It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.¹

Introduction

This essay concerns itself with the politics of silence as examined in literary form by E. Annie Proulx. Before I begin, I feel it may be instructive to examine the context of its production. Written as a part of M.Litt. studies in creative writing, the inspiration for this essay was primarily my admiration for Proulx’s characterizations; her capacity to elicit empathy and affection for deeply flawed human beings. I knew, then, that I wanted to examine her writing but what I lacked was a critical approach, a perspective which looked promising enough to pursue. Three things struck me about Proulx. First, her protagonists are invariably expert in some craft or activity (hunters, trappers, accordion builders) but inarticulate. Second, they inhabit the fringes of society, rural backwaters, slums; they are the disenfranchised, the dispossessed. Finally, although they are not exclusively male, the terrain her protagonists inhabit is more often than not what one might term traditionally masculine; the hunting and trapping lands of the harsh Midwest, for example. It was this combination of gendered world and silent disempowerment which inspired me to take another look at some feminist critical theory of the 1970s and 1980s. Here, the silenced and therefore disempowered figure was invariably that of the female (protagonist, reader) and the gendered world was the all-encompassing patriarchy which we all inhabited (protagonists, readers, writers). Recent critical theory has perhaps led us to take for granted that questions of identity and articulacy have vastly different implications not only for different genders but also for different socio-economic, cultural and racial groups. Needing a way into the text, I was intrigued to see what a
more ‘purely’ feminist approach might reveal about the gender and sexual politics of Proulx’s 1993 novel *The Shipping News*.

**A critical framework**

There is of course no single, clearly defined feminist perspective within the field of literary criticism, either recent or historical. What I would like to do here is to outline the approach I took to Proulx’s text, with reference to the work of a few key theorists.

Much of my reading of feminist critical and literary theory from the 1970s and early 1980s had posited the notion of the narrative as patriarchal (and sadistic) cultural production. The keywords here were ‘identification’, ‘linear’, ‘suture’. That is to say, these theories saw the notion of the reader becoming tied into the political assumptions of the patriarchal narrative structure, with its strong emphasis on resolution, on (re)establishing the (ideological) status quo. This binding, it was argued, occurs largely through the reader’s identification with the protagonist, and therefore through one of the most fundamental (and least visible) processes of meaning-production. Many feminist critics argued that this binding works as a form of ideological coercion, and as such it has politically dangerous consequences for the female reader. In *Victims of Convention*, for instance, Jean E. Kennard examined the narrative structures of turn-of-the-century novels. She argued that the marriages which invariably concluded these narratives signified the heroine’s development of maturity, and with it an adjustment to the values of the society they inhabit. However, this maturity also entailed the sacrifice of ‘independence and individuality’, the very qualities which made the heroines attractive to the reader in the earlier stages of the narrative. In *Dancing Through the Minefield*, Annette Kolodny argued that:

> The power relations inscribed in the form of conventions within our literary inheritance... reify the encoding of those same power relations in the culture at large.³

Moreover, Kolodny asserted that the female reader is implicated in these power relations in that she is:

> asked to identify against herself, so to speak, by manipulating her sympathies on behalf of male heroes, but against female shrew or bitch characters.⁴

Other critical theorists have proposed a different methodology of reading, and have suggested that texts may be approached from a different
Perspective. Against the aforementioned models of narrative identification are pitched particular subjectivities, investments in moments of narrative excess, the scope for resistant readings. The keywords here are ‘fluidity’, ‘difference’, ‘reappropriation’. Such theories have argued that texts are never the absolute arbiters of meaning; that there are always inconsistencies, points at which the textual processes exceed their ideological boundaries. Moreover, the reader also always brings her own assumptions, her particular set of social, cultural, political identifications to the text – consciously and/or unconsciously. These theories proposed that the reader has a more active part to play in the reading process, in the production of meaning: one man’s bitch or shrew is another woman’s heroine, so to speak. Indeed, many theorists saw a more active readership – a consciously feminist readership – as a political necessity. In *The Resisting Reader*, Judith Fetterley maintained:

> What we read affects us – drenches us in its assumptions, and to avoid drowning in this drench of assumptions, we must learn to re-read.⁵

