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Bénédicte Meillon

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# Unreal, Fantastic, and Improbable “Flashes of Fearful Insight”<sup>1</sup> in Annie Proulx’s Wyoming Stories

Bénédicte Meillon

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- 1 Within the burgeoning critical mass focusing on Annie Proulx’s literature, it seems that comparatively little attention has been paid to her use of magical realism in her short stories. Many essays dwell on her award-winning novels or on environment and nature-related concerns overarching from her stories to her novels, studying her writing in the light of naturalism, postmodernism, and neo-regionalism.<sup>2</sup> With three entire collections of short stories anchored in rural, ranching Wyoming, Annie Proulx asserts: “If the writer is trying to illustrate a particular period or place, a collection of short stories is a good way to take the reader inside a house of windows, each opening onto different but related views—a kind of flip-book of place, time and manners” (*The Missouri Review*). She explains that, in *Close Range* “the focus was again on rural landscape, low population density, people who feel remote and isolated, cut off from the rest of the world, where accident and suicide rates are high and aggressive behavior not uncommon” (*The Missouri Review*). Yet, in spite of the grimly realistic anchor of the stories in rural Wyoming—the least populated state in North America—this “lonely voice” writer<sup>3</sup> nevertheless comes up with plotlines which, as Karen L. Rood observes, “are occasionally interrupted by excursions into magical realism, a technique in which a plausible narrative enters the realm of fantasy without establishing a clearly defined line between the possible and impossible” (Rood 13).
- 2 Looking at Annie Proulx’s Wyoming stories, I would like to delve into the fantastic and magical aspects of her narratives, which borrow from tall tales, local legends, folktales, fairy tales and myths, and waver between a pathetic, tragic depiction of the harsh reality of rural Wyoming and a postmodernist, sardonic kind of irony and disenchantment with the Pioneer Spirit and the American Dream. Indeed, the number of grotesque freaks, monsters, hybrid creatures, devils, and demons sometimes acts as a reminder of the fictional quality of these self-conscious short tales, which, although

contemporary, also draw on a long tradition of North American story-telling, often adding a rather destabilizing, caustic sense of humor. Focusing on fantastic apparitions, disappearances and evanescence in Annie Proulx's stories, it seems that her writing wavers between various modes, at times uncanny, at times fantastic, and at times magical realist. In using these often controversial terms, I will mostly be relying on Todorov's definition of the uncanny and the fantastic on the one hand, and on Wendy Faris's seminal definition of magical realism on the other.

- 3 In his introduction to fantastic literature, Tzvetan Todorov elaborates on the concepts of the uncanny and the fantastic as modes blending realism with supernatural phenomena. With the uncanny, however, impossible events eventually find a rational explanation which in the end undermines the preternatural. With the fantastic, the reader is left to hesitate between a rational and an irrational interpretation of impossible events, and the text does not clearly support one or the other. This hesitation, Todorov argues, results from the narrator's own hesitation and/or the character's, making it impossible for the reader to dismiss the supernatural dimension of unlikely phenomena. This hesitation is precisely what Amaryll Chanady establishes as the main distinguishing characteristic between magical realism and the fantastic. According to Chanady, the fantastic encodes hesitation into the narrative and thus foregrounds the problematical nature of the supernatural, in conflict with realism. On the contrary, Chanady insists, the magical realist text presents the paradox at the heart of this oxymoronic mode as unproblematic:

While the implied author is educated according to our conventional norms of reason and logic, and can therefore recognize the supernatural as contrary to the laws of nature, he tries to accept the world view of a culture in order to describe it. He abolishes the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural on the level of textual representation, and the reader, who recognizes the two conflicting logical codes on the semantic level, suspends his judgment of what is rational and what is irrational in the fictitious world. (25-26)

- 4 This may at first seem like a highly useful and reliable criterion to distinguish between the fantastic and magical realism. Yet, as Wendy Faris points out, antinomy is not actually always entirely resolved in magical realist texts: "Although many magical realist narrators accept the disjunction between realism and magic, thereby tempting their readers to do likewise, many others do not and thus promote hesitation" (Faris 2004 20). Moreover, if Faris deems Chanady's distinction as "generally valid" (20), she nevertheless underlines that "we readers' investment in the codes of realism is still so strong [...], even the narrator's acceptance of antinomy does not overcome our hesitation completely" (20). Consequently, this paper will try to look into some of the elements of magic in Annie Proulx's stories in order to assess whether they present in the end resolved or unresolved antinomy, or, in other words whether they may read as magical realist or fantastic. I will first tackle some of the local color elements and realistic effects that lend the collections an air of authenticity, as might be found in regional memoirs and histories. I will then analyze the use of uncanny, fantastic, and magical realist modes in those of Proulx's stories which cast impossible events. Having established the magical realist turns of Annie Proulx's Wyoming stories, I will finally show what a self-conscious, omnivorous form of the short story these postmodernist tales really belong to.
- 5 "Frankly, almost every single one of the stories that I write about in Wyoming are founded in historical fact," Proulx insists in an interview (Wyoming Library Roundup

