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Oral History and Revenge in Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer"

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"Earlier generations may very well determine the shape of the trajectories of future generations."

--Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame

Stories are the recordings of history and serve as reminders of personal and cultural struggle. In *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*, Gísli Sigurdsson writes that before the development of written language, oral history "became a kind of knowledge bank" (57) in which stories of success, as well as those of tragedy, were retold to subsequent generations. A study conducted by Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame concludes that "earlier generations may very well determine the shape of the trajectories of future generations through what it passes on to them [. . .] for the purpose of generating foreseeable conduct" (87). While this study provides evidence that positive behaviours may be transmitted to descendants, it also implies that destructive acts may be channelled through history and generate foreseeable negative conduct. The pain of struggle, revenge, and retaliation arises from behaviours which may be perpetuated across many generations; often the original source of the feud is forgotten, yet a desire for vengeance persists.

The originating concept for Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Proulx's story "The Half-Skinned Steer" is, as the author notes, "based on an old Icelandic folktale, 'Porgeir's Bull'" (Proulx 10). Proulx's reconfiguration of the themes of revenge within this tale demonstrate how 'old' thinking can slow progress and resurrect long-forgotten grievances. In "The Half-Skinned Steer", the author relocates and remodulates the traditional folk tale to address particular issues and behaviours – work ethic, diet and vengeance – within the setting of the contemporary American West. This article will examine the ways in which Proulx reconfigures the Icelandic folktale "Porgeir's Bull" to explore intersecting themes of persistence, human arrogance, and nature's revenge on man.

In Proulx's story, provident, healthy-eating Mero is called back to his childhood home in Wyoming in order to attend the funeral of his brother, Rollo. During the long drive, Mero remembers events from his young adulthood, particularly a story told by his father's girlfriend more than sixty years earlier about a stricken rancher named Tin Head. Describing the girlfriend as a "teller of tales of hard deeds and mayhem" (24), Proulx forewarns that there is unlikely to be a happy ending to this tale. The story recounted is that of Tin Head, a local rancher who kills a steer, hangs it up from a tree, and begins skinning it. Halfway through the job, he goes inside to eat. When he returns, the steer has gone missing. He sees the steer in the distance, its skin hanging behind it dragging on the ground. The steer turns around and looks at Tin Head:

Its red eyes glaring at him, pure teetotal hate like arrows coming at him, and he knows he is done for and all his kids is done for, and that his wife is done for and that every one of her blue dishes has got to break, and the dog that licked the blood is done for, and the house where they lived has to blow away or burn up and every fly or mouse in it (37).

Although there is no verbal interaction between the two figures, the tension between human and animal is clear. From that moment on, Tin Head and his descendants are described as the victims of bad luck, as if a curse has been placed upon them. By implication, something sinister has been conveyed through the contact between Tin Head and the steer. In his essay “Nature and Silence,” ecocritic Christopher Manes identifies an “animistic subject”, suggesting that “human speech is not understood as some unique faculty, but as a subset of the speaking of the world” (18). Manes implies that there is more communication taking place *without* verbalization than *with* it. Without using spoken words, the half-skinned steer appears to communicate with Tin Head.

The ‘curse’ of this encounter, however, is not simplistically portrayed. Tin Head’s misfortunes can be interpreted as either caused by the steer’s ‘curse’ or a result of his own lack of planning, a weakness which is described as inherited from his parents and their ancestors. Furthermore, a few years prior to his encounter with the steer, Tin Head had fallen down cement stairs resulting in a metal plate in his head, with townspeople gossiping that this was eating away at his brain. His ill-luck is elaborated in a series of unnatural images, as “chickens turned blue, calves were born with three legs, his kids was piebald and he never finished nothing he started, quit halfway through a job every time” (26) – even when skinning a steer. Like any good storyteller, Mero’s father’s girlfriend adapts the story according to the circumstances. Mero knows the chickens did not turn blue since the girlfriend describes them as “blue as your old daddy’s eyes,” a fact he feels free to dismiss because “he knew his daddy’s eyes were brown” (32). However, the idea that Tin Head never finishes a job is accepted as a truthful description, further evidenced by the fact that he only skins the steer *halfway* before going inside to eat. Proulx repeats the word “half” or forms thereof several times: Tin Head quit ‘halfway’ through a job (26), and he only eats ‘half’ his meal before returning to skinning the steer (35). Tin Head’s problems, therefore, are not only caused by bad luck brought on by a mythical steer, but by his own behaviour.

