perception and reality. Sewall maintains that 'among other benefits, imagination provides the opportunity to invent our worldview.' Sewall calls it 'the imaginal self', and defends the claim that the images created through imagination may well be the guide to

⁶ Vitreous material formed of sand or other sediment fused by lightning (from the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2.0.3, 51.5, 2005-2007: Apple Inc.).

our daily unconscious choices (1995: 214). The images Loyal carries with him –his visions– are significant determinants of subjective reality and choice, his future. These perceptions are not a product of his active imagination but the passive frosted images of his primary landscape. Loyal increasingly loses his power of imagination and this disempowerment does not let the old images be replaced by new ones, for him to move on. Ben Rainwater points at the silence and the music of the land:

He remarked that the wind was coming up, talked to Loyal, then to himself, and still he drank, slowly now, sipping careful mouthfuls of an amount he knew was right. The onerous bands loosened. The wind moaned.

“You know,” he said, “you can get so used to silence that it’s painful when you hear music again.” Through the wind Loyal could not remember any music he’d ever heard. The wind became all the music since the beginning. It disallowed musical memories. He tried to think of “Home on the Range,” but the wind took everything.

(Postcards 170)

Interestingly, Mark Tredinnick reads the interconnections between land and the human spirit in terms of lively musical forms -rhythm and dance-, as ‘a network of relationships intrinsically dynamic’ (Tredinnick 2005: 290) and insists on the role of imagination as the key to ecological engagement. His quote of Paul Carter takes us back to Palmer’s matrix: ‘A particular landscape is not only what we see and hear. It includes all the things that escape our notice’ (2005: 290). The inability to develop clear visions and refreshing imaginations deprives Loyal of a guide, a future and a road to salvation. Proulx has always referred to imagination as crucial in keeping us connected: “Imagination is the

human mind's central life strategy. It is how we anticipate danger, pleasure, threat. The imagination is how our expectations are raised and formulated; it excites and ennobles our purpose in life. [...] Imagination is the central pivot in human's life" (Bolick 1997). Significantly, by the end of his life he is referred to as 'the old Hat Man' by young couple Paula and Kostj, who listen to his stories in compassion and admiration. For them he is 'a rank old man, grease and dirt and dog, hard face under the scarred forehead, hat brim tipped over the eyes.' (*Postcards* 273)

The kind of reading that I have suggested contrasts with a reading of the subject in terms of culture versus nature. It attempts more to reach the concept on the basis of a world where no one is separate, pure or unarticulated. (Palmer 2002: 175). The image of Loyal Blood should be understood as an individual surrounded by connections and articulations he fails to take hold of. Proulx renders a protagonist that is unconnected and refusing to connect, except through the mental form of his old memories and former attachments. Loyal's way to perception suggests Palmer's idea that personal responsibility here becomes a material issue, not a divine one. (Palmer 2002: 175) Loyal's former connections to the past, old, unrenewed, define his inability to re-perceive and to establish new connections. He seems aware of his misalignment but does not succeed in his endeavor to get back:

He had tried to keep the tremulous balance of his life, walking a beam between short friendships and abrupt departures. He thought of nights in the sand, the squalls of desert foxes, the stars screeching points of light cutting paths and orbits, the gaping core. And the shuddering hours with Ben in the observatory tracing sidereal arcs with the still camera, trying to follow Ben's vaulting talk of distant energy and collapsing matter.

(*Postcards* 186-7)

In *Postcards*, according to this reading, what dies with Loyal's road to ruin, decline and extinction is a matrix, a series of vital and rich connections that signify impoverishment for the economic improvers who will take the land for granted and fail to perceive the relations within the landscape, which they are inevitably and responsibly part of.

CHAPTER 4. LANDSCAPE AS A SYMBOL OF A NEW GENERATION

What was left was a kind of worn, neutral stuff, a brownish dust possessing only utility. This ghost ground, ephemeral yet enduring, was what it came down to.

Annie Proulx, *That Old Ace in the Hole*

This section reverses the viewpoint of the two previous ones regarding the direction of the influence exerted between landscape and humans. So far we have seen, first, how landscape initially defines an individual's identity and, second, how the individual's lack of harmony in his relationship with landscape can lead to loss or fatal disjunction. In this section I will reverse the directional argument of interrelation. My argument is that *Postcards* reflects the invasion of landscape by economic powers and extractive improvers, which leads to the decline of a previously self-sustainable model of landscape: the family-operated dairy farm. In the odyssey of the Bloods, Proulx addresses causes and consequences, clearly pointing her finger at what Slovic refers to as disjointed improvers (agribusinesses, developers, etc.). In her view, they have ruined a three-century-old partnership with landscape which is 'the backbone of northern New England's economy' (Morris 2000). Throughout Loyal's wanderings and the disintegration of the farm, the focus widens to include the entire country, from New England to California, where those new generations of improvers play out a 'satire of the American frontier expansion' (Morris 2000), leaving behind a large imprint on both human and natural landscapes.

The Bloods' progressive abandonment of their farm, together with their refusal to continue as stewards of the land, allows new movers to enter and redefine its uses. A landscape that has been looked after by seven generations of the same family is promptly subdivided, sold and given 'unnatural' uses by the well-to-do second owners who replace

them. *Postcards* clearly undergoes this reading of landscape through human agency and improver involvement. Rural landscape is then defined in terms of utility, from leisure to extraction. Proulx sees the use of landscape today in the same terms: 'the locus of the raw stuff of extractive industries such as timber and coal; good places for nuclear testing and missile silos, and now, for the storage of nuclear waste' (Proulx 2009: 8).

Proulx illustrates this bleak decay-through-intervention of the American landscape by means of a diversity of characters. They fall into three categories: the impoverished pilgrims/dwellers forced to leave their land and relocate (the surviving Bloods: Jewell, Dub and Mernelle) and who have no choice but to readjust; the newcomers who purchase the land and dramatically transform it; and improver-extractors (typified by those Loyal meets during his odyssey), whose aim is to suck nature dry and then move on, embarking on what Barry Lopez refers to as 'detours to hell' (Lopez 1997: 10). Of the three, only the first group retains to a greater or lesser degree a 'spiritual affinity' with nature (Lopez 2001: 250), which is what keeps them connected, and closer to the 'pilgrim' status that Slovic refers to. The three types project one way or another on the land of the Bloods' farm, which changes from a rural dairy operation in 1944 to a trailer park next to a dumpster camp in the late 80s. The degree of improver carelessness for the land is proportional to their dire economic circumstances, and is reflected in the ultimate responsibility for the destruction of the environment and the subjugation of 'its wild inhabitants' (Proulx 2009: 16).