- 7). According to the author, this is true even about the horrific “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” which ends with the discovery of a character monstrously maimed in an auto wreck who has been castrated by his neighbors with a dirty knife, and has consequently turned black with gangrene: “And that really happened. It happened here in the late 1800s,” Proulx upholds (Wyoming Library Roundup 7). Indeed, in the “Acknowledgements” section of her first volume of Wyoming stories, *Close Range*, Annie Proulx traces the genesis of “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” to “a few disturbing paragraphs” found in a regional Wyoming history by Helena Thomas Rubottom, *Red Walls and Homesteads*, and which was “the take-off point for the story” (10).
- 6 Many of her stories, thus, sound as if based on real-life anecdotes, such as the twenty-five-line short story entitled “55 Miles to the Gas Pump” in which a rancher’s wife finds corpses in her attic “she recognizes [...] from their photographs in the paper: MISSING WOMAN” (*Close Range* 251). Reminiscent of the roots of the short story genre in the 14<sup>th</sup> century fabliau, Annie Proulx’s Wyoming stories contain real-life anecdotes, displaying the novelty of subject and authentic grounding which René Godenne posits as defining traits of the early European short story he calls the “nouvelle-fabliau” (Godenne 27). Proulx’s horror story may remind one of daily news items, or *fait divers*—a fact that is made clear from the reference to the missing women ads, and is also obliquely suggested by the description of one of the corpses “wrapped in newspaper nipple to knee” (252). As in the early days of the genre, when the short story was meant to offer entertaining stories, Proulx’s language tends to be truculent, often vernacular, as for instance in the description of “Mr. Croom’s paramours [...] some desiccated as jerky and much the same color, some moldy from lying beneath roof leaks, and all of them used hard, covered with tarry handprints, the marks of boot heels” (252).<sup>4</sup>
- 7 Proulx derives the authentic, local color characteristic of her stories from “raw materials”:
- 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 with one another in bars and stores, in laundromats. I read bulletin boards, scraps of paper I pick up from the ground. (*The Missouri Review* 4)
- 8 Such close observation and representation of the ordinary lives of Wyoming ranchers owe much to Annie Proulx’s background as a history major in Vermont and then Montreal, which she commemorates as follows: “I was attracted to the French *Annales* school, which pioneered minute examination of the lives of ordinary people through account books, wills, marriage and death records, farming and crafts techniques, the development of technologies. My fiction reflects this attraction.”<sup>5</sup> (*The Missouri Review* 1-2)
- 9 If Annie Proulx’s stories may often read as regionalist chronicles or memoirs, they differ from the fabliau in her sinister choices of subjects and overall grimness. When asked about the somber outlook one finds in her rather morbid, tragic stories, Annie Proulx again relies on an assertion of realism:
- America is a violent, gun-handling country. Americans feed on a steady diet of bloody movies, television programs, murder mysteries. Road rage, highway killings, beatings and murder of those who are different abound. [...] Most of the ends suffered by characters in my books are drawn from true accounts of public

record: newspapers, accident reports, local histories, labor statistics for the period and place under examination. The point of writing in layers of bitter deaths and misadventures that befall characters is to illustrate American violence, which is real, deep, and vast. (*The Missouri Review* 8)

- 10 Paradoxically, for all these claims to authenticity and realism, her stories still often play with fantastic codes or veer off into magical realism in a way that is difficult to reconcile with her alleged dedication to "real life." Proulx writes: "The elements of unreality, the fantastic and improbable, color all of these stories as they color real life. In Wyoming not the least fantastic situation is the determination to make a living ranching in this tough and unforgiving place" (*Close Range* 11). Interestingly however, this commingling of realistic and magical elements recalls one of the five primary characteristics of magical realism according to Wendy Faris, that is "[descriptions detailing] a strong presence of the phenomenal world" together with historical anchoring. (1995, 169-70). The realistic aspect of Proulx's stories partly comes from extensive details giving a clear picture of the landscape, the climate, the ranches, houses and trailers, the clothes and food of her Wyoming characters. Their ranching, farming, rodeoing and other daily activities are also accounted for with much detail. Moreover, many of her stories are explicitly anchored in the history of the United States, and abound with references to background historical events and to real places. To give but one example, let us look at "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World." The first two pages set the story of Old Red and his family within the context of the end of the First World War, the building of the Waldorf-Astoria in New York in 1930, then the Great Depression in Oklahoma, World War Two, and then Vietnam (*Close Range* 121-22).
- 11 As happens frequently in magical realism, Proulx's short stories draw attention to the strangeness of reality, here to the wondrous in the ordinary lives of Wyoming ranchers, making it hard at times to delineate between the realms of magic and the natural. In the tensed, thunderous atmosphere of the tragic and violent story "A Lonely Coast," there is for instance a quasi-supernatural moment when a fireball inexplicably explodes in the plate glass window of the local bar:
- Now a terrific, sputtering ball of fire bloomed on the ledge throwing glare on the dusty cowboy gear. It was still raining. You could hear the fireball roaring and a coat of soot in the shape of a cone and peck-speckled with rain was building up on the glass. [... Justin] poured three pitchers of water on the thing before it quit, a blackened lump of something, placed and set afire by persons unknown. There was a sound like a shot and the glass cracked from top to bottom. Justin said later it was a shot, not the heat. It was the heat. I know a shot when I hear one. (*Close Range* 202-203)
- 12 Matching the electric, mounting atmosphere between the riotous characters, the extraordinary phenomenon receives various, vague explanations, wavering between rationalizing the curious "thing" ("placed and set afire by persons unknown;" "Justin said later it was a shot") and a more mysterious cause ("It was the heat"). As the mysterious origin of the fireball is left unsolved by the narrator, this passage may draw on the great number of actual reports of ball lightning throughout history. Indeed, the sightings and the scientific hypotheses for this still elusive atmospheric phenomenon perfectly match the occurrence detailed by Proulx's narrator. This illustrates in the end Proulx's blurring of the antinomy between "real life" and "elements of unreality, the fantastic and improbable," and, as with much magical realist fiction, it foregrounds the strange, uncanny, and unbelievable aspects of reality.

