

Postcards from the Edge: The Journey Motif in Annie Proulx's *Postcards*

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Amerikkalainen nykykirjailija Annie Proulx kuvailee ensimmäisessä romaanissaan Postcards (1992) Bloodin maanviljelijäperheen elämänvaiheita, joissa kodin, matkan ja ajan teemat kietoutuvat yhteen. Romaanissa Bloodin perhe hajoaa ja menettää kotitilansa. Tapahtumiin liittyy monimutkaista ihmissuhteiden, liikkeen ja paikan dynamiikkaa, jonka tuloksena paikka ja aika saavat uusia merkityksiä. Käytän tutkimuksessani kirjallisuudentutkija Janis Stoutin paon, tutkimusmatkan, kodin perustamisen ja säilyttämisen käsitteitä analyttisinä työvälineinä, joiden avulla tarkastelen henkilöiden suhdetta paikkaan, liikkeeseen ja aikaan. Työssäni totean, että käsitteet liittyvät saumattomasti toisiinsa, jolloin matka yhdistyy paikkaan, ihmisiin ja historiaan.

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1 Introduction

It has been said that American literature is a “literature of movement” (Stout 1983: 3), and the fiction of Annie Proulx is no exception. Her novels traverse the North American continent – from Vermont to Newfoundland and Miami to Chicago and Denver to backwoods Texas – and take readers on a whirlwind journey through time and space. Not only do the novels span great distances, but the journey motif is a tool used by Proulx to illustrate the complex relationship between the individual and the land, as well as the connections between time and place.

Proulx has commented on her own fiction in this way: “Geography, geology, climate, weather, the deep past, immediate events, shape the characters and partly determine what happens to them, although the random event counts for much as it does in life” (The Missouri Review 1999). All of these elements are part of Proulx’s first novel, *Postcards* (1992), which follows the lives of the Blood family, spanning from the 1940s to the 1980s. Through the characters of Loyal, Mink, Jewell, Dub, and Mernelle, Proulx illustrates that the journey is intricately

connected to the notion of home. The aim of this paper is to examine the various incarnations of the journey motif, in order to show how the identities of the characters are intertwined with the land.

The journey motif is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is one of the most common themes in literature, from the quest narrative to the picaresque, to the American western, for example. Vladimir Propp was among the first to claim the predominance of this motif in his “*Morphology of the Folktale*” (1928), where the whole tale hinges on the hero setting out on a quest to fulfill a lack or a desire. Proulx’s novel does not necessarily follow the same pattern as these tales, but is most definitely centred around the notions of journey and a desire for a better life, which is at the heart of many of the stories that Propp analyses.

In a similar fashion, Janis Stout (1983: 5) has examined the journey narrative in American literature, and states that “our [sic] journey-centred history also set the patterns in which the journey would continue in our [sic] fiction.” She uses the categories of escape, exploration, and home-founding to classify different types of journey narratives found in American literature, and these terms will be used as methodological tools to examine how the journey informs the central conflict for each character. *Escape*, according to Stout (1983: 30) is “not a journey *toward* but a journey *away from*.” *Exploration*, on the other hand, has more positive connotations, and is connected with discovering new vistas: “the explorer or adventurer is firm in his [sic] purpose to venture forth and may be clear as to his hopes or expectations of what he will find, though ultimately the discoveries that await him [sic] impose their own shape” (Stout: 1983, 30). Finally, *home-founding* has “its focus [in] the new home to be established and the associated benefits it will bring” (Stout: 1983, 42). These terms do overlap and are inter-related, but to highlight their significance to the different characters, will be dealt with separately.

2 Escape

The novel is catapulted into action in the opening paragraph:

- (1) Even before he got up he knew *he was on his way* [italics mine]. Even in the midst of the involuntary orgasmic jerking he knew. Knew she was dead, knew he was on his way... he knew that everything he had done or thought in his life had to be started over again. *Even if he got away*. [italics mine] (Proulx 1992: 4)

Loyal has just raped and killed his fiancée, Billy, for reasons unknown to the reader at this point. Some insight is given to this later in the novel as we find out it is a result of Loyal's sometimes uncontrollable temper; he is thrown into a fury when Billy does not appreciate the beauty of the land while they are out for a walk in the fields. At this point, he thinks that his only option is to run, so he buries her in the rock wall on the edge of the property, tells his family that he and Billy are running away together, and leaves. Loyal then spends the rest of his life running and never returns to the land that he treasures. This turn of events is tragic on so many fronts, as, given the choice, Loyal would not want to leave – it was Billy's dream to go west and seek their fortunes, while Loyal had no other plans than to build up the land which had been in his family for generations. Ryden (2009: 73) describes the situation in the following way: "Billy, who has always despised the farm, will now be a part of it forever. Even more ironically, Loyal, whose only plan has been to work the farm for the rest of his days, spends the rest of the novel roaming the country to avoid the consequences of his crime." Escape seems to be Loyal's only option, even though no one ever suspects him of any wrongdoing.