Jewell, Loyal's mother and head of the clan, has to sell the farm after Loyal departs, and her son and husband are put behind bars. Her name, too, signifies character correspondence, suggesting that she is a valuable member of the family. When Proulx places female characters in Western households, she gives them a role that she calls 'active absence'. The advice of a pilgrim-turned-improver relative named Ronnie Nipple, together with sheer economics will force the family to

sell most of the land and the farm, with the exception of the farmhouse. Nipple is now into rural real estate and apparently takes care of Jewell, advising her on economic moves. She feels the mark of generations in the land: “this farm has been in the Blood family since the Revolutionary War days. I’ll never know why Mink didn’t go to Ott, why he didn’t think the farm could bring anything.” (*Postcards* 113) Jewell reads some of the signs of the new times and is forced to move, relocating to a new landscape that she only partially understands. Caught between her attachment to the farm and her craving for freedom and independence, Jewell sees her domestic space reduced to a trailer in a trailer park, from where she can see the land that used to be theirs. She stands for the new role of women in American society in the decades after World War Two, free and economically independent. Her readjustment means not only living in the trailer, but also working two jobs to support herself, and learning to drive: all signs that she is a woman of the new age. Once relocated, Jewell often misses old feelings and sensations, as she cannot capture familiarity in the new domestic environment. Despite the commodities, including an electric oven, a symbol of the electrification of rural areas, she still misses the old authentic tastes and flavors and, the real sensations she experienced at the farm. Now everything she eats is canned or frozen. Through Mernelle, Proulx has us look back and reminds us of the importance things we might easily have dismissed:

”Mernelle, you remember the hens we raised were so good. I can just taste one of those big roasters, go seven or eight pounds, sitting on the platter all crispy and roasted with a good bread stuffing. Make your mouth water just to smell it. I always liked my food and I guess I miss the stuff we grew on the farm. [...] There’s nothing so tender as home-canned beef. You can’t buy it for love nor money”

(*Postcards* 175)

Somehow Jewell manages to support a dual structure of loyalties –on the one hand her former life, and on the other the new economic and domestic premises that keeps her connected and moving on. The stimuli and challenges of this new existence lead her to venture beyond the borders of the familiar and into the unknown. Moreover, it provides her with a freedom of movement she never enjoyed before. Proulx's exercise in geographic determinism⁷ places Jewell in a dangerous and eventually fatal situation; on an excursion to Mount Washington in her '66 orange Beetle, her car gets trapped on a logging road and, as she is trying to free it with a pole, she dies of an aneurism. Her body is never found. Like those of Billy and Loyal, it has physically become part of the landscape.

Even though the character of Jewell can be read at different levels, I find it relevant to point out this change of role within the familiar landscape and the final maladjustment to it. Rooted in the past, Jewell sees the advantages of the new life, while longing for the feel of a rural lifestyle that is long lost. Proulx places her at the mercy of the rugged, overpowering geography of her narratives, as she succumbs to natural forces, dying in nature, but still in an improver-transformed landscape that becomes a road to destruction.

Dub, the Bloods' youngest son, has no interest in the farm and lacks the attachment that Loyal feels. After losing an arm jumping boxcars, he is crippled and of no use on the farm. As a result he longs for a different life and dreams of learning to improve his personal situation somewhere far from the hinterlands. When he's around the farm, Dub is in a constant state of disjunction with the landscape. Only after Loyal left did he feel part of the farm, working hand in hand with his irascible

⁷ The fate of most characters in Proulx's literature is often determined by their relationship to landscape. From *Heart Songs* (1995) to her last collection *Fine Just The Way It Is* (2008) the tragic fate of those characters challenges the American idea of the self-made man or woman, free to adopt an identity (Weatherford 1999: 152), thus reinforcing the concept of geographic determinism in which landscape plays a central role.

father until disaster struck. He lacks Loyal's perception, nor is he ready for it. He does not hesitate to help his father Mink burn down the barn for the insurance money, for which he will be incarcerated. In *Postcards* Dub's arch of character development goes from estrangement to economic prosperity.

His name, like Loyal's, signifies character correspondence, and I would argue that he clearly falls into the mainstream of developers/improvers who plague the country after the fifties once he is released from his confinement. He applies for a number of jobs –electric milking farm operator, piano tuner, electrician, grain salesman-, but is invariably turned down as soon as they see the hook, where his hand ought to be. Divorced and father of a son he will never see, Dub moves to Florida and gradually attains prosperity in the real estate business, missing no opportunity to take advantage of the land and the economic possibilities it offers. After real estate school, he learns the ropes and develops his improver's mind. Through Dub, Proulx's sharp eye highlights Walt Disney's purchase of cheap land on which to build what is now Disneyworld, as well as a residential area, for which a vast area of swampland was drained and ecosystems destroyed. He is aware of the consequences, but dismisses them: 'The Reedy Creek Improvement District, Disney World they will call it when it's done. Expensive plastic shit, he thinks. But winks and says to himself, thanks a million.' (*Postcards*, 203) Dub is immediately corrupted by Miami, where he develops a sense of place, awed as he is by the superficiality of the Disneyworld-like images which the place exudes:

Along the streets Dub sees the parade of bright dresses, gold chains and sequins. Above the city a fan of clouds like crimson knife blades, below, marble sidewalk. He passes a window, and in it an antique gramophone horn with painted morning glories surging out of its throat. I love this, he thinks, the shriek of jets, statues with flowery garlands, the

front yard layaway saints lit with pink neon and the flashbulb of tourists, windows heaped with conch shells, the raw bars and imitation shrunken heads, fish baskets and painted textiles and the funky music, the wild toughs, the deals and dirt, the eroding beaches, the sense of being in a foreign and lethal place. Home.

(*Postcards* 204)

He feels a desire to belong, but in disjunctive terms. As Mahoney and Katz affirm, 'The desire to belong somewhere is as common as the impetus to find ways [...] to establish a connection to a place and a community.' (Mahoney and Katz 2009: 24) While the authors are referring to an understanding achieved in terms of respect and understanding, clearly Dub's appreciation is purely economic; he commits to this specific geographical place, which is overtly conducted in terms of utility. His partner in crime is Pala, his Cuban American wife, who has turned into a real modern-day improver, one who has no scruples when it's about 'going big' in real estate. Dub is attracted to her improver's mind: "I am more interested in the special commercial properties –centrally designed, landscaped projects that balance hotels, shopping malls, marinas and services in a beautiful and coherent way. Spaces with water elements, plants, esplanades, open air restaurants. That is why I applied here." (*Postcards* 183) Pala and Dub, an immigrant and a crippled farmer boy, have to all appearances succeeded in realizing their particular version of the American Dream.