The project of the feminist reader, then, is to identify the textual structures which support and impart these assumptions in order that she may ‘resist the sexist designs a text might make upon her’. ⁶ This resistance not only ‘protects’ the individual reader against this patriarchal saturation, but also opens a door to new possibilities. To quote Kate Millet:

> When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud; when its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion, but even to change.⁷

Both models rested on the notion of text as (at best) ideologically conservative. In this context, the reader is caught between drowning and fighting, and there seems little place for the pleasure of reading. This is, of course an over-simplification, and I acknowledge that both models are only crudely outlined here for reasons of brevity. The point I wish to make is that neither model provided me with an adequate description of the processes I undergo when reading Annie Proulx. However, in applying both models to the text, I began to wonder if the reading experience might not lie somewhere between the two. My suggestion, then, is that *The Shipping News* exposes and questions the processes of reader-character identification to political effect.

*The Shipping News* contains two distinct narrative strands, centred around two different characters: Quoyle and Agnis Hamm. Both strands are concerned with inarticulacy and identity, and both are gender-specific. My central thesis is that Proulx plays these narrative strands against one another, encouraging shifts in reader-character identification. In so doing,
she effectively invites the reader to question the ‘sexist designs’ not only of the community depicted, but even those at play within her own text. My project here, then, although inspired by Fetterley’s, is also subtly different. I shall, in effect, be adopting the position of the ‘resistant reader’, but at the author’s invitation. The task I set myself, then, is to show how Proulx draws the reader’s attention to the characters’ silences, where she invites questions, provokes equivocation. I shall seek to articulate the ways in which *The Shipping News* is designed to elicit resistance in the reader, and what implications this has for the reader’s interpretation of the novel as a whole.

Mention of ‘the reader’ brings me to a final definition of terms before the analysis proper may begin. The reader I am talking about here is, of course, me. White, female, early thirties, university educated, economically privileged, Northern European woman of left-leaning, green political inclinations, in a loving, heterosexual relationship of seven years’ standing. Somewhere at the intersection(s) of all of these elements, plus the myriad other influences which are either too personal or too subconscious for me to mention, is the person who reads and responds to *The Shipping News*. How much this brief taxonomy can inform you, the reader of this essay, about my reading of the novel is perhaps questionable. Does the fact that I am a woman predispose me, for example, more towards the female characters than towards the male? I do not reel off this list (merely) to be glib, however, but to affirm the role which the material identity of the reader plays in the act of reading. To (re)state that which, as I suggested above, it may be too easy to take for granted. Central to the feminist project of rereading has been the abandonment of the homogenizing universal; the recognition that the presumption that all readers are the same risks masking the machinations of patriarchal ideology in literary criticism. In a feminist approach to the text, then,

there is no place for the critic as the ‘universal intellectual’ who has the answer for everything; rather what is called for is the ‘specific intellectual’ *[if I may be so bold]*, who speaks from a specific context and situation with the aim of making connections.  

And though I cannot speak for others I would, at this point, like to use the words of three others to speak for me. In doing so I hope to accomplish two things. First, to offer the analysis undertaken as an interpretation; a small contribution, as it were, to a pluralist critical project. Second, to set myself the challenge of analytical rigour.

*We do not speak of readings that are simply true or false, but of readings that are more or less rich, strategies that are more or less appropriate.* (Robert Scholes)
Whatever our [critical] predilection, let us not generate from it a straitjacket that limits the scope of possible analysis. Rather, let us generate an ongoing dialogue of competing potential possibilities among feminists and as well between feminist and non-feminist critics. (Annette Kolodny)\textsuperscript{10}

Because the interpretation is presented as an interpretation, its claim to validity rests on the cogency of the supporting arguments. (Patrocinio P. Schweikart)\textsuperscript{11}

**Quoyle’s voice**

Broadly speaking, *The Shipping News* is about Quoyle’s development of a voice, and with it a sense of self and belonging. He starts the book as a silent, lumbering giant, with a deep sense of his own ugliness and inadequacy:

his earliest sense of self was as a distant figure: there in the foreground was his family; here, at the limit of the far view, was he.\textsuperscript{12}

Quoyle is small-town, no-hope, ‘poor white trash’. Even the joy of marriage to Petal Bear (‘thin, moist, hot’)\textsuperscript{13} turns to painful disaster: the myriad iniquities of their relationship exemplified when Quoyle lies quietly in bed listening to his wife’s adulterous sex in the living room.