Loyal's departure signifies the death of the Blood family farm, as they cannot manage it without him. His father, Mink, is shocked when Loyal makes his announcement to the family, as he knows he cannot keep up the farm without him, as is evidenced by his brother's comment: "'Hey, you leave, Loyal...you're finishin' off this farm'" (Proulx 1992: 11). Dub's statement shows just how tied to the land Loyal is.

Though he feels he has to escape, Loyal reluctantly heads out on his journey. He does not want to go, and he does not know where to go. As he drives away, he takes one last look at what he is leaving behind:

- (2) 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 the 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 exactly in the center of the ten-acre pages. (Proulx 1992: 12)

The comparison of the scene to a postcard is a direct link to the postcards that become a means of communication for Loyal and represent the movement that his life has now become. As Ryden (2009: 76) notes, "[g]iven these Biblical connotations, the farm becomes a paradise lost for Loyal, a place of grace that can be

glimpsed, that can be remembered, but can never be brought forth on this earth.” This passage accentuates the unattainability of Loyal’s dream, as his ideal will never be found in the so-called real world.

In addition, no matter how far he goes Loyal cannot escape himself. The unconscious guilt he feels for what happened to Billy and the state he left his family in follow him wherever he goes. It comes in the form of asthma-like attacks whenever he gets close to a woman. On one such occasion, he is saved with a shot of adrenaline. When told that it could have been an allergic reaction, Loyal thinks:

- (3) But Loyal knew it wasn’t anything he’d swallowed. It was the touching. Touching the woman. If it wasn’t Billy it wouldn’t be anyone else. The price for getting away. No wife, no family, no children, no human comfort in the quotidian unfolding of his life; for him, restless shifting from one town to another... (Proulx 1992: 53)

Evident here is the fact that Loyal cannot escape his past, no matter how he tries. No matter how far from home he travels, he is always part of the land he left behind, which prevents him from making a life for himself. The asthma attacks are a bodily expression of the constraint he feels at this futile escape. His disconnection to his present surroundings and unbreakable link to his homeland is made especially clear in the chapter entitled “Billy.” He wakes up in the hospital only to discover that he has been robbed of just about everything he owns:

- (4) In the hospital bed he stood against the unseen landscape, the ozone smell of fresh snow on his wool jacket – the last light, and the smell of snow.
His blood, urine, feces and semen, the tears, strands of hair, vomit, flakes of skin, his infant and childhood teeth, the clippings 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 strength 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. (Proulx 1992: 77)

It is abundantly clear through this that Loyal is a product and a part of the land in which he was brought up – time and space cannot separate him from that.

As mentioned, related to this idea of being connected to the land is the main motif of postcards weaved throughout the text. With few exceptions, each chapter of the novel opens with a postcard. Many are sent by Loyal at various stages of his journey. He acquires the postcards while escaping his first encounter with a woman after Billy’s death. As he stumbles out of the coffee shop, gasping for

breath, he trips over a stand of postcards, all bearing the picture of a bear. He grabs a pile of them, runs to his car, and drives away. Periodically, he writes to his family to tell them where he is and what he is doing. In true postcard fashion, he never provides too much information, most importantly, a return address. This one-way communication represents the communication breakdown in the family, as well as Loyal's disconnect with his home. He always addresses both his parents and his siblings, long after Mink has died, and his brother and sister have moved away. He usually asks about the farm, indicating that he still cares about it, but has not stopped to think just how much things have changed since he left, and what kind of trajectory he put his entire family on by running away. For Loyal, the farm is frozen in time, much like the postcard-like image he sees as he drives away.

What he writes on these postcards are cryptic messages about where he has been and what he has done. He does all kinds of odd jobs – from mining to uranium prospecting to bone collecting to trapping. Even when he finally decides that it is a farm that he wants, this is taken away from him in a tragic series of events. When put in the context of the journey motif, it seems like the means is cut off from the end – where to go when you have nowhere to be or if you would rather not have left in the first place?