Here Proulx is clearly referring to the economic growth and striking changes that have taken place in the city's landscape. They are attributed to the influence of drug money, especially cocaine, in a time of marked economic recession, a critical period that Billy Corben describes in his documentary movie *Cocaine Cowboys* (2006). Miami's opulence during this period (mid-to-late 70s) is contrasted with the rest of

southern Florida, where real estate markets were collapsing and the unemployment rate increased dramatically. Crime rose to such an extent that on November 23, 1981 South Beach appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* under the heading 'Paradise Lost?' This was a clear reference not only to the changing lifestyle, but also to the disfigurement of the landscape. In this context, Dub's image of tacky prosperity is decadent and grotesque, almost surrealistic when contrasted with the old days when he was working on the farm: 'Dub, fat in white linen in the peacock chair, having breakfast beside the pool before sunrise. The chilled mimosa, the opal-fleshed melon with a twist of tangerine juice, then the country ham and the quail eggs flown in from Japan, blackhearted coffee that wired you for the day.' (247)

The tax administrators –the IRS– are after them, and they receive a postcard summoning them to have their books examined. After experiencing a rioters' attack in the streets, which terrifies Pala, they decide to move to Houston and open a travel agency. They leave Miami well-off, having risen to the top of the Miami "jet set", thanks to their improver achievements: 'He and Pala had an instinct for the protected properties, islands joined to the mainland by a single causeway or bridge. Peninsulas with a single approach road. They understood the clients who needed certain properties. He wished the tax people would understand them.' (*Postcards*, 248) Prosperous but troubled, they cash their chips and leave Miami for Houston, just as the IRS is investigating them for tax fraud. Dub, now retired, grows orchids as a hobby, his first attempt at any type of cultivation. As Rood suggests, this is quite an appropriate vocation for someone with 'no sense or connection to the land' (Rood 2001: 74), seeing that orchids survive without any contact with the soil.

Mernelle, the Bloods' youngest daughter is perhaps the only survivor, following the disintegration of the farm unit. She measures her success in readjusting in terms of 'lack of pain', just like Quoyle in *The Shipping News*. Proulx draws an archetype of young woman in the

domestic role Mernelle is destined for. As a young girl she shows all the signs of connection and conjunction with the landscape, including feeling part of it. To borrow Sewall's terms, she perceives it as a relationship to and a partnership with nature:

She stepped into the blueberries and picked a few. They were still tinged with purple and sour. She squinted at the sky remembering the dusky brass color it had taken on the eclipse a month ago, though the sun had stayed visible and white. She had been disappointed, had hoped for a black sky with a flaming corona burning a hole in the darkness of midmorning. No suck luck. The mournful call came again, and she stripped a handful of berries and leaves, chewed them as she climbed the hill back to the house and only spat them out at the fence.

(Postcards 63)

Mernelle is perhaps the character through whom Proulx displays 'partnership', or what Barry Lopez refers to as 'intimacy' with the place (Lopez 1997: 11). When the fatal disruption takes place, the moment when the farm and the land are lost, after Mink has hanged himself in jail, she turns to the landscape, and reads its inauspicious and proleptic signs: 'Mernelle sat dreamily rocking staring out the window at the scorched house foundation. She was apart from this talk. Fireweed had already surged up out of the cavity. The trilling was maddening. The weeds spurted, mallow, peppergrass, dog strangle vine, stinking wall rocket. The barberry bush near the old dog's grave in sullen flower, the moths nipping and jittering.' (*Postcards* 112) Mernelle effortlessly replicates her housewife-mother's pattern, but she does not have her mother's longing for independence, in spite of the fact that Jewell reminds her about the importance of that freedom, a liberation she had never experienced: "You better learn to drive a car Mernelle soon's you

can so you don't get stuck on a farm. I wanted to learn years ago, but your father said no, still won't have it, no, doesn't like the idea of his wife drivin' around." (*Postcards* 65) She is the passive witness of the profound transformations in both landscape and the world around her. She just wants a better place.

Mernelle marries Ray McWay through a newspaper campaign to find him a wife, and the two of them adjust to the rapid transformation of the landscape around them, becoming a traditional 50s middle-class couple. Unlike Loyal, she never leaves Vermont and the only contact she has with the world outside is also through postcards. Mernelle represents the end of the line for the Blood clan, as she and Ray do not have children: "This family has got a habit of disappearing. Every one of this family is gone except me. And I'm the end of it." (*Postcards* 225) Mernelle's sterility stands for the end of a lifestyle, but also for the lack of a future for generations who have deserted their cultural environment for what Kowalewski identifies as 'attitudes, and economic and social forces that threaten local distinctiveness.' (Kowalewski 2001: 242)

As noted above, the breakup and subdivision of the Bloods' land stands for the rapid and significant transformation of rural areas during the second half of the 20th century. In *Postcards* Proulx samples city improvers who are trying to redefine landscape through the subplot of Wilkin, the Boston dentist who buys one of the lots from the Bloods' farm. Ronnie Nipple, as we have seen, is the neighbor that 'helps' farmers in Cream Hill to sell their land. He drops cards in the neighborhood postboxes urging them to sell: '*Dear neighbor, since the death of my mother I have got out of farming and into Real Estate. With our boys coming back from the war there is a good market for farms. If you are thinking about Selling your place why not deal with a neighbor who can get you the Best Price? Call Nipple Real Estate at 4989 and let's talk turkey.*' (*Postcards* 71) Farmer turned improver, Nipple feels contempt for the land, which invests him as the instrument that cuts the

bonds between seven generations of farm families and their lands, and provoking the scattering of those families who change from being stewards of the land to what Proulx calls 'service providers to the rich moving in' (Morris 2000). Nipple has metamorphosed into a personage of the new times: 'Leatherette briefcase bouncing against his leg, his upper body encased in a tight plaid jacket, head rocking left, right, left, Ronnie Nipple came up the may path. In the drive his dusty blue Fleetline Aerosedan cooled.' (*Postcards* 111) He has also swiftly learned the new suave improver ways: "A piece of the orchard so you can keep up your pies and applesauce. Ott has offered a real good price for the cropland and pasture, that field of Loyal's prob'ly more than it's worth right now. And I got a doctor from Boston wants to buy the woodlot and the sugar bush, build a hunting camp up in the woods. Between Ott and the doctor you'll be free and clear of the debts. It'll lay it right out for you, Jewell" (113)

While Jewell is grateful that at least part of the land will stay in the family –Mink's brother Ott is going to buy Loyal's land–, Ronnie describes the 'real' causes of the Bloods' downfall, summarizing the full philosophy that connects both ends of the equation in the trade of the land –farmers turned improvers and new residents: "You folks kept yourselves up here [...] Missed on a few things. Changes. It's not just what a farm will bring for a farm, now. There's people with good money want to have a summer place. The view. That's important. See the hills, some water. The places with the barn right across the road from the house don't move good but if there's a pretty view, why..." (*Postcards* 114) The land has become useful and he will have his share. Days after the sale of the farm, Jewell gets suspicious when she sees her brother-in-law Ott appear on the land with a bulldozer: "I'd like to know what he thinks he's going to do with that. [...] He says he wants to plant corn. I never see a farmer use a bulldozer.' (*Postcards* 119) Jewell feels betrayed and angry when she discovers him bulldozing the land at night and dividing it into small lots. She soon realizes that he is setting up a trailer park in

partnership with Ronnie Nipple. Mahoney and Katz refer to the extent and impact of such practices, stressing the influence of outsiders on rural landscape transformation, when they argue that 'like colonies, regions, then, may be produced for the eastern market, for outsiders and by outsiders' (Mahoney and Katz 2009: xv).