The armour of indifference in which he protected his marriage was frail. . . . he did not get up but lay on his back, the newspaper rustling with each heave of his chest, tears running down into his ears.\textsuperscript{14}

After Petal’s drunken death in a car crash, Quoyle’s elderly aunt comes to visit. Agnis Hamm persuades Quoyle to take his daughters and accompany her to the remote and weather-beaten town of Killick Claw on Newfoundland: ‘the rock that had generated his ancestors, a place he had never been or thought to go.’\textsuperscript{15} Here, Quoyle learns of his family’s disturbing and brutal past; their isolation, violence and incestuous relationships on some level confirming his own sense of undeserving. He is also very much an outsider in Killick Claw, ignorant of the ways of the Newfoundland communities, and consequently makes many mistakes. On a coast where fishing is in everyone’s blood, for instance, Quoyle buys an obviously badly crafted boat, much to the amusement of his colleagues, and much to his own shame: ‘Drumroll of rain. Stupid Man Does the Wrong Thing Once More.’\textsuperscript{16}

In this unlikely setting Quoyle finds friends, respect, a job he enjoys, a sense of belonging, and even love with Wavey Prowse. At the beginning of
his stay on Newfoundland, Quoyle is invariably silent while others speak. When asked about himself, he can only begin a reply: “I was – Ah, it’s complicated.” And his voice fell away.”

Through his work on the local newspaper *The Gammy Bird*, however, Quoyle gradually finds a position to speak from and words to speak with (even thinking in newspaper headlines: ‘Man Sounds Like Fatuous Fool’). The success of his column both with Jack the proprietor and the community provides Quoyle with a means of self-expression and self-acceptance: ‘The words fell out as fast as he could type. He had a sense of writing well.’

Quoyle’s growing self-confidence is evidenced when he takes charge of where the family is to live. At the beginning of his story, he follows his Aunt Agnis to Newfoundland because he cannot think of anything better to do. However, by the half-way point in the narrative, he makes the decision to leave the family home and over-winter in Killick Claw, without discussing it with Agnis. And he also talks her into accepting his plans: “You have been thinking of all the angles,” said the Aunt. Dryly. She was used to being the one who figured things out.

By the time the old family house is blown away in the spring storm, Quoyle feels ‘As if he’d lost silence’.

So far so good. Articulacy is intimately intertwined with identity here: one the corollary of the other. Silence equals a negative sense of self; expression is having a positive sense of who you are. More than that; the self is constructed through language. Subjectivity is explicitly linguistic. Quoyle’s story is one of transcendence, and his passage out of silence is a joy which I am invited to share. Proulx always encourages the reader to feel for Quoyle, to experience events from his perspective. To return to an earlier example: Petal’s adultery is described from inside Quoyle’s bedroom, with his tears, rather than from the living room with Petal and her lover. Quoyle is a victim. Abused by his wife, his brother, his father, but always represented without sentimentality and with enough tough tenderness to prevent me from finding him merely pathetic. I am always given enough of his inner life to maintain a respect for Quoyle, equal to the sympathy which his, in many ways unpromising, life elicits.

‘Why don’t you come home?’ he pleaded in the wretched voice. . . . She said nothing. The silence stretched out . . . the memory of the brief month of love when she had leaned in his arms, the hot silk of her slip, flying through his mind like a harried bird.

Quoyle finding a means of expressing what lies inside is therefore a deeply moving conclusion to his narrative.
To speak or not to speak?

But what of the politics of being heard? For the female characters, this is not so clear-cut. Wavey, Beetie, and especially Agnis are shown to have a more vexed relationship with self-expression than Quoyle. The critical framework I began with needs some updating. Before I proceed with my analysis of The Shipping News, then, I think a brief discussion of identity politics may help inform my approach.