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- 13 On opening Annie Proulx's first Wyoming collection, the reader must ponder the epigraph she has chosen for her book, quoting a retired Wyoming Rancher: "Reality's never been of much use out here." As Proulx explains, many of the fantastic apparitions and disappearances in her tales have been inspired by the extraordinary lifestyles of rancher families, living secluded lives and confronted with a foreboding wilderness. Even in stories without any incursion into fantastic or magical realist modes such as "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water," nature itself is described in a way that suggests natural forces beyond that experienced by most of us readers in our daily lives:

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

- 14 Annie Proulx's untamable Wyoming sometimes reads as a Gothic backdrop—one might say a nineteenth-century wilderness, à la *Wuthering Heights*, with desert and sagebrush instead of moors and heath—creating an ominous and threatening environment. Take for instance in "Man Crawling out of Trees" the description in the iterative of the meteorological forces throughout the month of December as experienced by Eugenie, an outsider who has recently moved with her husband, Mitchell, from New England to Wyoming: "The few clouds drew out as fine and long as needle threads and the wind-damaged sky showed the same chill blue as a gas flame. The wind set its teeth into the heavy log house and shook it with terrific gusts. In the early mornings it ceased for a few hours, then [...] it returned, brutal and avid, sweeping into the air what little loose snow remained" (*Bad Dirt* 184). Whether perceived by natives or outsiders, Proulx's antediluvian landscapes often seem animated, as if endowed with a volition of their own: "The country wanted to go to sand dunes and rattlesnakes, wanted to scrape off its human ticks" (*Bad Dirt* 111). In "The Man Crawling out of Trees"—a title which in itself foreshadows some ghastly, beastly apparition—the outsiders' point of view serves to highlight the savageness of the place:

Every few months, something inexplicably rural happened: on a back road one man shot another with his great-grandfather's 45.70 vintage buffalo gun; a newcomer from Iowa set out for an afternoon hike, and fell off a cliff as she descended Wringer Mountain. Black bears came down in September and smashed Eugenie's bird feeders. A hawk hid under the potentilla bush and leaped suddenly on an overconfident prairie dog a little too far from its burrow. In Antler Spring [...] a young woman expecting her first child was widowed when her husband, fighting summer wildfires in Colorado, was killed by a Pulaski tool that fell from a helicopter. Vacationers locked themselves out of their cars and were struck by lightning. Ranchers, their eyes on their cattle, drove off the road and overturned. Everything seemed to end in blood. (*Bad Dirt* 175)

- 15 Red in tooth and claw, Wyoming's ruthless nature is immense, exhibiting "the monstrous scale of geologic time" (*Bad Dirt* 190) and it seems that through some metonymical contagion the inhabitants have been hardened so as to become as ragged and harsh as the environment they try to thrive in.

- 16 Many of Proulx's anti-heroes read as grotesque figures reminiscent of the Southern freak tradition inherited from Flannery O'Connor or Sherwood Anderson.<sup>6</sup> This is notably the case for Ottaline, "the family embarrassment" in "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World" (*Close Range* 121), with braided "reddish-pink hair," and "a physique approaching the size of a hundred-gallon propane tank," suffering "'minstrel problems,' a sudden flow that sent her running for the bathroom, leaving a trail of dark, round blood spots behind her varying in size from a dime to a half-dollar" (125). Driven insane by "the raw loneliness then, the silences of the day, the longing flesh" (130), Ottaline starts turning inward for solace and distraction: "Brilliant events burst open not in the future but in the imagination. The room she had shared with Shan was a room within a room. [...] The calfskin rug on the floor seemed to move, to hunch and crawl a fraction of an inch at a time" (130). Having thus underlined Ottaline's increasingly anamorphic eye and, via onomastics, her out-of-line perception of the reality around her ("Ottaline was dissolving" 130), the disturbing passage when she starts conversing with a "treacherous John Deere 4030" tractor (131), who "killed a ranch hand years earlier," may read as a fantastic piece bordering on the uncanny, in Todorovian terms. It is easy to rationalize the impossible courtship by calling onto the character's possibly starved, psychotic perception:

"Sweet," the voice breathed.

She was alone, there were no alien spacecraft in the sky. [...] She had eaten from a plateful of misery since childhood, suffered *avoirdufois*, unfeeling parents, the hard circumstances of the place. Looniness was possible, it could happen to anyone.

[... She] wondered if hunger had prompted an invisible voice" (*Close Range* 132)

- 17 It is rather tempting in this case to reject the possibility of a talking, murderous tractor as Ottaline does at first: "This was a hallucination" (134). However, as the narrative goes on, it moves away from internal focalization and presents the dialogues between Ottaline and the John Deere tractor in a matter-of-fact way: "Every day the tractor unloaded fresh complaints, the voice rough and urgent" (136). The omniscient narrator reports entire conversations in a dramatic way, without clearly establishing if there is any focalization at play. Giving the impression of zero or even external focalization, the rest of the story involving Ottaline and the monstrous tractor is recounted from an indeterminate perspective, corresponding as such to Wendy Faris's concept of "defocalization" which she ascribes to magical realism (Faris 2004 43-59). Blurring the origin of the perspective onto the text, the narrative voice thus gives the impression that, like Ottaline, it has finally accepted the reality of the trickster-tractor. Moreover, Ottaline's father dies at the end of the story in a plane crash, curiously involving the tractor, by then cast away and forgotten about: "the left wheel caught the iron frame of the abandoned tractor and the plane fell on its face, crumpled into a mash of cloth, metal and rancher" (148). A possible reading thus suggests that the malevolent, neglected tractor may be responsible for the accident, keeping in mind that it claims earlier in the story to have intentionally killed one of the ranch hands. Interestingly, Proulx's story allows for various interpretations of the ending, without authoritatively favoring one over the other. First, a very logical explanation for Aladdin's accident may be found in his reckless flying, possibly linked to "the smoke from home-grown that clouded the cabin" (147). Moreover, Aladdin's wife and daughter exchange accusations, blaming each other in superstitious ways for causing the accident. This hesitation between contradictory understandings of events is in fact in line with a second of the five characteristics Wendy Faris assigns to magical realism (Faris 1995 171). Taking up

Faris' analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, I would like to suggest that this might provide evidence of the writer's "playing with our rationalist tendencies to recuperate, to co-opt the marvelous" (Faris 1995 171).