Oral stories evolve into folktales and may eventually be recorded, but where oral storytelling remains the mode of communication, some storytellers can be identified as more talented than others. According to storytelling scholar Anne Pelowski “there would be some whose adventures were always the pleasantest to hear, whose deeds were the most marvelous, whose realistic details the most varied” (9). Just as successful authors become celebrities today, these historic individuals would become entertainers, telling stories around campfires, at family gatherings, and during religious ceremonies. One of the most vital traits of oral storytelling is that stories can be adapted by the teller depending on the circumstances. Anthropologists Lynn Sikkink and Braulio M. Choque write in their article “Landscape, Gender, and Community: Andean Mountain Stories” that stories can be manipulated by the tellers to make new statements (168). In similar terms, Annie Proulx manipulates “Porgeir’s Bull”

to a different set of circumstances. She is a writer with roots in oral literature, whose family had a strong tradition of oral storytelling, teaching her to see and appreciate the natural world, develop an eye for detail, and learn to tell a story (Rood 2); these traits emerge in her reconfiguration of a traditional oral tale into “The Half-Skinned Steer”.

In an interview with Susan Salter Reynolds, Proulx admits her love for “examin[ing] the lives of ordinary people” (2), as well as an enduring interest for “cultures in their death throes [. . .] which involves looking carefully at [. . .] any record of daily life.” This fascination is evident throughout her fictional work; the reference to “cultures in their death throes” echoes her doctoral work on Renaissance economic history, which may have honed her interest in how a community’s geography and economy affects its citizens and its survival. While researching her book *The Shipping News*, Proulx familiarized herself with the geography and economy of Wyoming and Newfoundland; a visit to Iceland and her interest in history and economy made her aware of cattle ranching as one of the main economies of both Iceland and Wyoming. Researcher Stefán Einarsson writes in his book *Icelandica* that Icelanders “struggle with the elements, which no native can escape, especially during the winter” (30). Similarly, Proulx confesses she is ready to leave Wyoming because of the winters (Reynolds Interview). The harsh landscape of these two locations drives many people away, a point of comparison which emerges as an essential element in “The Half-Skinned Steer”.

The original Icelandic tale which lies as the basis for “The Half-Skinned Steer” centers on the figure of a bull, a creature only appearing at night, in inhospitable surroundings. Indeed, creatures of the night are abundant in Icelandic folklore: “Long, dark winters cause a weakening of the nervous resistance to darkness” (Benekiz 7). It is crucial to note that the folktale comes in various forms. Benekiz places it in the ghost category and calls it “Porgeirsboli, the gigantic ox who trailed his hide behind him on his tiresome visits” (11). Jacqueline Simpson names the creature “Thorgeir’s Bull” (177) and describes a magical bull dragging its skin. This bull could travel by any method, take any form, be invisible, and torment his creator, descendants, and any on which it wanted revenge.

Revenge is a common motivation in Icelandic folktales, partly because many Icelandic families are able to “trace their lineage to the settlement generation” (Hume 197) and either their descendants or relatives might carry on the grudge into eternity. In her article “Saga Form, Oral Prehistory, and the Icelandic Social Context,” Jesse Byock writes:

In Iceland people knew who their ancestors were. Kinship obligations for both revenge and inheritance were reckoned out to the fifth degree. This meant that Icelanders could be affected by the actions of individuals with whom they shared a great-great-great-grandparent. It is not likely that the Icelanders needed the example of a chronicle to spark the idea of telling stories about their ancestors and their island existence (164).

The revenge theme carries through into folktales. “Porgeir’s Bull” represents slow progress, and old grievances that prohibit people from moving forward with their lives. Annie Proulx adapts this idea in “The Half-Skinned Steer” to show how behaviours, grievances, and lack of persistence in our ancestors

can also be inherited and dragged around – just as the skinned bull drags around its hide, slowing the living down. Both versions of the folktale involve a steer dragging around its skin that appears to invoke bad luck and revenge.