In broad terms, then, the core of feminism’s early project was to revalue female experience, to invest in Woman as a collectivizing term/sign. This may be seen in the literary-political campaigns of Tillie Olsen, Virago, the Women’s Press, to (re)discover female authors, ‘women’s writing’, to change the make-up of the canon. However, feminism’s early preoccupation with self-expression, becoming heard, soon came under scrutiny. More recent feminist theories, particularly those influenced by late twentieth-century French philosophy, have argued that such essentialist approaches lead to political dead-ends, the thesis here being that an identity formed in oppression risks forever being defined within the oppressive system. This argument has been of special concern for lesbian critical theorists, such as Teresa de Lauretis and Peggy Phelan, among many others, who have frequently cited Michel Foucault’s study of Victorian sexual mores as an argument against the political expediency of collectivizing identities:

it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality.\(^{23}\)

It would be rather flippant to dismiss the gains made during the early years of feminism. However, recognizing that ‘woman’ is at best an insufficient – and at worst a reductive – term has arguably been a significant milestone in the development of feminist politics to date. It has been perhaps painful but certainly imperative to acknowledge that ‘woman’ does not speak of the differences between and within women, and therefore risks eliding women of colour, lesbians, women from different classes and creeds, and all their multifarious intersections. The once-valued sign ‘Woman’ remains locked into the binary of masculine and feminine, still part of the phallocentric, patriarchal system of representation.

The same developments have been seen in lesbian identity politics (indeed it is arguably in this area that some of the most exciting recent developments in feminist thought have found their starting point\(^{24}\)). The identity ‘Lesbian’ came to be regarded by many as politically problematic: another deviance which guarantees that which is normal (white, male,
heterosexual) by being different. Julia Creet, a member of Gay Liberation, explains her dissatisfaction at the end of the 1970s:

we all fell under the rubric of gay: not simply an alliance of difference, but an identification of sameness. And it founded the politics of my sexual identity squarely on a male paradigm.\textsuperscript{25}

One strategy to avoid the strictures of the binary, then, would be to refuse representation within this system. In reality, however, this means not being represented, effectively being silenced. More to the point, all too often it means silencing oneself. As Peggy Phelan has indicated: ‘There is an important difference between wilfully failing to appear and never being summoned.’\textsuperscript{26} Self-silencing would therefore seem to be equally politically redundant.

A potential alternative to these two positions has been offered by Michel Foucault:

The problem is precisely to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a ‘we’ in order to assert the principles one recognises and the values one accepts: or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a ‘we’ possible, by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that the ‘we’ must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result – and necessarily the temporary result – of the question in the new terms in which one formulates it.\textsuperscript{27}

I would argue that Annie Proulx does exactly this through the way she represents the relationship between Agnis and Quoyle, and more pertinently, through the way she encourages the reader to relate to their relative silences and articulations.

**Agnis’ quietness**

Agnis Hamm, Quoyle’s elderly aunt, with whom he moves to Newfoundland, is a lesbian. She is presented as entirely comfortable with her sexuality, but is not ‘out’. The reader is asked to piece together her past, and her sexual preference, through a series of clues. Warren, for example, who Quoyle thinks is a ‘doddering husband’, but is actually Agnis’ dog, named after her now-deceased ‘significant other’.\textsuperscript{28} Agnis’ relationship with the original Warren is always presented in the most tender of terms, as is her decision to keep it secret: ‘Didn’t tell Quoyle that Warren had been Irene Warren. Dearest woman in the world. How could he understand that? He couldn’t.’\textsuperscript{29}
Much of what I learn about Agnis comes through oblique asides, fragments, allusions. Her position in the narrative, and in relation to the reader, thus works in marked contrast to the more direct delivery of Quoyle’s narrative trajectory. I am asked to read between the lines, piece together snippets of information to form a picture of her character and inner life. Agnis’ developing relationship with Mavis Bangs, for instance, is first alluded to in Mavis’ ‘small kindnesses’, how she had begun to ‘get the mail or pour a cup of tea unbidden. Proffer things with invisible trumpets.’30 Even their decision at the end to move away from Killick Claw and set up a home and business together is given the barest mention.