- 18 In "Pair of Spurs," the eponymous object is handmade by a wizard-like, millenarian character, obsessed with the end of the world and who believes that he has endowed the spurs with some special, magical power. And indeed, the supposedly doomed spurs bring about bizarre phenomena, possibly accounting for the sudden, violent deaths of its successive owners. Moreover, the main character, Car Scrope, seems to yield to some fatal attraction to the spurs, suffering from inexplicable migraines and behaving erratically as soon as he goes near them. Of course, the soundness of Scrope's state of mind is questionable since we are told that as a child, following the family taboo surrounding his brother's death in some vague, freak bathroom accident, Scrope started hearing the grass, which "never shut up, making a kind of hissing snicker" (*Close Range* 153). Consequently, if Scrope's dubious sanity may be comforting to readers eager to reject the possibility of supernatural phenomena, the chain of events nevertheless finally sustains the magical interpretation, suggesting that within the diegesis, the spurs truly do have supernatural power.
- 19 Another story that may at first read as uncanny bordering on the fantastic is "The Sage Brush Kid." Initially, because of her extreme loneliness and longing for a child, Mizpah's taking to a sagebrush as a replacement object of motherly love can, as earlier with Ottaline, be dismissed as a sign of her lunacy: "[she] fixed her attention on an inanimate clump of sagebrush that at twilight took on the appearance of a child reaching upward as if piteously begging to be lifted from the ground. The sagebrush became the lonely woman's passion. It seems to her to have an enchanted fragrance" (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 83). The narrator's voice reports how even the husband eventually "succumb[s] to the illusion" (83), thus insisting on the pathetic fallacy and grotesque anamorphosis at play: "Mizpah tied a red sash around the sagebrush's middle. It seemed more than ever a child stretching its arms up" (84). The tone is here more comical than pathetic, since Mizpah's attachment to the sagebrush comes after two failed attempts to pick first a piglet, then a chicken as substitutes for a child, both of which she dresses preposterously and nurses like babies. Moreover, both adoptions end in a way that is tragicomic and typical of Proulx's caustic sense of humor and ruthless plotting:
- The piglet one day tripped over the hem of the swaddling dress and was carried off by a golden eagle. Mrs. Fur, bereft, traded another of her husband's shirts to a passing emigrant wagon for a chicken. She did not make the swaddling gown mistake twice, but fitted the chicken with a light leather jerkin and a tiny bonnet. The bonnet acted as blinders and the unfortunate poult never saw the coyote that seized her within the hour. (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 83)
- 20 However, as the omniscient narrator tells in a more and more defocalized way of an endless series of disappearances all occurring by the growing sagebrush, it becomes clear that the sagebrush surrogate child has turned into a ravenous, hybrid monster as a result of the meat gravy, scraps and bones Mizpah has been feeding it. As a consequence of this unnatural diet, it has grown disproportionately, has metamorphosed into a degenerate, carnivorous plant and has started swallowing up animals and people. Therefore, if the beginning of the story seems to endorse skepticism, it gradually enforces supernatural laws, forcing the reader to suspend disbelief.



- 21 It turns out many of Proulx's Wyoming stories stage entirely magical events, thus containing, in Faris's terms, an "irreducible element of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" (Faris 1995 167). According to Faris's thesis, this comes as the first characteristic trait of magical realism. In "55 Miles to the Gas Pump," the omniscient narrator recounts how Rancher Croom drunkenly attempts suicide by jumping down into a canyon. Yet, this is thwarted by a baffling event, as "before he hits he rises again to the top of the cliff like a cork in a bucket of milk" (*Close Range* 251). Here again, this passage is told from an indeterminate perspective. Definitely not recounted through internal focalization, it can be considered defocalized, and it simply offers no alternative or logical explanation for Croom's aborted suicide attempt, defying the laws of gravity. There are many other stories where the magic cannot be doubted and comes on the same level as other, more realistic events. In "Dump Junk," the omniscient narrator tells in an accepting tone of voice of Christina's discovery, after her parents' death, of a wish-fulfilling magic tea kettle with a power similar to that of Aladdin's lamp. Paradoxically, it is the magic of the tea kettle that helps rationalize the otherwise miraculous apparitions of wished-for objects in the story.
- 22 As much as Annie Proulx welds magic into some of her stories, she also makes use of fantastic codes in a self-debunking way and uses metafictional elements which might keep the magic and the supernatural at a certain distance. The story "Man Crawling Out of Trees" for instance ends up undermining the horror couched in its menacing title, dispelling the notion contained in the title that the story may read as a fantastic piece. Indeed, the initially threatening apparition of a crazy and wild-looking character trespassing on the protagonists' property turns out to be but an injured skier seeking help.
- 23 Similarly disparaging of wild fancies is the "The Blood Bay"—an equivocal title quite fit for a gory story indeed that nevertheless uses dramatic irony to debunk the codes of the fantastic. The story starts when a Montana cowboy freezes to death on a river bank for lack of knowledge of Wyoming's harsh winters. The vernacular language here heightens the crudeness of the story, as Dirt Sheets, one of three Wyoming cowboys riding by the dead man's corpse, decides to seize his fine hand-made boots to replace his own "curl-toe boots cracked and holed":
- "That can a corn beef's wearin my size boots," Sheets said and [...] pulled at the Montana cowboy's left boot but it was frozen on. The right one didn't come off any easier.
- "Son of a sick steer in a snowbank," he said, "I'll cut em off and thaw em after supper." Sheets pulled out a Bowie knife and sawed through Montana's shins just above the boot tops, put the booted feet in his saddlebags, admiring the tooled leather and topstitched hearts and clubs. (*Close Range* 94)
- 24 The grotesque story hinges on *quiproquo* and turns into a parody of a fantastic piece as the two cowboys find shelter for the night in "old man Grice"'s shack, who warns them to stay away from his horses which he keeps inside away from the cold: "Sleep where you can find a space, but I'm tellin you don't bother that blood bay none, he will mull you up and spit you out. He's a spirited steed'" (94). In the morning, suddenly remembering he must send his mother a happy birthday telegraph, Dirt Sheets wakes up and steals away before sunrise. As Grice wakes up to find that one of his guests has vanished, he discovers the thawed feet and used boots Sheets has left behind, and figures his "hell-bound fiend" blood bay must have "eat[en] the man whole" (95).