Besides being a commentary on the drudgery of survival, Proulx's version of the tale invites interpretation as a study on the behaviour and effects of eating red meat. The grotesque blood imagery of drippings falling into a tub while Tin Head skins the steer, and the dog licking it, encourage the reader to respond with a sense of disgust. "But, she said. They had to eat, didn't they, just like anybody else?" (Proulx 27); "that's what they'd eat all winter long, boiled, fried, smoked, fricasseed, burned and raw" (32). This enforced and habitual consumption of meat gradually emerges in the story as a source of illness and suffering. A study conducted in 2002 by Vaclav Smil which examines the evolution, patterns, and consequences of eating meat considers frequent consumption of any kind of meat (especially pork and beef) to be associated with higher intakes of cholesterol and leads to coronary heart disease (627) and points out that the global cattle count has grown 130 million since 1980 (618). The population of domesticated bovine has increased over the past one hundred years, with the result that a contemporary version of the curse of the half-skinned steer continues to reverberate in its consequences for the human cardio-vascular system.

Like Tin Head, Mero's father contends with misfortune throughout his life. The old man is "bankrupt and wrangled a job delivering mail" (Proulx 21). He has given up on the ranch because he lacks the persistence necessary to make a success of it. Even Mero and Rollo recognize the mail job as a "defection from the work of the ranch" (21). With this "defection", Mero's father abandons the unspoken doctrine that binds ranchers to their land and trades rural life for urban life. Ranching can be a very lucrative business for those who succeed in it, like the neighbour, Mr. Banner, but a rancher must be persistent and unfaltering in pursuit of success. When Mero leaves the ranch, he knows they are ruined because he recognizes the same lapsed work ethic in his brother Rollo, a behaviour dragged along from the previous generation. The two brothers want to "pull the place taut" (22), intending to tighten up the ranch so it can be profitable. The tough landscape of Wyoming will eat one's cattle, drive them over cliffs, suck them into sinkholes, send mountain lions to eat them, and blow down fences (21), unless the rancher does the job the *whole* way, not *half* way.

Proulx reinforces the notion of nature's revenge on man through description of the misfortunes encountered by Rollo and his family. Unable to make the ranch profitable, Rollo sells part of it to the neighbouring rancher, Banner, who is making a living ranching just a few miles down the road. In a description which echoes Tin Head's inability to complete a job, Rollo now only owns 'half' of the ranch and receives 'half-interest' for running the place (22). Does that also mean he is only *half*-interested in the ranch? It is only *half* a ranch, now, at least when compared to the perceived myth of the American West and its cowboy and cattle imagery. Mero wonders, "What the hell was this about an emu? Were they all crazy out there?" (22). Raising emus on a cattle ranch seems unnatural to him, but then nature strikes out at Rollo when he is "killed by a waspy emu" (22), an animal native to Australia. Cattle are also not indigenous to Wyoming, so Rollo's interest in introducing non-native

species like emus and kangaroos into the ecosystem is a continuation of behaviour beginning with the introduction of cattle. The ranch has become an invented version of the American West, known as “Down Under Wyoming” – invoking an Australian theme, a continent which is *half*-way around the world from this location.

While characterizing Rollo to be ‘half’ a man, Proulx develops Mero as modern and ‘whole’. Mero tries to escape the alleged curse placed upon his family in moving far away to Woolfoot, Massachusetts. His decision to leave the ranch comes at twenty-three years of age after “he had listened to her damn story [about Tin Head] and the dice had rolled” (33). Through gambling imagery, Proulx develops Mero as a character willing to take a chance with his destiny by leaving Wyoming, thus breaking an intergenerational cycle of procrastination. After leaving, Mero changes his life and adopts new behaviours, different from those inherited from his ancestors. He becomes a successful businessman, exercises, eats healthily, and stays away from Wyoming. The story opens with a description of his new life. It seems Mero is content in his life away from Wyoming; he is wealthy and able to get both “in and out of politics without scandal” (21). However, this apparent good luck is reversed the moment he makes the decision to return to Wyoming for Rollo’s funeral. “That event would jerk him back” (23) to Wyoming and also to the scenes of his childhood where the lack of persistence exhibited by his father and brother are normal.