This does not, however, have the effect of marginalizing Agnis in the narrative. On the contrary, Proulx lays a great deal of thematic groundwork that serves to underpin Agnis’ pivotal role in the overall narrative. For instance, the rape on the frozen pond which Agnis suffered from her brother is alluded to only in snatches as she walks along the shore, embedded within memories of violent winter weather:

Storms on the way. Soon enough there would be frost on the glass, frost-fur on the sills, the edging of frost that gathered on the quilt where the breath condensed. . . . As it was, once. Then, the slide of feet, hot breath on her face. And outside the ravenous wind in the cables, slamming down the chimney.31

However, sexual abuse is returned to again and again on a thematic level throughout the novel. Nutbeam’s column in the Gammy Bird, his revelations about abuse during his education, Petal selling Bunny and Sunshine to a pornographer, all serve as a disquieting frame of reference for Agnis’ memories. Thus when Proulx repeatedly describes the young Agnis as ‘alone’32 on the ice, I am already frightened for her, even before the brother has appeared ‘unbuttoning his pants’33 at the edge of the pond. This careful knitting of specific detail within a rigorously maintained thematic framework lends the allusions, the brief references, an extraordinary power.

The pieces of information the reader has about Agnis are rarely available to the other characters. As such, I effectively have privileged access to Agnis’ inner life, and Proulx uses this to interesting and unsettling effect. The chapter in which Agnis remembers the rape is a pivotal one regarding the balance between Quoyle and Agnis’ narrative trajectories. As Quoyle finds his voice, so Agnis loses hers. It is significant that, just as I learn of Agnis’ rape by her brother, so Quoyle takes control and decides that they should move into the town for the winter. Precisely when Agnis (and I) are feeling vulnerable, Quoyle takes over, and Agnis is silenced. I do not question the wisdom of Quoyle’s arguments, but I do question the verbal battering he gives her, the way he corners her with pragmatics. Quoyle repeatedly suggests
options, only to dismiss them again on the grounds of cost, weather, convenience. He leaves Agnis no time to think, speak. By situating this scene immediately after the painful memories at the pond, Proulx places Agnis at the emotional centre of the scene, and shows Quoyle to be more concerned with having his own way than how his aunt might be feeling.

The aunt was astonished. She had gone for a walk and looked at a pond. Now everything had rushed on like an unlighted train in the dark.34

Agnis also does not simply ‘lose her voice’. Rather, she makes the decision not to speak. Quoyle does not know, for instance, that his father’s ashes are in the outhouse. To him, the aunt’s preoccupation with whether the outhouse has blown away is ludicrous, but to me, the reader, it is not. I know the satisfaction Agnis gets from emptying her bowels over her abusive brother’s remains each day. Significantly, this is also the scene in which Quoyle confronts Agnis with his knowledge of his father’s rape, the aborted pregnancy, ‘the secret of her whole life’.35 Again, Agnis holds the privileged position in my sympathies. Her decision to remain silent on the subject recalls an earlier conversation where Nutbeam argued against confronting the demons of his abuse:

And what I don’t know is . . . if the pain is supposed to ease and dull through repetitive confrontation, or if it just persists, as fresh as on the day of the first personal event. I’d say it persists.36

Quoyle’s responses to Agnis’ tears are portrayed as clumsy and inadequate: he suggests a cup of tea, pats her shoulder ‘as if she were Bunny or Sunshine’.37 Agnis, on the other hand, copes far better with the loss of her privacy.

She straightened up, the busy hands revived. Pretending he’d never said a thing. . . . As usual, the aunt was way out front and running.38

All of this does not make Quoyle an unsympathetic character. Rather, it shifts him from the centre of the narrative universe, and in so doing complicates my identification with him as the locus of meaning. By privileging Agnis in my sympathies at these key moments, Proulx calls into question the certainties of Quoyle’s narrative trajectory, the simple corollary between identity and expression. Agnis does not discuss her abuse, or her sexuality on the level of dialogue. However, this does not mean that she doesn’t think about them, process them, deal with them on her own terms. Importantly, too, for the reader, her sexuality is never dodged, but surfaces again and again in little references, jokes even, for our benefit, and no one else’s. For example,
when the children are given a new puppy, they decide to name it after Agnis’ old dog.