Triggering a response half-way between laughter and disgust, dramatic irony here makes Grice the *alazon*. Indeed, the other two greedy cowboys profit from Grice's gullibility, as he ends up bribing them with forty gold dollars to keep silent as to their friend's grisly, or literally night-marish disappearance. The plot thus serves to retribute Grice's earlier greed—a trait which his name, Grice, may signal via paronomasia. Moreover, he embodies greed earlier in the story as he takes advantage of his guests' helplessness, forcing them to pay the little money they possess in exchange for his hospitality. Additionally, the story's grotesque effect is enhanced as Grice is implicitly derided by the omniscient narrator's comment, exposing the pride he takes in his fanciful delusions: "Secretly he was pleased to own a horse with the sand to eat a raw cowboy" (96).

- 25 If this grotesque parody contains the fantastic elements of the story within the limited point of view of a fooled character, it nevertheless highlights the flights of fancy that may be born from idioms and folk stories. Not only does the author acknowledge this tale as "a Wyoming twist on the folktale 'The Calf That Ate the Traveler'" (*Close Range* 10), the language of the text signals from the start the double-entendre at play in turns of phrases such as "the blood bay," "he will mull you up and spit you out," "a spirited steed," etc. As this example shows, the improbable and the magic in these stories often seem to sprout directly from a form of verbal magic, often for the sake of parody and satirical distortion.<sup>7</sup>
- 26 In any case, as Proulx's fiction plays with the codes of the fantastic in some stories, and effaces the frontier separating magic and reality in others, her own, often exaggerated stories consequently acquire a self-debunking dimension. The eponymous hero of "the Sagebrush Kid" for instance is at first held at a certain distance by the *incipit* of the story, drawing an analogy between the story about to be told and another well-known urban legend: "Those who think the Bermuda triangle disappearances of planes, boats, long-distance swimmers and floating beach balls a unique phenomenon do not know of the inexplicable vanishings along the Red Desert section of Ben Holladay's stagecoach route in the days when Wyoming was a territory" (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 81). First presented as an old folktale, the fact remains that, as seen above, the narrative in the end embraces the magic of the story. Both comical and disturbing, the story meanwhile metafictionally underlines the tall-tale quality of superstitious beliefs, as when the station master, trying to explain the enigmatic evanescence of six oxen grazing by the sagebrush, chuckles, "Indans probly got your beasts. [...] They'll bresh out the tracks with a sage branch so's you'd never know but that they growed wings and flapped south" (*FJW* 85). However, the last disappearances in the story of first, detectives and then a botanist, ironically and metonymically represent the defeat of logic, reason and science in the face of magic, whether the magic of nature or fiction.
- 27 Another feature of Proulx's tales which encourages critical distance is the caustic, often unexpected *clausulae* revealing the narrator's dark, wry sense of humor. For instance, after the two short paragraphs which make up "55 Miles to the Gas Pump," the story of the discovered female corpses in a padlocked attic ends abruptly with the baffling conclusion: "When you live a long way out you make your own fun" (*Close Range* 252). This potentially autoreferential punch line works on several levels.<sup>8</sup> First, it may highlight the playful style apparent in the perfect symmetry between the two twelve-line paragraphs which, with the *clausulae*, constitute the entire short story in the form of a diptych. Looking closer at the structure of this very short story indeed, both

paragraphs contain one unusually long, very complex sentence, with the first paragraph focusing on Mr. Croom and the second on Mrs. Croom's finding. In addition, the metadiegetic last sentence may refer to the author's playing with Charles Perrault's "Blue Beard" tale, a hypotext for this vignette which may very well be hinted at by the significant detail of the "bright blue" paint some of the bodies have been covered with in Proulx's version. Having satisfied her curiosity only to be confronted with the gloomiest of realities, Mrs Croom's discovery recalls Perrault's mock moral at the end of "Blue Beard": "Curiosity, in spite of its appeal, often leads to deep regret. To the displeasure of many a maiden, its enjoyment is short lived. Once satisfied, it ceases to exist, and always costs dearly" (Perrault 295). Read as a hypertext, with Rancher Croom's magical suspension in the air as he attempts to commit suicide, Proulx's version of the story holds looming in the background the possibility of the husband's resurfacing and revenge, while symbolizing the contemporary resurgence of such atrocious crimes. Moreover, wavering between a sordid *fait divers* and a rewriting of the old tale, the text subverts the second and sweet, so-called "moral" at the end of Perrault's "Blue Beard":