Through Loyal's attempted escape, Proulx is making a statement about the price of progress in America. It is more than the fate of one individual, but how that individual's life translates to the landscape. In Loyal's journey, Proulx depicts the death of traditional ways of living, the shift from the rural to the urban, and the exploitation of the land in the form of mining and illegal hunting and trapping, and the value of human life, for example. The characters of the novel are profoundly out of touch with their environments, stunting their growth and ability to adapt to new situations. As Karen Rood (2001: 44) notes, "[t]he novel is full of examples of how Americans have been poor stewards of the land, gradually losing any sense of connection to the natural world and the creatures that inhabit it." When Loyal has had enough of his current situation, he hooks up his trailer and moves on, without a trace. The care with which he sets his traps when hunting coyote is a metaphor for his own life (coyotes have a keen sense of smell so there are intricate routines a trapper must perform to catch them). He does not want to leave a mark; he does not want to be discovered.

Loyal's end is just as it should be, given the circumstances. He dies alone in Minneapolis, with nothing but the shirt on his back and the Indian's book (a journal he has been keeping over the years), in anonymity. A couple sitting in a restaurant notices him, digging through a garbage bin, and the woman says, "He's been in the garbage...I wish the city would scrape up the drunks and bums and dump them up in the swamp. Solve the homeless problem for good. Instead of yelping about shelters" (Proulx 1992: 304). Again, we see the callousness of a society which lets this happen, as well as the pathetic end of Loyal's escape. His last thoughts hearken back to the land:

- (5) The Indian's book falls open. He is astonished to see the pages are the great, slanting field. At the top of the field a 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. (Proulx 1992: 309)

Significant here, once again, is the textual nature of his image of home – the ideal image he has been carrying in his mind for forty years. His life has come full circle; "in death he has returned home" (Rood 2001: 50). Tragically enough, in this case, he is not buried in the land on which he was raised, but dies in obscurity, with only the thoughts of the land he loved. Though he has been on the run for most of his life, he has not been able to break that connection to his home. His escape comes with a grave price.

Loyal is not the only Blood brother to attempt escape. Dub stays on to take care of the farm with his father, Mink, after Loyal leaves. But they are doomed from the start, as they do not have the same drive and vision that Loyal does, not to mention the physical limitations. In fact, Mink kills Loyal's Holsteins after he leaves, and refuses to sell the farm when it becomes apparent that they will not survive. Dub, the prodigal son to this point, is forced to stay on the farm, when all he wants to do is marry his sweetheart, Myrtle, and build a life of his own. In this parallel relationship to Loyal and Billy, Proulx juxtaposes the two brothers: Loyal *had* to escape to avoid his crime, and Dub *wants* to escape but is forcefully tied to the land out of a sense of duty. Like Billy, Myrtle does not see her future as matron of the farm, and ends up divorcing Dub, taking their son with her. Dub becomes a pawn in Mink's plan to burn down the barn (with the cows in it, as they have an incurable disease) and claim the insurance to pay off their debts.

When their fraud is uncovered, both are sent to jail. Mink commits suicide, and when Dub is released, he heads for Florida instead of returning home. At first he is part of a con with a fellow ex-con, but he soon begins to dream of being something. He goes to real estate college, putting him on a path to becoming a real estate tycoon with the mansion to match. On the surface, he appears to be the most successful of the bunch, in terms of financial security, especially in comparison to Loyal, who in his last postcard is "Down to bedroll" (Proulx 1992: 299). But his wealth has come with a price, both to the land and to his own morality. He is being chased down by the IRS for tax fraud, and he and his wife, Pala (also referred to as 'the pirate' by Dub), are involved in the development which turned Florida swamplands into Disneyland, an extreme expression of American consumerism and rape of the land. Eventually they leave Florida for Texas to escape financial ruin. Though Dub has escaped the life of poverty he was living, his success has come with a price. He is completely cut off from the land.

3 Exploration

One can examine Jewell's story in terms of exploration, as she attempts to escape without leaving home, focusing on exploring familiar places from a new perspective. The matriarch of the Blood family, she undergoes a profound transformation after Mink's suicide and the sale of the farm. With no more ties to the land, she is free to go out and explore her environment. The first thing she does is learn how to drive (often seen as a symbol of freedom in American literature), and this gives her a whole new perspective on her surroundings:

- (6) All her life she had taken the tufted line of the hills against the sky as fixed, but saw now that the landscape changed, rolled out as far as the roads went, never repeating itself in its arrangement of cliffs and water and trees. View was something more than the bulk of hills and opening valleys, more than sheets of riffled light. (Proulx 1992: 126-127)

Unlike Loyal, Jewell is seeing her *real* surroundings, not a postcard-like scene. The isolation she felt on the farm has all but disappeared and she is attracted to this newfound freedom.