‘Warren the Second’, said Herry. Quoyle saw that his life might be spent in the company of dynastic dogs named Warren.39

Only the reader knows that the puppy is really Warren the Third, and that Quoyle is also unknowingly spending his life in the company of all of Agnis’ partners, and thus another dynasty of Warrens entirely!

Perhaps more importantly, and certainly more pertinently to my argument, the oblique, subtle, allusive presentation of Agnis’ narrative has the effect of always suggesting something further. The small, poignant, painful and funny details that are revealed are always suggestive of much that remains hidden. I am invited to share in some of Agnis’ present and past, but she is always also more than this, and therefore irreducible to this. And being indefinable, without limit, she is endlessly fascinating to me: Quoyle is interesting, but Agnis is surprising. Proulx invites my fascination by intimating secrets which, if I read closely enough, Agnis might just reveal. This is also true of the other female characters. Beetle, for instance, is more often than not in the kitchen, cooking hearty and wholesome food, taking excellent care of Bunny and Sunshine, for no more reward or reason than friendship and community ties. However, she also has the capacity to amaze, to surpass expectation. Her extraordinary talent as a mimic and teller of tall tales is revealed at the end during the town fair, where she has the entire community enraptured by her comedy routine. Wavey Prowse may be the ‘Tall, Quiet Woman’,40 but nevertheless she has enormous and unseen (unheard) powers of persuasion. She has successfully lobbied the authorities into setting up a special education class for her Down’s Syndrome son Herry, which is no mean feat in a conservative backwater like Killick Claw. She also plays the accordion. Not much is made of this talent in the novel – Quoyle merely finds her at the kitchen table once with her accordion strapped on – and, to a reader who is new to Proulx, this moment probably holds little weight. However, to a devoted reader, who knows the special place which accordions and accordion players occupy in her work, Wavey’s hobby marks her out as a character worth noting.

While I am diverging into the wider territory of Proulx’s other work, I think it may be instructive to look at a more recent short story, from Close Range (1999), called ‘The Half-Skinned Steer’. In this, Proulx casts a (very) secondary female character in the role of story-teller, recounting the Wyoming folk tale of a steer which gets up and walks away as the rancher is half-way through skinning him, cursing the rancher with his bloody red eye as he goes. The story-teller is the much younger girlfriend of the main character’s father, and is lusted after by both sons. Rather than listen too
intently to her story, which they have half-heard anyway, they concentrate on the (unnamed) girlfriend’s legs. She is described as a horse, and the sex they imagine with her is suitably bestial. Decades later, her words come back to haunt, however, with the protagonist as an old man stuck out in the snow, so far removed from his roots as to have taken the wrong turning, and out in the landscape of his youth, unprepared for its harshness. The story ends with him being followed by the red eye of a steer, and the unnamed girlfriend, the story-teller, takes on a power denied her decades ago when her audience imagined fucking her and only half heard her warning words.

To return to *The Shipping News*, then, while the men are busy building boats, saving each other from drowning and forging their identities in the world of work, the women are getting on with things in their own quiet and invariably surprising way. There is always more to the women of *The Shipping News* than meets the eye. Proulx’s characterizations refuse categorization. I am always curious to hear what her people will do or say next. And because each disclosure is surprising, tantalizing, unique, it only leaves me expecting more.

**An ending without end**

A principal characteristic of the patriarchal narrative structure, as identified by Jean E. Kennard, among many others, is its strong drive towards resolution, towards the (re)establishment of the diegetic (and ideological) status quo. *The Shipping News*, however, ends with a series of revelations, and a miracle (or two). It does not steer a steady course towards resolution, but throws up questions right to the end. Partridge’s once-idealized California is not only barbecues and fun, but also bullets and tears. The old cousin may seem sane when Quoyle visits him in the hospital, but he is also very dangerous, stabbing a nurse after Quoyle leaves. Jack’s resurrection provides the central point for unanswered questions, bringing back the subject of Petal’s death for Quoyle’s daughters. Bunny finds a dead bird and demands to know the difference between sleeping and dying. She refuses to accept the adult’s distinctions, and Jack’s miraculous awakening (at his own wake!) blurs their arguments. In the end the adults are left speechless about it and Bunny has the last word.