Apply logic to this grim story and you will ascertain that it took place many years ago. No husband of our age would be so terrible as to demand the impossible of his wife, nor would be such a jealous malcontent. For whatever the color of the husband's beard, the wife of today will let him know who the master is. (Perrault 295)

- 28 Reversely, as several of Proulx's stories are set in a 19<sup>th</sup> century time frame, the sarcastic *excipit* of "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water" prevents the reader from comfortably rejecting their horrific content into a long-gone, savage past: "That was all sixty years ago and more. Those hard days are finished. [...] We are in a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen. /If you believe that you'll believe anything" (*Close Range* 117).
- 29 As the writer freely acknowledges, her fantasy world taps into all kinds of folktales and fairy tales. Her rewriting of the Grimm brothers' "The Frog-Prince" for example is overtly alluded to in "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World," when puzzled Ottaline sardonically asks the talking tractor: "'Are you like an enchanted thing? A damn story where some girl lets a warty old toad sleep in her shoe and in the mornin the toad's a good-lookin dude makin omelettes?'" (*Close Range* 138). The more somber story "Tits-Up in a Ditch" offers a contemporary, ghastly subversion of the stereotypical fairy-tale pattern according to which the young woman falls in love with a handsome prince, finds bliss in marriage, has many children and lives happily ever after.<sup>9</sup>
- 30 As for "The Half-Skinned Steer," which Proulx admits was inspired by the old Icelandic Folktale "Porgier's Bull,"<sup>10</sup> it seems to me that one of the many possible readings of the story revolves around the *mise en abyme* of story-telling. At first, the embedded narrative structure serves as a way to cast light on the tall-tale aspect of the story which is told by Mero's father's girlfriend, allegedly a true story which has happened to one of the locals: certain that he has killed a steer intended for food, the grotesque character named Tin Head:

hoists it up and sticks it. [...] When it's bled out pretty good he lets it down and starts skinning it, starts with the head, cuts back of the poll down past the eye to the nose, peels the hide back. [...] H]e gets the hide off about halfway and starts thinking about dinner. So he leaves the steer half-skinned there on the ground and he goes into the kitchen, but first he cuts out the tongue which is his favorite dish

all cooked up and eat cold with Mrs. Tin Head's mustard in a forget-me-not teacup.  
(*Close Range* 32)

- 31 After dinner, as Tin Head sets about to finish his job, it turns out he will indeed never forget the steer, which has altogether vanished. Searching in the distance, Tin Head can see:

something moving stiff and slow, stumbling along. It looks raw and it's got something bunchy and wet hanging down over its hindquarters. [...] And just then it stops and it looks back. And all that distance Tin Head can see the raw meat of the head and the shoulder muscles and the empty mouth without no tongue open wide and its red eyes glaring at him, pure teetotal hate like arrows coming at him, and he knows he is done for and all of his kids and their kids is done for (37).

- 32 Throughout the telling of the story, Mero's point of view serves to constantly disparage the intradiegetic narrator: "She was a total liar." (32) Using Mero as internal focalizing agent, the omniscient narrator presents the story within as mere yarn, emphasizing the teller's "low and convincing liar's voice" an enticing voice "that drew you in, that low, twangy voice, wouldn't matter if she was saying the alphabet, what you heard was the rustle of hay. She could make you smell the smoke from an unlit fire." (35) With Mero's brother's name, Rollo, meaning "hot air" in Spanish, the narrative strategy here underlines the *skaz*-like quality of the story. Yet, despite the desecrating of the woman's story, its imagery nonetheless unleashes powerful dread in the protagonist, as well as, by proxy, in the reader.

- 33 When most critics have read the stunning reappearance of the half-skinned steer, at the end of the short story, some fifty years later, as Mero's "coming face to face with his own mortality" (Rood 157), it seems to me that there is another hypotext interweaved into the complex frame narrative, signaled via onomastics by the main character's name Mero, which reads as an anagram for "more." In addition, Mero stands as a near-palindrome for Homer, and, finally as a truncated version of Oedipus' adoptive mother's name, Merope. In any case, it seems rather telling that it is the hearing of the lurid story of the half-skinned steer which should prompt Mero to flee the family ranch. The catalyzing trauma thus springs from the raw bestiality of the people and place he has grown up with, as well as his own, lustful fantasies of "the old man's girlfriend whom he imagined down on all fours, entered from behind and whinnying like a mare" (*Close Range* 28). Through intertextuality with the myth of Oedipus, it is suggested that Mero, sensing his and his brother's desire for their father's girlfriend, associates with the steer's cruel treatment and develops castration anxiety—it is probably no coincidence that the bull from the original Icelandic tale has, in Proulx's story, been traded for a steer, that is a castrated ox. Thus, Mero's final anamorphic vision of the *doppelgänger* half-skinned steer which Proulx's highly metatextual mock epic ends with does not so much, in my understanding, toll the character's death as it reveals the moment of *anagnorisis* by which Mero, the seer rather than the steer, eventually becomes aware, "in the howling, wintry light," of the everlasting power the symbol of the half-skinned steer has held upon him, and what it stands for, despite his vain attempt to run away from his buried, unconscious psyche.<sup>11</sup>