Similar to Dub, Jewell's journey can be interpreted in a positive way. She has released herself of the shackles of the domestic prison she lived in for so many years. Stout (1998: 15) sees this as a particular quality of the female journey: "images and narrative structures of journeys employed by women writers trope

not only the social and political liberation of women but the freeing of consciousness and self-recognition as well.” However, selling the farm to acquire that freedom is a profound statement of how the composition of society is changing, as it has been in the Blood family for generations.

Her journey also ends in death, emphasizing the cost of this freedom and exploration. One day, she decides to take a drive up Mount Washington. It is something that she has longed to do for some time, and decides that there is no time like the present. She drives off in search of the summit – the weather is bad (the chapter is called “Looks Like Rain”), and when she stops for a coffee break at a café along the way, she is given directions for a shortcut as it is getting late. Her car gets stuck on a logging road, far from civilization, and as she attempts to free the car from the rock it is hung up on: “She fought her way forward, seven, eight feet, her heart hammering, so intent on reaching the other side of the gully she felt only astonishment when the fatal aneurism halted her journey. Her hand clenched wild raspberry canes, relaxed” (Proulx 1992: 219). Her body is never recovered, despite search brigades. She is reclaimed by the land, and only her wedding ring is laid to rest with Mink, once hope to find her is lost: to be free she must die, yet in death “she remains free, wedded to the country she loves” (Rood 2001: 57). Again, a link could be made to Loyal, who also dies alone. The biggest difference is that Jewell’s exploration has given her a sense of accomplishment (though she fails to reach the summit) and Loyal’s death signifies a failure to accomplish anything.

4 Home-founding

Home-founding can be seen as a stationary expression of the journey, as the emphasis is on securing a home, often after a long journey. According to Stout (1983: 33), it grows out of the exploration and quest, especially when considered in the context of the American pioneer story. However, in her later study of American women writers, she takes a woman-centred focus. She sees how the female journey is often inextricably linked with the home, especially in the context of escaping the bondage of patriarchal society and ideals. In *Postcards*, it is not always about *finding* a home, but *keeping* one. This has environmental, economic, and cultural implications, as can be seen through Mink’s, Jewell’s, Dub’s, and Memelle’s efforts to survive after Loyal leaves.

The Blood family farm, as mentioned earlier, has been in the family for many generations. Its loss is a statement of the high price to be paid for progress, but at the same time is a result of Loyal's tragic flaw, the anger he has inherited from his father, not to mention the murder of Billy. Loyal is essential to the survival of the farm, as he is the one with the vision, the drive, the passion, and the knowledge to make it work, and when he leaves, there is no hope. Mink tries to hang on, but he is too stubborn to change his ways, and he drives the family further and further into debt. In desperation, he burns the barn down, and is eventually charged with arson and insurance fraud. He commits suicide, leaving Jewell behind to dig herself out of financial ruin. In the end, she is forced to sell the land, and ends up moving to a trailer overlooking the farm. She becomes witness to its falling into disrepair, and the garden being reclaimed by nature:

- (7) If she pulled back the blue-flowered curtain in the bathroom window she could see the old house, down on its knees now. The roof had broken under a freight of snow the winter before. Ott wanted to burn it up, called it an eyesore that made the trailer park look bad, hanging over the pastel tubes like a wooden cliff, but she couldn't let go of the place, still limped in back of it every day in the summer to keep the old garden patches going, though the woodchucks and deer moved in with the weeds and did a lot of damage. Her ankles swelled so. It wants to go wild again, she thought. (Proulx 1992: 174)

In the context of home-founding, Proulx is making a comment about the struggles to maintain a traditional agrarian life in a time of technological development – there is a strong criticism of the changes in society in post WWII America. Proulx herself has said that

- (8) [t]he novel was concerned with what happens when a region has only one economic base and it goes under – the breakup and scattering of families, the subdivision of land, the outflow of old residents or the new position they adopt as service providers to the rich moving in (The Missouri Review 1999).

It is essential to keep in mind the greater social context when examining the individual journeys of the characters in the novel.

Loyal's journey has previously been discussed as one of a wanderer with no fixed address. However, as has been mentioned earlier, he still carries the land with him, and he has not abandoned his dream to have a farm altogether:

- (9) His own place would be a small farm, maybe two hundred and fifty acres, gently swelling earth like the curve of hip and breast, good pasture...The soil would be crumbly and stoneless. There would be a stream with a flat rich bottomland on each side for corn and hay crops, and a woodlot, say fifty acres of tall straight hardwood, a sugarbush, low-branched sweet trees on a south slope. (Proulx 1992: 54)

But what does he end up with? A plot of land in North Dakota, “[t]he farm a curve of earth, a slat-sided house leaning into the wind, starved fields among the ranches and sugar beet farms” (Proulx 1992: 188). He does not know what to grow there, and he seems out of place in this country. The farmhouse is destroyed in a freak wildfire, and all he is left with is his dog and his truck, as he did not have fire insurance.