The arrival of Franklin Wilkin, a Boston dermatologist who has bought the other half of the Bloods' land, is an extreme exemplar of a different use of the landscape, carried out by city improvers. Cultural disjunction and lack of perception make for an explosive combination that will result in the abuse and neglect of the land. He materializes Ronnie Nipple's vision: Wilkin also sees the land in terms of utility, this time as a site for a vocational home and outdoor adventures. He and his family arrive at his new piece of land in Vermont and camp out. From day one he shows no connection with the land, but rather curiosity. He is an outsider who cannot read nature:

There was too much to look at. Knotted branches. The urgent but senseless angular pointing of tree limbs. Grass the color of wafers. Trees lifting soundless explosions of chrome and saffron. Mountains scribbled maroon, riven by mica-shot cliffs. The yelling light. He looked up and the sky filled with swarming points. If he walked into the woods, land tilted, trees thronged like gnats, the air turned sallow and he was lost. He always came back to the wall for his bearings, finding in its linear perseverance, its lichened stones, a rope in the wilderness.

(Postcards 129)

The hunting camp that he and his half-brother are planning fulfills the fantasies of youth. Their story contrasts with the old ideal of the simple

life with inhuman urban complexity. Their plan for 'shooting weekends in the autumn, deer season, about lovely dogs who might range and cast before them' (*Postcards* 130) is more about property than stewardship. Their improver disjunction is intrinsically linked to a feeling of possession and ownership: "It's a different thing than coming up for the skiing or staying at a Woodstock inn, or even visiting friends or taking a house for the summer. That someone in the family owns the land." (*Postcards* 130) As with most newcomers, their activities are determined more by the urge to own than by the 'sense of belonging' or the longing for companionship (Lopez 1997: 12). Kowaleswki explains that newcomers do not feel the need to connect with old residents, as their possession of the land is done in capitalist terms: 'Citizens are reduced to mere consumers and livable communities are seen as commodities to be purchased rather than entities that must be created, often with great effort, for ourselves.' (Kowalewski 2001: 243) Witkin displays a growing infatuation with the land, and every weekend he drives up from Boston alone, seeking shelter in a strange landscape that he owns: 'It was as if the road between his two lives was the realest thing of all, as if the journey counted more than arriving at the end.' (*Postcards* 133) At first, the 'place' in Vermont is barely an escape from their overscheduled agendas. And yes, he gradually feels that the camp is the 'kernel of things', as it draws him away from his family and his life in Boston. He is confused about the feeling he has for the place and about the unknown connections, as he does not know how to 'perceive the relations' (Sewall 1995: 207) and is in permanent disjunction: 'A cold confusion invaded him. Witkin was off-balance with every step.' (*Postcards* 164) He sees the land but does not equate with it. As an outside improver, Witkin is invulnerable to the sensual stimuli his place produces, and he is unable to gain intimacy with it (Lopez 1997: 12) since he does not pay attention. Lack of attentiveness makes him a stranger in his own place. Sense of place tries to enter him in a way that he cannot discern, and he wonders how to attain it:

Only the half brother understood the atavistic yearning that swept him when he stood beneath the trees, when a branch in the wind made the sound of an oboe. He had only to walk into the woods far enough to lose the camp, and he was in an ancient time that lured him but which he could not understand in any way. No explanation for his sense of belonging here. He stared, numb with loss, into bark crevices, scrabbled in the curling leaves for a sign, turned and turned until the saplings heaved their branches and the trunks tilted away from him. He could hear a little drum, a chant. But what could it mean? The kernel of life, tiny, heavy, deep red in color, was secreted in these gabbling woods. How could he understand it?

(Postcards 165)

Detached from his family home and the medical world, in the woods he feels inexplicably alive. Ray Suarez, quoted by Kowalewski, explains the urban effect of the urbanites fleeing the cities, also leaving an imprint on metropolitan communities, in terms of breaking up the harmony of many neighborhoods. (Kowalewski 2001: 245) Throughout the years Witkin –he is now Frank– changes the camp, adding extensions, and slowly grows apart from Larry, older and too tired for long climbs in the woods. His imprint on the old Bloods’ land has changed the former landscape into a new concept: ‘The roof of the abandoned farmhouse below had fallen in. No one could guess there had been a farm there. The trailer park spread wide, dusty lanes jerked along the hillside. When the wind was from the south, Witkin could hear engines and shouting. Yet on this hundred acres the wild woods came even closer, the trees multiplied.’ *(Postcards 252)* Even though he has owned the camp for

years, Witkin can't make anything out of the place, he does not read, understand or feel the 'sense of belonging' to the place in that 'confusion of trees' (252).

He decides to tame, dominate and reorder nature: 'He began to put the chaos of nature in order. The sinuous wood music, once so beguiling, had taken on discordance like a malfunctioning speaker. The same endless hum as the high tension wires when he had stood beneath them waiting for Larry to drive the deer across, confusing him so that he had not heard the deer come, had only seen the tawny motion.' (*Postcards* 252-3) Significantly, he decides to reorder an area with two-hundred-year-old maple trees and projects a new lawn, a sign of the new times. He feels a rush to get it done – 'other projects swarmed his mind, he had to hurry' (254). He has the machinery, tools and plans. He is ready to adapt the landscape he does not understand to his urban improver needs. Tredinnick states that 'what seems to count is how we choose to be present in the land, how deeply and subtly we look' (Tredinnick 2005: 77). Witkin clearly lacks subtlety and attention, and that makes him fail in every attempt to be part of it. One day, digging near a wall and rearranging the stones, he finds the buried remains of a woman. It is Billy. His romanticizing nature makes him think it is the grave of a pioneer's wife, and he leaves it the way he found it so as not to profane a sacred place: "Poor woman, I wonder who you were?" he said. In respect he undid the day's work, dragged the stone back to wall and levered it home again He would not desecrate a grave.' (*Postcards* 255)

Years later, Witkin's son Kevin lives in the camp, next to the trailer park. Out of work, money and drugs, he is bothered by the noises coming from the trailer park – 'a cacophonous symphony of slamming doors' (306). Proulx portrays the social maladjustment to the land, which is now used to set camp, living trailers, a completely new use of landscape. The place has turned into a messy ruin. Misalignment and disjunction lead him to destruction. The dirt and decay of the trailer park contrasts sharply with what the land was once, the Bloods' farm.

The scene drives Kevin crazy: 'Filth was washing up around him. Yup! He walked along a washed-out road that went nowhere, smelled filth, found a decaying pig's carcass. Crows had pecked the eyes out. The skin pecked into pebble finish. Loosened reddish hair on the ground in sheets. The guts pulled away by something.' (*Postcards* 307) The trailer park packs up and the feelings of decay and carelessness for the place are invasive: 'The trailers were packed closer and closer together. Overhead a jet roared. Yellow-eyed dogs on chains. In the doorways women holding beer cans or cigarettes or babies. Watching him. He drove faster, the car swung in the greasy ruts.' (307) In the end, Kevin drives up to a hill and shoots himself with his father's hunting rifle.