- 34 Many of Proulx's stories derive much of their potency from their quirky characters, and from the grotesque vividness of the imagery and language which sometimes blurs the border between idiom and reality. Blending the codes of realism, the fantastic, and magical realism, the effects of such stories are often both horrific and comical, inducing ambivalent responses in the reader, caught between laughter and fear or

repulsion. Indeed, as illustrated by “The Blood Bay,” some of the horror in the stories is at times mitigated by the pregnancy and playfulness of the vernacular language of the characters and even sometimes of the omniscient narrative voices. In the overall rather realistic story “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” the narrator delves into Suzzy’s thoughts: “she disliked having to repeat ‘Have a nice day’ to people who deserved to be ridden bareback by the devil wearing can openers for spurs” (*Bad Dirt* 114). This image, through an autographic intertextual play with the story “Pair of Spurs,” casts an autoreferential, postmodernist light onto the devilish spurs at the heart of the latter story, where they are described as “pretty can openers” by one of the characters (*Close Range* 163). Similarly, the aforementioned comparison between the “spiritual shudder” induced by the Wyoming wilderness and “a claw in the gut” is not without echoing the violent death of Mero’s brother, killed by a “waspy emu” who, it sounds, literally eviscerated him “with its big razor claws.” Here again, one might follow an autographic intertextual thread leading to “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” with Rollo’s son being christened “Tick,” and the emu’s aggressiveness reading as a synecdoche for nature’s will to “scrape off its human ticks.” (*Bad Dirt* 111)

- 35 One of the clues that Annie Proulx’s short stories cannot be taken too literally lies in the leitmotif of the Devil, which reappears as a character in several marvelous stories as well as in the character’s quotidian imagery and sociolect. These more comical, satirical stories casting the Devil and his demons as protagonists seem to have been born from fantasies set free by folklore, by postmodern lifestyle, and by the hellish living and natural conditions in Wyoming. Similarly, in “Swamp Mischief” (*Fine Just the Way It Is*) the grotesque apparitions of pterodactyl birds in present day Wyoming seem to arise by analogy and metonymy, from the antediluvian, prehistoric quality of the landscape which is often described in Proulx’s stories. This often implicit, autographic intertextuality between several stories of the three Wyoming collections produces a metadiegetic effect. These various bridges from one narrative to the other invite the reader to explore the different ways in which the texts form one long short-story cycle, which, seen from a wider perspective, definitely foreground the potential and the magic of language and fiction.
- 36 Another hint calling attention to the metafictional quality of Proulx’s tales lies at the end of “The Sagebrush Kid.” As the story comes to a close, it is suggested that the botanist is about to be gobbled up by the monstrous plant he has come to measure. The objects he carries are described with significant details, obliquely referring to the short story genre and its reliance on implicit strategies of meaning: “He had measured some huge specimens [...] and recorded their heights in the same kind of little black notebook used by Ernest Hemingway and Bruce Chatwin. The tallest reached seven feet six inches. The monster before him certainly beat that by at least a foot” (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 91). The allusions to Hemingway and Chatwin may converge in recalling their lapidary, understated style. Like Proulx’s, Chatwin’s fiction was often closely inspired by real-life tales and anecdotes. Moreover, the dimensions of the sagebrush kid might obliquely refer to Proulx’s eponymous story, perceived in the light of Hemingway’s iceberg metaphor when describing the art of the short story, with “seven eighths of it underwater for every part that shows.”<sup>12</sup> Read metafictionally, the carnivorous sagebrush then reads as a metaphor for the fascinating Wyoming stories Proulx engenders. Analogically, her stories are oftentimes monstrous, omnivorous hybrids

that ingest and thrive on raw folklore, news items, fables, fairy tales, local legends and myths.

\* \* \*

- 37 Proulx's overall somber universe abounds in predators, child abuse, rape, incest, zoophilia, and all sorts of imaginable forms of cruelty and deviance, but the monstrosities are sometimes held at a distance in at least some of the stories by their metafictional quality and the dry humor which brings a partial sense of comic relief. Still, for all the irony and autoreferentiality drawing attention to the artifice of her stories, her use of fantasy, her vivid images, her often poetic prose and colorful language do impress themselves upon the mind in a way that Mary Lee Settle has powerfully encapsulated: "Annie Proulx's work is as real as a pickup truck, as ominous as a fairy tale. [...] She ignores fashion in favor of a true voice and vision. She haunts." (Quoted in Rood 17) Proulx's short stories seem to play with Alain Julliard's claim that the short story form and the fantastic attract one another like magnets.<sup>13</sup> Her narratives summon fantastic codes, but those are either undermined or superseded by magical realist ones, requiring suspension of disbelief. If, as Jean-Pierre Aubrit argues,<sup>14</sup> short fiction is the privileged locus for the supernatural, it may in postmodernist fiction be because of the omnivorous, mythopoeic tendency of the genre. Feeding on revitalized metaphors from vernacular language, on fairy tales, myths, local legends and folklore, it seems that Proulx's highly palimpsestuous narratives revel in the mixing of codes and genres, presenting stories of magic as much as the magic of story-telling. In that sense, Proulx's short fiction corroborates Nadine Gordimer's vision of the short story as "a kind of creative vision [...] better equipped [than the novel] to attempt the capture of ultimate reality, [and which] suits modern consciousness—which seems better expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference." (264-65) As Gordimer explains:

Writers are becoming more and more aware of the waviness of the line that separates fantasy from the so-called rational in human perception. It is recognized that fantasy is no more than a shift in angle [...]. But this fantasy is something that changes, merges, emerges, disappears as a pattern does viewed through the bottom of a glass. It is true for the moment when one looks down through the bottom of the glass; but the same vision does not transform everything one sees, consistently through one's whole consciousness. Fantasy in the hands of short story writers is so much more successful than when in the hands of novelists because it is necessary for it to hold good only for the brief illumination of the situation it dominates. (264-65)

- 38 In Proulx's short stories, fantasy opens up liminal spaces, upsetting received ideas about the dichotomy between reality and magic, and between fiction and truth. Her use of magical realism is decidedly a postmodernist one, succeeding in presenting powerful, long-lasting visions, sometimes with the advantage of offering a moment of respite or a sense of poetic justice in her otherwise mostly tragic, violent and morbid fictional universe, while simultaneously foregrounding the creative act of story-telling itself.