Mero reverts to old behaviours even as he prepares for the drive to Wyoming, chooses a hat, and recalls his childhood. Mero’s father wears hats with the “damnedness curl to the brim,” (24), and Mero contemplates which hat to bring to the funeral. Mero begins thinking of cattle on his first morning on the road, expressing the belief that both “weather and cows” are typical issues people deal with when travelling (25). From this point on, he is subject to a string of bad luck which combines with the gradual resurrection of old behavioural patterns. He gets a speeding ticket, wrecks his Cadillac, begins drinking coffee and whiskey, and eats eggs. Indeed, the wrecked Cadillac is abandoned with all the evidence of Mero’s new and improved life forgotten inside—the power bars and bottled water of his former lifestyle (30).

The moment that Mero crosses the state line of Wyoming, Proulx begins to associate him with the same *half* terminology used to describe Rollo and Tin Head. Just as Tin Head does his work ‘half-way’ and Rollo is ‘half-interested’ in the ranch, Mero is ‘half an hour’ past Kearney, Nebraska when the full moon rises (30), and dozes ‘half an hour’ in the wind-rocked car (36) in the darkness of the road. Mero stops at a restaurant and orders a juicy steak. The violent imagery of “blood spread across the white plate and the beast, [. . .] mouth agape in mute bawling” (30) appeals to the reader’s empathetic pity for a young calf taken from its mother. Manes theorizes that “nature has grown silent in our discourse, shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object” (17). The image of Mero suggests humans no longer listen to the voice of nature as they slowly destroy natural resources.

As Mero draws closer to the ranch, imagery proliferates which alludes to the consumption of red meat, cardio pulmonary arrest, and butchery: “muscle in the wind [. . .] great pulsing artery [. . .]

cliffs like bones with shreds of meat on them” (Proulx 33), and taillights which look like a “fresh bloodstain” (37). This imagery reiterates the contradiction in Mero’s behaviour, as the character lapses back into patterns he has tried to avoid by leaving Wyoming sixty years previously. Mero drags the old red meat-eating habits of his ancestors behind him, and they are once again slowing him down, leaving him open and vulnerable to the curse of the half-skinned steer.

Proulx’s narration concentrates on Mero’s downfall in terms of his betrayal of himself. A crucial behaviour that Mero brings with him from Massachusetts is his arrogant belief in his own invincibility. Though he cannot remember the name of his father’s girlfriend, who drives him away from his home state, he nevertheless believes he can drive from Massachusetts to Wyoming without getting lost. When a traffic cop gives him a ticket, he cannot remember where he is going (26). He is disoriented in Des Moines, causes an accident (29), and gets lost on his way to the ranch. He believes himself to be better and stronger than the harsh landscape of Wyoming, but his arrogance overwhelms him. Rather than spending the night in his cosy Cadillac with the engine running, Mero gets out and foolishly believes he can walk ten miles to the nearest ranch house in a snowstorm. This behaviour leads directly to his climactic confrontation with the half-skinned steer, and provides the setting for the heart attack which may destroy him.

Benekikz documents that Porgeir’s Bull is a night dweller (7), and the eerie ending to “The Half-Skinned Steer” takes place “on a bad night”, after the protagonist has driven along “an unmarked road through great darkness.” In Proulx’s story, patterns of ancestral revenge emerge as Mero falls back into the behaviours of his meat-eating relatives; the half-skinned steer appears to avenge the murder of its ancestors, just as traditional Icelandic folk tales show people still seeking to avenge wrongs inflicted by earlier generations. Proulx’s tale resurrects this pattern of vengeance; in this account, a relative has brought a terrible curse upon Mero’s family, and the half-skinned steer will find him through an alternate form of vengeance, wreaked upon his own body in the form of heart disease. Vengeance manifests itself in the arteries of man, clogging them with saturated fats. Nevertheless, the half-skinned steer is nowhere in sight when its revenge is personified as a heart attack; instead, it is Proulx’s suggestive use of imagery and metaphor which emphasises the link between the half-skinned steer and Mero’s fate.

By applying the principles of oral storytelling to her writing and reconfiguring an Icelandic folktale into a contemporary short story, Proulx permits both the reconsideration of old ideas and the introduction of new ways of thinking about them. This interpretation raises the possibility that inherited behaviours can be modified; however, the traditional conflict between man and nature continues, and nature’s power over man seems eternal. Though one cannot change one’s landscape or economic situation, one can change the attitudes inherited through intergenerational transfer. As this article has shown, Proulx successfully uses the tenets and central themes of the traditional representations of cyclical ancestral revenge, to elaborate upon this theme in “The Half-Skinned Steer”.

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