Dub’s home-founding is essentially a social commentary on the American dream. He appears to be happy and successful – he and his wife are able to retire from real estate when life gets too dangerous in Miami, and leave for Texas where Dub can look after his orchids, and Pala can run a travel agency. Despite this success, he is cut off from his roots and his family.

Mernelle, the youngest of the Blood siblings, also wants to escape the farm at her first opportunity. She is often seen waiting for the mail delivery, waiting for that magic letter to take her away from it all. After Mink dies and it is time to do something about the farm, “Mernelle sat dreamily rocking, staring out the window at the scorched barn foundation. She was apart from this talk” (Proulx 1992: 112). This image is connected to Stout’s (1998: 12) observation that “in association with its pervasive emphasis on departure, women’s writing in the twentieth century often focuses insistently on two particular architectural features of the domestic space: doorways and windows.” Her looking out the window speaks of escape, a chance to get away from these surroundings which have trapped her for so long. As well, one cannot help but think of the start of the novel when Loyal announces his departure. Mink bolts the door shut, but this does not stop Loyal – he steps through the window, leaving behind shards of glass all over the place, including in the family dinner they had just sat down to eat.

Mernelle finally responds to an ad in the newspaper by a man looking for a wife. They end up marrying and building a life together: “Mernelle becomes a typical 1950s-style middle-class housewife, more like the women she sees on television than her mother. Mernelle’s only regret is her inability to bear children, which is echoed by the sterility of her lifestyle” (Rood 2001: 55). Of all the Bloods,

however, she is the one who tries to maintain contact – she visits her mother and is in regular contact with Dub. But, in the end, she is cut off from her roots, like the others, living a rather hollow existence of Sunday dinners and TV nights.

Jewell's story is also connected to the home-founding narrative, but first she must be released from the domestic bonds that kept her tied to her former life. Looking at her life as the head of the household, it is apparent that this is not a job she does with all her heart. The house is rundown and dirty:

- (10) The kitchen had not changed, Ronnie thought. Mink's grimy barn cap still hung from a hook near the ell door. The linoleum, the ivy crawling over the walls were as they always had been. There was half a loaf of bread standing on a scarred board, the knife with the broken point beside it: the sink was full of chipped dishes. (Proulx 1992: 114)

And, she has no interest in helping Mink when Loyal leaves (she will not go work in the barn – her place is in the house). After she is left alone, she shuts out different corners of the house and celebrates her solitariness:

- (11) Nor did the silent rooms bother her. She closed the doors, one by one, keeping just the kitchen and the spare room for sleeping. The night of the day they told her about Mink she got her pillow from their bed and took it into the spare room with its iron bed painted white, its flowery coverlet, the braided rug in all colors. The bed was hard, but its strangeness seemed correct. Silence deep as coal. When she woke in the morning to the pattern of light on the faded wall, the scent of sachet from the little embroidered bag under the pillow, *she was already in her different life* [italics mine]. (Proulx 1992: 128)

However, her independence, once she sells the farm, is ambiguous. On one hand, she is able to maneuver in this new world, by knitting hats and working at the local cannery, but on the other, it seems like a layer of color in her existence is gone, and that an entire way of life has disappeared. As Berry (2009: 173) notes, "This newfound freedom is a mixed bag, or the commercial economy that releases Jewell from farming life brings with it multiple problems." Is this the price of economic progress? What does it say when this family is shattered to pieces and spread all over the country?

5 Conclusion

As Stout (1983: 32) notes: "the tone of the escape narrative...has generally darkened as the possibility of real escape has diminished." This quotation captures the atmosphere of Proulx's *Postcards* well. Though the characters have been

examined through the different categories of escape, exploration, and home-founding, it becomes apparent that these categories are interlinked. The journey – no matter where it is or when it takes place – is connected to the land, the people, and the history out of which it grows. Described by many critics as a dark novel, the journey, in many cases, reaches a dead end. Many of the characters die in obscurity, or they are disconnected and uprooted from the environment that produced them. Even Jewell, who escapes the domestic prison she has lived in most of her life, dies as a result of the freedom she acquires during an exploration of her surroundings. This is further emphasized by the narrative structure which “portrays the discontinuity we associate with contemporary life” (Berry 2009: 172). The multi-layered narrative, strung together with the postcards, illustrates that the connection between home and away is a tenuous one.

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