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## NOTES

1. As quoted in the conclusion, I am here borrowing an expression from Nadine Gordimer's essay on the short story genre.
2. In *Understanding Annie Proulx*, Karen L. Rood views Annie Proulx's fiction "as part of a late-twentieth-century trend toward a new regionalism." (14); the same emphasis is laid in the critical essays collected and edited by Alex Hunt in *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism*, 2009.
3. I am here taking up Frank O'Connor's celebrated vision of the short story as the locus for the expression of a "submerged population group," of a lonely and alienated voice.

4. "Proposer au lecteur une suite de récits divertissants, tel est le propos de l'auteur anonyme des *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*. [...] Divertissants, les récits le sont d'abord par les sujets. [...] Les récits sont encore divertissants par une expression truculente, même si elle confine à la trivialité. [...] On] peut affirmer que la nouvelle à ses origines serait comme un fabliau en prose. (René Godenne 26-27)
  5. For more on the French *Ecole des Annales* in relation to Annie Proulx's writing, see the article by Stéphanie Durrans, "The Influence of the *Annales* School on Annie Proulx's Geographical Imagination," in *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx* (11-23).
  6. The analogy between Proulx's characters and Sherwood Anderson's has also been noted by O. Alan Weltzien, who calls Proulx's Wyoming grotesques "weathered, Western descendants of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio* gallery," in "Annie Proulx's Wyoming: Geographical Determinism, Landscape and Caricature, in *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism*, 2009.
  7. I am here referring to Gérard Genette's definitions of "parodie" and "travestissement burlesque" in *Palimpsestes*, as on the one hand playful transformation of a traditional theme, character or action, and on the other hand, an imitation and rewriting of a text in a lowly language, with more common and modern themes, and with a more satirical intention. My claim is that Proulx's rewriting of fairy tales for instance is an example of "travestissement burlesque," while her humorous debunking of fantastic codes abides rather by the rules of "parodie," rather than pastiche, for it imitates themes and content rather than style.
  8. Annie Proulx lives on a remote ranch in deep Wyoming.
  9. For more on this analysis of "Tits Up in a Ditch" see my paper "Inheriting 'Bad Dirt,' White Trash and 'Dump Junk': the Art of Recycling in Annie Proulx's Wyoming Stories." This paper will soon be published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, as Chapter Three in *Thy Truth Then be Thy Dowry: Questions of Inheritance in American Women's Literature*, edited by Stéphanie Durrans.
  10. For these two intertextual signposts, see the Acknowledgements in *Close Range*, 10.
  11. I have developed the symbolism of the steer from the perspective of nature in another paper, currently submitted for publication, where I argue that the half-skinned steer provides a potent synecdoche for man's abuse and silencing of Nature, the dirty cut-off tongue and the "mute bawling" (30) of the animal metaphors expressing Nature's speechless voice.
  12. "I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show." Quoted in Brucoli 125.
  13. "Le fantastique et la nouvelle s'aiment réciproquement." Quoted in *Le Conte et la Nouvelle*, by Jean-Pierre Aubrit, 117.
  14. Jean Pierre Aubrit, *Le Conte et la nouvelle*, Chapter Nine: "L'attitude face au surnaturel" (117-27).
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## ABSTRACTS

Si l'œuvre d'Annie Proulx a fait l'objet de nombreuses études ces dix dernières années, la plupart se sont attachées d'une part à ses romans, et d'autre part, au déterminisme géographique en jeu dans sa fiction, à la construction des genres ou au mythe du cowboy. Cet article s'intéresse aux trois recueils de nouvelles du Wyoming d'Annie Proulx, et aux apparitions et disparitions



fantastiques et magiques qui les caractérisent. Car ces nouvelles exhibent par endroits un certain réalisme, ancrées comme elles le sont dans l'état le moins peuplé des Etats Unis et un contexte socio-historique aisément identifiable ; mais, par ailleurs la part de fiction est mise en relief par de nombreuses incursions dans des modes fantastiques et magiques. Cet article examine dans un premier temps le régionalisme prégnant de ces nouvelles, empreintes d'une couleur locale et d'effets réalistes qui rapprochent ces trois recueils d'archives ou de mémoires régionaux. Il s'agit ensuite d'analyser les événements improbables qui viennent contrecarrer le réalisme et le naturalisme dans ces récits brefs, en s'appuyant sur les définitions du fantastique données par Tzvetan Todorov, du réalisme magique selon Wendy Faris, et de la distinction entre ces deux modes étudiées par Amaryll Chanady. Enfin, la dimension parodique de ces nouvelles s'associe à un jeu autoréférentiel typiquement postmoderniste qui vient souligner le caractère omnivore du genre de la nouvelle, qui ingère et renvoie aussi bien à des mythes anciens que de nombreux récits tirés du folklore et des contes de fées. Ainsi, c'est finalement le pouvoir de la nouvelle elle-même qui est mis en relief par ces nouvelles de Proulx, qui parviennent à mélanger les codes, les genres et les modes avec cynisme et dérision, tout en créant d'intenses moments de révélation ou des symboles frappants.

## AUTHORS

### BÉNÉDICTE MEILLON

Bénédicte Meillon is Associate Professor at the University of Perpignan, where she teaches translation and literature. She is a member of the VECT (Voyages, Echanges, Confrontations, Transformations) Research group in Perpignan. She wrote her PhD on Barbara Kingsolver's short stories and has published articles on Barbara Kingsolver's work, Roald Dahl's short stories, Paul Auster's, and Annie Proulx's works. She has specialized in the short story genre and in North American literature, with a strong interest in the postmodernist rewriting of myths, folk and fairy tales, in the representation of minorities, nature, and rurality.