The rock was there, but no bird. A small feather in a tuft of grass. It could have come from any bird. Bunny picked it up. ‘It flew away.’

Annie Proulx’s narrative is not a simplistic espousal of identity politics. What works for one character will not work for another; and, more
significantly, what works for one gender or sexuality will not necessarily work for the other(s). For Quoyle, articulacy, words, speaking all have their benefits, but as far as Agnis is concerned, some things are better left unsaid. The relationship to language is therefore presented as gendered, but importantly, neither gender is privileged. There are complications in the relationship to language on both sides of the line between masculine and feminine. Quoyle, for example, may be able to give voice to his feelings, but there are limits to his articulacy. The banner headlines which encapsulate his doubts, fears and triumphs offer the reader intimate routes to his heart, but also work on the level of pathos because of their stark, unpollished simplicity. Agnis may not have access to words as far as her past and sexual identity is concerned, and this means that her relationship with Mavis, although it is the loving centre of her life, will never be celebrated by her community as is Quoyle and Wavey’s marriage. I cannot, however, feel entirely unhappy about this, as Proulx always maintains it is also Agnis’ choice to maintain a dignified silence.

Both genders in *The Shipping News* are therefore in conflict with language. But, to quote Toni Morrison, this is ‘Not a problem, just a conflict’. In its resistance to closure, in the rush of questions at the end, *The Shipping News* suggests that such gendered positions are never fixed for long. Proulx places great emphasis on the unexpected, the impossible happening, and on happiness being found in the most unlikely places. Were the book simply to propose that heterosexual men have a less complicated relationship to identity politics than do lesbian women, this would certainly not be news! My argument is that not only is silence sometimes privileged in *The Shipping News*, but the capacity of language to encapsulate human experience is also questioned.

Wavey saw that the questions would come for a long time, that the child was gauging the subtleties and degrees of existence. . . . Ah she could be years and years explaining and never clear up the mysteries.

Proulx presents a community in which there are no fixed points, in which everyone’s relationships are in flux, and in which the weather can change everything overnight. This does not make it an unhappy community; on the contrary, it makes people very aware of the joys of living with one another in the present time. Quoyle’s new position as father of an extended family, for example, is celebrated at the same time as it is teased:

The herrings smoked, the children dodged around, saying Dad, Dad, when are they ready. Dad, said Herry. And put his pie-face up, roaring at his own cleverness.
In such a world, conflicts are indeed not problems but the stuff of life, and since conflicts are a fertile source of change, gendered relationships to language are bound to be upset sooner or later. In this respect, I would say that Annie Proulx ‘elaborates the question’ (Foucault), and brings beauty and politics together in the way that Toni Morrison suggests in the opening quotation:

For if Jack Buggit could escape from the pickle jar, if a bird with a broken neck could fly away, what else might be possible?^45

Notes

3 Ibid., p. 99.
4 Ibid., p. 100.
6 Kolodny, ‘Dancing through the minefield’, p. 100.
7 Kate Millet, quoted by Fetterley, The Resisting Reader, p. xix.
10 Ibid., p. 111.
13 Ibid., p. 12.
14 Ibid., p. 16.
15 Ibid., p. 1.
16 Ibid., p. 89.
17 Ibid., p. 81.
18 Ibid., p. 115.
19 Ibid., p. 142.
20 Ibid., p. 227.
21 Ibid., p. 321.
22 Ibid., p. 15.
24 See e.g. Suzanne Raitt (ed.), Volcanoes and Pearl Divers: Essays in Lesbian Feminist Studies (London: Onlywomen, 1995); Monica Rainfelder (ed.),


29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 228.
31 Ibid., p. 225.
32 Ibid., p. 225.
33 Ibid., p. 225.
34 Ibid., p. 227.
35 Ibid., p. 322.
36 Ibid., p. 221.
37 Ibid., p. 322.
38 Ibid., pp. 322–3.
39 Ibid., p. 316.
40 Ibid., p. 115.
41 Ibid., p. 336.
44 Ibid., p. 310.