Through the subplot of the Witkin' family, Proulx focuses the spotlight upon generations of improvers who first owned the land, and tried to manipulate it into a state of total disjunction, but their inability was its destruction. Rood points out that the exploitation of Loyal's field stands as a metaphor for Americans of the late 20th century, who are far more likely to resemble Witkin than Loyal, without any deep understanding or respect for the land (Rood 2001: 58). In conjunction with this idea, William Leach in *A Country of Exiles* explains the 'weakening of place' due to capitalist influences. He blames the heartless world of cosmopolitan escapists who do not acknowledge their own social location, assisted by legions of entrepreneurs who seem 'bent on transforming everything, and land above all, into vendible commodities, how they tended to measure everything from labor to art for its market value' (Leach 2000: 4). Thousands of acres across America became trailer parks as the recess of American economy gained visibility – during the 80s especially – and many people had to leave their homes and move into trailers. Not only that, but legions of well-to-do urbanites invaded rural areas, bought low-priced land and tried to set up their domestic spaces without any attention to or respect for the original landscape. This resulted, in most cases, in the destruction of the land of many generations of farmers who had been its faithful custodians for

generations⁸. Nature was never recovered and the American landscape was forever uniformly transformed into the walmarted or starbucked space it is now. Mahoney and Katz agree that ‘Today regional barriers, borders, and markers of difference have all been irrevocably breached, awash in the nationalizing and globalizing flood of the economy, polity, population, and culture.’ (Mahoney and Katz 2009: xx)

Together with impoverished pilgrims-dwellers –some turned into improvers– and newcomers who transform the land, *Postcards* presents a third of improvers formed by a number of characters that Loyal meets along his way. Their main objective or activity is that of extraction from the land. They see landscape as a means to economic progress and, as we saw in section two of this chapter, Loyal joins them and becomes one of them, until he loses all connection with the landscape. Unlike the newcomers, these ‘pure’ improvers exploit and go, squeeze nature for resources and move on choosing their presence in the land in opposite terms to Tredinnick concept: they enter the land ‘to manipulate, to possess’ not to learn or surrender (Tredinnick 2005: 71).

Deveaux, the shift’s boss in the Mary Mugg mine, personifies the archetype of the improver, who sees nothing but cash flow at the end of the use and abuse of the land. He had come to despise any job that had to do with working the land –farming – and the mine also means having nature out of sight:

“I swear to God I’d work for nothing, get out from under that sky. I seen red spots in front of my eyes all day long, squint, old eyes start to water and tear. Too bright, too hot, everything watching you. The wind never lets up, like a kid pullin’ at your sleeve all day, ‘Daddy buy me some candy.’

⁸ The midwest farm crisis of the 80s during the Reagan Administration had its roots in high interest rates, a 60% drop in the value of farmland, and overproduction which subsequently forced prices down. By early 1984, in the depths of the crisis, farm indebtedness had risen to \$215 billion. (See Ronald E. Seavoy’s *An Economic History of the United States: From 1607 to the Present*, 2006)

That's what I hated about farming. I tried that for five years.
You set out there all day on the tractor or stringing fence
and the wind throws trash in your face, whips your hair in
your eyes, knocks your hat into the next county and laughs
to see you run for it"

(Postcards 82)

This type of improver, in permanent disjunction with the land, appears in different modes and versions. Proulx's narrative produces a myriad of improvers who are cut from the same cloth. Loyal's co-workers at the mine are ready to move into the next big thing in extraction from the land, the uranium craze⁹: "Hey what's the government pay for uranium anyway?" "Heard the guaranteed maximum is seven dollars twenty-five cents a pound. How many pounds per ton depends on the strike. There's an average of four pounds to the ton. There's a rich Canadian strike paid out eighty pounds.' (88) Loyal will also work in uranium extraction, but will not hit the lucky strike. He takes up prospecting the moment ore prices are low. As prices rise again, big companies take over using expensive equipment and polluting the environment with 'acid leaching chemical extraction, [...] poison wastes and tailings, sand slurry choking the streams, big fish kills and mountains of dead reeking tailings' (*Postcards* 147). Proulx show again how Americans are 'poor stewards of the land, gradually losing any sense of connection to the natural world and the creatures who inhabit it.' (Rood 2001: 44) Loyal compares his bad luck with other prospectors who have become rich:

"And Charlie Steen, found the Mi Vida in the Big Indian
Wash area at the Moab. They say he got sixty million on that

⁹ The United States was the world's leading producer of uranium from 1953 until 1980, aimed at the nuclear industry. Mines were mainly located in the Midwestern states. Its mining produces vast amounts of waste material –radioactive, drilling and ore- Source: U.S: *Environmental Protection Agency* (<http://www.epa.gov>)

one. Then there was this truck driver started working on an old abandoned copper claim with his brother-in-law, The Happy Jack, and damned if they didn't get into uranium ore worth millions. Another guy was on his way to fix somebody's stock tank and got a flat tire. While he was fixing it, he just turned his old Geiger counter. You guessed it. There's a string of stories like that. It's out there. Some get rich."

(Postcards 152)

Even the trappers that Loyal has a chance to work with are changing the face of landscape to become extractors, rather than helping to balance ecosystems. Loyal runs into a trapper who offers him a lot of money to use his expertise on the land to trap bears, intending to pull out the animals' gallbladder and teeth for the Asian market: 'there is a market in Japan and Korean and China for certain substances. Aphrodisiacs. [...]. Stuff that the Japanese guys think will double the size of their prick and give' em a three-day hard-on. Sex stuff.' *(Postcards 245)* Loyal is assured he will not have to deal with the hardest part of the job: '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 the time.' (245) Proulx shows her concern for the annihilation of species within their ecosystems for economic improvement and illegal hunting, denouncing the complicity of government officials and wardens. A park official reveals 'there's so much money in the illegal it surprises me anybody's still on the decent side of the fence. Hell, it surprises me I am' *(Postcards 257)*. Proulx closes off the subject of the bears by stressing the responsibility and complicity of the law -what Barry Lopez calls 'a hazy legal understanding of responsibility' (Lopez 2001: 417) in cases of environment destruction- from the point of view of the prosecutors:

“Success is defined by the end result. You know where this scum are now? (...) Right where they were a year ago. Doing the same thing. Illegally trapping bear, taking the claws and gallbladders, selling to the Japanese and making a fortune. You know why? You know why all that work is down the tubes? Judges. Fucking, two-bit, smug, dumb, egocentric, stuck-up, ignorant and stupid judges who cannot tell their ass from a jelly doughnut. You be interested to know that those stinking humps that sat with you got fines for one hundred dollars each for ‘practicing taxidermy without a license.’ They peeled it off a roll as big as a ham and paid up with a smile. (...) Five-hundred-dollar fine and a thirty-day jail sentence suspended for ‘hunting out of season.’ (...) The judges think it’s funny. They don’t take any of it serious. That’s the trouble. And. They. Don’t. Care. We are going to see the end of bears in our lifetime.”

(Postcards 257-8)

Bulldozers are a powerful symbol for the erasure of past imprints on landscape. They clear the land for development in the interest of progress and capital gain. The most significant is the one described above (Ott’s), as it transforms the Bloods’ land into the trailer park area, with its divisions and lots, changing it, remodeling it from a living to a dead landscape for humans to move in as the Bloods desert it. This way of killing natural environments reappears when dermatologist Witkin, as I just stated, bulldozes the area around the camp to have a lawn, changing the original centennial landscape into an artificial man-made one, a sign of the emerging middle class. Machines also appear to represent the new generation of farmers who were able to adjust economically to the new times. However, those who overuse them also tend to overlook the messages which, according to Mahoney and Katz, an inhospitable environment tends to bring with it: ‘a harsh

environment provides reassurance of the overriding importance of nature in a culture that otherwise flaunts its ability to escape nature, through means such as air conditioning or irrigation.’ (Mahoney and Katz 2009: xxii) Of those, the Shears represent that obsession with machinery designed to tame the land in any desired way: “Get it with the eighteen-foot cutter bar. [...] Get it as big and string as you can. [...] The son of a bitch can harvest anything you grow, wheat, oats, barley, flax, peas, rice, clover, alfalfa, soybean, hay lupine, sunflower, sorghum or weeds, and them two can grow anything you can harvest.” (*Postcards* 190) Frank Cloves is a rancher by inheritance who ‘had a need as strong as disease to make a show of power.’ (*Postcards* 240) He is also a bulldozer improver that does not care for the land and, despite his wealth, is in permanent conflict with the landscape, going from misfortune to misfortune. He is a permanent abuser of the land, for example, when government trappers try to exterminate coyotes in his property: ‘[he] had the government trappers all summer with traps, snares, shooting from planes, cyanide guns and poison baits. The carcasses, mostly young animals, had been dumped to rot in an old gravel pit near the creek. The survivors, Loyal thought, would know every trick in the book.’ (*Postcards* 242)

One of the last improvers Loyal meets and works for is Kortnegger, the owner of a potato farm that employs and exploits illegal Mexican workers who work all day in the heat. He does not pay them and kills them if they try to escape or complain about their treatment. The cotton grove next to the farm is filled with scattered human skulls and bones. This modern-day slaveholder archetype focuses attention on agribusinesses, their abuse and exhaustion of the land, after replacing small farm operations across rural America. An assassin of workers, Kortnegger has set his farm on a dry area and has suffered a two-year drought. His improver’s mind made him misinterpret the signs of the land and now he curses it: “Two mile north and we never got a drop. Fuckin’ goddam country. Oughtta give it back to the goddamn Indians.”

(*Postcards*, 286) One night after a storm, Loyal discovers the dead bodies of illegal workers half buried in the ground, and departs before sunrise.

Proulx introduces improver characters around just about every corner of her narrative. *Postcards* insists on the disjunction not only between the new generations of American urbanites and nature, but also on the divorce that of the rural people themselves suffer with from the land. The lack of opportunities outside of the traditional rural ways of life has sudden and irreversible consequences for those who used to be in conjunction. Human relationships and behavior are highly conditioned by the way humans approach nature. Again, to come as a pilgrim or as an improver makes the difference, and examining the interaction of humans and landscape in those terms should work as a practical alert in terms of awareness. As Lopez advises, becoming companions, rather than owners or authorities, is part of the secret to success. Proulx's main aim in writing *Postcards* was to show the failure of a limited economic base for a region, which was 'often the very thing that gave the region its distinctive character and social ways' (Morris 2000). In this case the promises of electrification for rural areas after the war - 'farms first' -, an adjustment of rural areas to the changing times, meant the sudden collapse of a model that could not keep up with the pace of the country, what Lopez identifies as the main subject matter of literature of place: "The main topic of nature writing, I think, is not nature but the evolving structure of communities from which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development' (Lopez 1997: 10). The sources of the story for *Postcards* were actual episodes of farm burnings after an economic collapse: "The story's genesis was sparked by a small stack of fire marshal's reports during the Depression. There were a number of dismal accounts of farmers burning down their houses and barns for the meager insurance money. They had nothing else. From their desperate arson, with its roots in the global economic slump, emerged the story." (Morris 2000)

None of the *Postcards* characters examined achieves or attempts any journey to intimacy with the land, conjunction through the senses, or the practice of an awareness that could end in at-homeness, or give them a sense of inclusion. Most of them are people who want to manipulate, possess or extract. For them there is no hope. 'The true wealth that America offered, wealth that could turn exploitation into residency, greed into harmony, was to come from one thing – the cultivation and achievement of local knowledge' Lopez writes in *The Rediscovery of America* (Lopez 1992: 12). Proulx denounces how Americans are not only disconnected from nature, but from human landscapes as well. They come into nature with a benefit mindset and act in individual mode. They replicate each other's pattern, as their interaction with landscape is utilitarian: they come to take, to extract and to possess as landscapes diminish as they proceed. Landscape is a conscious goal, not an unconscious consequence. Theodore Roszak refers to the 'repression of ecological unconscious is the deepest root of collusive madness in industrial society' (Rozsak 2001: 320), and David Abram alludes to the lack of 'ethical responsibility' to the planet as a consequence of the 'collective myopia' or the 'psychic numbing' mentioned before (Abram in Sewall 1995: 202).

Proulx charges her characters with all of those features and sets them on the loose. Her interest in how particular regions and peoples see their future determined by changes in the economy and socio-cultural structures that are totally beyond their control is reflected in the fact that improvers and former inhabitants of rural landscapes are in disjunction. In short, she makes the point that Mark Tredinnick clearly states on his website and that he calls his 'credo', the only improvement that can help find conjunction: 'I believe in landscape, and I believe in literature. I believe, though it sounds strange to say so these days, that places teach us how to live right; I believe that they show us, if we let them, how to speak well; and I believe that the struggle to improve our

sentences, to make them lean and honest and humble, is the struggle to improve ourselves, and, by that means, the world.'

In *Postcards* Proulx vehemently warns us about the way to enter nature and the implications of understanding it in economic terms. The deterioration and annihilation of ecosystems, the merciless extraction of natural resources, the vandalization of archaeological sites, and the lack of responsibility and protection by the governments involved are all a consequence of a widespread improper modus operandi that seems dangerously genetic. She conveniently reminds us: 'never has there been a time in human history when landscapes have changed and disappeared with such rapidity' (Proulx 2009: 18).

CONCLUSION. CERAMIC SAGUAROS MADE IN CHINA

Ecocriticism is one of the more recent arrivals on the literary criticism scene. Although from the very beginning in the 1980s, it has never formulated a field-defining statement, it is commonly agreed that it focuses on the relationship between literature and nature. As Buell states, there are numerous ways in which these two terms can be related, which will be clear from the multiple approaches which the discipline encompasses (Buell 1999: 702). In the last decade, the rise of this field as a major critical movement has made itself felt, alongside its growing expansion into other fields and disciplines. That interdisciplinarity may well form part of its definition. The interrelation between environmental criticism and other disciplines ranging from feminist studies –ecofeminism was present in the early stages of the movement, from the 1970s up to post-humanism and postcolonialism – is where ecocriticism found its place. Critics such as Buell and Heise still demand a further branching out of ecocriticism into other forms of expression, such as art or music (Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011: 434). Others, such as Glotfelty, claim that ecocriticism “expands the notions of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere”, something that other literary approaches refer to as ‘society’ (Glotfelty 1996: xix).

Environmental studies focuses on literature’s engagement with the environment, in both fiction and non-fiction. Even though it has focused mainly on non-urban landscapes, ecocriticism has recently directed its attention to urban landscapes as well. As Buell reminds us, many critics consciously write criticism on nature fiction and non-fiction without referring to any specific term that might be used to define them (Buell 1999: 706).

The fact that writing about place has become a new critical category means that the field is open to permanent examination and discussion. Mazel argues that although the postmodern approach to the relationship between ecology and literature has spawned issues that

might make it look obsolete –internet, concepts of the post-natural world, globalization– ecocriticism is more than ever fruitfully allied with regionalism (Mazel 2003: 133), i.e. the study of the literature with the focus on a specific place. The intersection between ecocriticism and regionalism is quite explicit, as they are both concerned with issues of landscape. The two are also intertwined via their attention to natural landscapes and the human interaction with them. Environmental ethics often appears in literature that focuses on specific areas, or discusses topics like the attachment to or detachment from a place, place-senseness and at-homeness. Bioregionalism, which emphasizes the fact that human behavior and ethical deliberation take place within the context of local communities (Kowaleswki 2003: 16), gives careful attention to what it means to inhabit such places, and explores the complex relations between culture and place. Ecocriticism and bioregionalism have a shared concern for local communities, and also address the sense of place. Mazel explains how regional literature is today more self-consciously environmentalist than ever before. In this context of intersection and common environmental concern between the two disciplines, Annie Proulx stands as one of the most relevant contemporary writers.

The answer to Buell's question "Who is listening?" (Buell 1999: 702), with reference to the aim of both nature writing and environmental criticism, parallels the issue of its effect. What is the scope of both environmental fiction and non-fiction? It would seem that the answer to this question is closely allied to the message – if any – that this kind of literature conveys. I would argue that both the study and the writing of literature of place have a common goal: raising environmental awareness. The question is how this 'literature translates into changes in a reader's attitude and behavior towards the environment', and how it somehow triggers a Thoreauvean process of reawakening (Slovic 1992: 11). Scott Slovic describes the process by which nature writers – such as Thoreau, Lopez, Matthiessen, and Berry – approach landscape as

a transition from ignorance or limited awareness to a deepening knowledge or awareness. In doing so, he seems to be indirectly describing Annie Proulx's writing process, patterned on nomadism, immersion and research as addressed in chapter 1.

Proulx achieves a suitable balance between proximity to and distance from the landscapes about which she writes, a *sine qua non* to reach the 'prized tension of awareness'. Tredinnick signals humility and attentiveness to the order inherent in landscape, 'the patterns at play' (Tredinnick, 2005: 71, 74). Proulx goes beyond that; she checks and rechecks, travels back and forth, observes, notes down, and keeps a number of notebooks that could be read as Thoreauvean journals. She cannot be regarded as a regional nature writer rooted in a specific locale. Proulx writes fiction in the same way as Lopez does: she writes about a different region, thus becoming an itinerant regionalist.

And yet it must be noted that she has lived in Wyoming for the last ten years and that this is where her last work of fiction is set. She does not do research to solely to create awareness, but also to supplement her knowledge, just as she studies the local patois, and reads the ethical drives of each region. Proulx becomes involved with the land and is changed. Tredinnick explains that 'nature writing is not *mimesis* [...] their work is not dislocated from the land, but a kind of participation in and continuation of it.' (Tredinnick 2005: 293) Proulx expresses her mobility in these terms: "I'm working my way across North America in the only way that I know. I am examining rural cultures in a variety of places" (Morris 2000). Her approach to her subject –place– is intensive and extensive, exhausting and exciting. Only when she is sure that she has succeeded in 'reading' the place and has gained the necessary awareness is she ready to start writing.

In *Postcards* Proulx addresses nature through the transformation of the American landscape over a period of forty-four years. In the background lies the rural way of life that has disappeared in the aftermath of World War II, as exemplified by the disintegration of

the Blood farm. In the foreground we find attachment to place and the agency of new generations of improvers and newcomers, who have become disconnected from the land and do not know how to (re)gain intimacy with it. The tragic consequences are the dramatic transformation of the land, the fault of Americans who prove to be poor stewards. Their interaction with nature is expressed in economic or utilitarian terms: they come to possess, to extract, to improve. In her fiction, Proulx creates two divergent types of characters, improvers and pilgrims –borrowing Barry Lopez’s terms-, which define themselves according to their interaction with nature, a dualism that *Postcards* stresses. This lack of harmony is Proulx’s main concern, and she points to the implications and the impact it has on rural communities. Despite her bleak narratives, she voices optimism when she affirms that: “there is something in us that wants to believe in sweet harmony against all evidence”. Still, she is uncertain about the consequences of this paucity of opportunities outside the traditional ways of life, where the individual ‘is trapped in the whirlwind of change and chance’ (Morris 2000). Disjunction from and conjunction with nature – terms used by Scott Slovic to illustrate estrangement from nature and conjunction, are two opposite stances along which Proulx’s characters rest to define their position with regard to landscape. All these are main issues that Proulx’s committed fiction addresses and *Postcards* is an outstanding example.

Proulx has defined landscape as ‘the sum of accumulated changes wrought by the inhabitants and their marks in the land’ (Proulx 2009: 14) a definition that immediately turns our attention to the interrelationship of humans and nature. It refers not only to the impact of humans on the land, but also the effect landscape has on the individual and on communities. In *Postcards* landscape has three levels of reading. It can be understood as a habitat, where the focus is the relation between the subject and his immediate surroundings, and the ethical drives of achieving or losing a sense of place or at-homeness.

This thesis has extensively dealt with the journey to disjunction of protagonist Loyal Blood, who suffers a breakup from his family farm and, during his forty-four-year-long journey to the West he is unable to reconnect and find home. Once a faithful custodian of the land, Loyal's lifelong affliction makes him hold on to lulling memories of the farm and disables him from conjunction or reconnection with nature in the rapidly changing American landscape. In my opinion Mahoney and Katz sum up what Proulx demonstrates in *Postcards*: 'the need to belong somewhere is as common as the impetus to find ways of doing so [...] regardless of the connection's "authenticity"' (Mahoney and Katz 2009: xxiv).

Proulx also warns us against the elimination of regional barriers, due to the globalizing trend in the economy, which has slowly deprived many small communities of their distinctive features and engulfed them in a 'walmarted' or 'starbucked' landscape, due to the little importance many Americans give to place in their lives, what Kowalewski refers to as 'an attention deficit disorder.' (Kowalewski 2003: 12) Mahoney and Katz explain how people still feel that their identity is threatened by homogenization,

now inevitably represented by Wal-Mart or McDonald's, international chains that threaten to put local firms out of business, and they often look to the past and to local nature in the hopes of finding a model for survival in which those economies of scale are not so inevitable, even if it means turning to marketable symbols of regional distinctiveness, like ceramic saguaros made in China.

(Mahoney and Katz 2009: xxiii)

Proulx refers to her fellow country people as unable to connect: "To millions of Americans, "Nature" is a reference to a chain of stores that

sells rocks and fossils and T-shirts stamped with images of eagles in flight. To millions, “landscape” is something done by a merchant who deals in cookie-cutter shrubs and bedding plants.’ (Proulx 2009: 22) *Postcards* confirms what Lopez concludes: the real topic of nature writing is the transformation of communities where economic development has left its imprint and nature has been removed (Lopez 1997: 10).

The second level of reading landscape in *Postcards* deals with the issue of identity. Taking as a model the posthuman subject, defined by Palmer as a confluence in a net of attachments, an interpretation of Loyal Blood through this model suggests that the misalignment between the subject and his attachments results in estrangement from nature. Here Proulx highlights the dangers of such misalignment and the consequences of a road of no return. Landscape is understood as a dynamic system of relations as Tredinnick maintains: ‘[nature] is a dance of matter and energy, a network of relationships [...] nothing is still in these moments’ (Tredinnick 2005: 290). To achieve conjunction and reconnection, it is necessary to reactivate and consciously use the senses in nature. Taking the example of *Postcards*, I have used ecopsychologist Laura Sewall’s theory of perception to illustrate how to regain what Lopez calls ‘spiritual affinity’ and ‘companionship’ with nature as a way to redefine one’s identity within landscape. Sewall’s five practices refer to a reawakening of the senses in order to gain intimacy – learning to attend, perceiving the relations, perceptual flexibility, re-perceiving depth and the imaginal self- (Sewall 1995: 201). Loyal’s former connections to the past, unrenewed, define his inability to re-perceive and to establish new connections.

The third level of reading landscape in *Postcards* is as a – heartbreaking– symbol of a new generation, consisting mainly of improvers, who take the land for granted and abuse it at their convenience. *Postcards* reflects the invasion of landscape by economic powers and extractive improvers, which leads to the fading away of a

formerly self-sustainable model of landscape. In the Bloods' odyssey Proulx discusses causes and consequences, clearly pointing her finger at disjointed improvers (agribusinesses, developers, etc.) who have ruined a three-century-old partnership with landscape. Their imprint cannot be reversed, and the devastating consequences for ecosystems, habitats and small communities are the red light that warns us to call a halt and re-evaluate our relationship with the non-human landscape. Proulx quotes nature writer David Quammen's *Song of the Dodo*, comparing it to a tapestry that has been cut by a knife so that the remaining parts fail to form a unity: 'An ecosystem is a tapestry of species and relationships. Chop away a section, isolate that section, and there arises the problem of unraveling' (Quammen in Proulx 2009: 21). Unfortunately, according to Proulx these isolated sites are economically connected to, and controlled by urban centers where 'one can enjoy a cappuccino, buy a computer, get the vehicle repaired, see a movie, visit a doctor, get one's hair dyed magenta. For many rural people the nearest Wal-Mart serves as a substitute for a town'. She concludes that today it is almost impossible to write about landscape without a reference to 'economics, politics, and human manipulation of the environment.' (Proulx 2009: 20-22)

Kowalewski states that the future of America 'looks increasingly bland, intolerant, unhealthy and consumer-oriented'. He urges authors to show courage and imagination in their attempt to raise awareness of landscapes that are 'battered, contaminated and ill-regarded' (Kowalewski 2001: 252). Annie Proulx clearly places her imagination at the service of landscape, and makes herself heard. As her good friend Barry Lopez puts it, 'the continuous work of imagination [---] is an expression of human evolution' (Lopez 2001: 414). Proulx uses it to show us how globalization and destruction is slowly depriving humans of our basis of subsistence and 'alienates individuals and communities from their rootedness.' (Heise 2006: 5107). Far from moralizing or spiritual messages –against which Dana Phillips warns us (Phillips in

Heise 2006: 510)–, it is necessary to read ecocriticism, both fiction and non-fiction writing as a ‘step into’ rather than as ‘a window on’ landscape. Awareness of the landscapes we inhabit, attention to the relations, and a self-evaluation of our rootedness in a place should all come from such readings, and form a point of departure for reconnection. But even if these issues of globalization and social justice sound like preaching to the choir, Proulx demonstrates how in fiction an exercise in imagination can lead to awareness and attention in the readers, and can bring into focus our appreciation and understanding of the world around us.

The 2012 London Olympics’ ceremony, directed by Danny Boyle, showed millions of people around the globe how British landscape was transformed through time and the ‘mark’ and ‘imprint’ of humans on it. Despite the undeniable cultural achievements and the economic improvements the landscape has undergone, the ceremony missed an opportunity to re-evaluate the relationship with landscape and to emphasize our commitment to it in the future. If the images we create determine our future, then we must put our ‘active imaginations’ to work and act accordingly. Sewall stresses that the Earth often cries, but not all of us ‘feel her tears and see her pain’. If we are receptive to the ways in which landscape talks to us, we might be able to re-awaken and preserve ‘a sense of human integrity’.

In the course of this dissertation many paths for further research have been opened up and many aspects of this subject have been highlighted. The authors have provided me with new insights into the field of ecocriticism, as well as material examples of its nearly endless interdisciplinarity, multiple approaches, and conceptual subfields. If, as Heise suggests, ‘ecocriticism promises to become one of the most intellectually exciting and politically urgent ventures in current literary and cultural studies’ (Heise 2006: 514), one cannot help but feel a compelling urge to carry on with such an endeavor. Proulx’s literature – committed, explicit and accusing– stands as a primary material for

further research and exploration. The prospect of meeting her again, this time in a more scholarly setting than the last time, is an extra motivation to continue to explore her work. Other fields of research appeal to me – posthumanism, for example, as well as other forms of expression that border the canon of literary criticism. Combining these with personal and scholarly commitments to contemporary environmental issues – including social justice and globalization – is a challenge I would gladly face. I intend to make follow Melody Graulich's advice to head off in new directions to find unexplored writers and topics (Graulich 2003: x) within the complexity of environmental studies. I intend to give more scholarly attention to works such as *Rats* by Robert Sullivan, essay narratives that explore urban landscapes in the context of the coexistence of animals and humans, the interaction between environment and music, or the way in which more popular art forms such as cinema could help to promote environmental awareness..

Many a time I have thought back to that brief encounter with Annie Proulx at her Wyoming home, in the small town of Centennial, in April of 2003. We talked about history, cooking, Dutch art and the landscape around her house; obviously, her favorite subjects. Only now, nine years later, in the course of my research, have I come to understand what she meant when she suggested that I write about landscape. Indirectly she was asking me to reflect on it, to talk about it, to worry about it. She was expressing in a few words her concern about the omission of landscape in certain works of fiction: 'Is it a reflection of the highway society we've become, proof of our growing insensitivity to the complex parts of the natural world, of our proud ignorance, of our inability to understand any of the deep meanings of place and time?' (Proulx 2009: 23). She may not be asking us to rush into the woods with a survival manual; the most immediate action could be looking at the nature around us and try to re-perceive it, first by being better stewards of the land and then by being more self-sufficient, in order to achieve a

more sustainable way of life. And we cannot do that until we stop interacting with the landscape from the buttons of a TV remote control.

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