

Tayloring the Self: Identity, Articulation, and Community in Proulx's *The Shipping News*

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AT THE CONCLUSION of his *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor says that “the intention of this work [is] one of retrieval, an attempt to uncover buried goods through rearticulation and thereby to make these sources again empower, to bring the air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit” (520). According to Taylor, persons situated in the contemporary world have lost the capacity to articulate who and what they are. Taylor sees the source of this problem in modernity’s¹ attempt to understand personal identity by using a model from the natural sciences, i.e., a model that seeks to be reductionist, non-teleological, and value-neutral. This has created a “disengaged self” suffering from a sort of vertigo displaced from any “moral horizon,” unable to articulate any substantive sense of the good. Recovery out of this malaise requires first that we reject the inappropriate epistemological model of the natural sciences for understanding personhood, and come to realize that “identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose” (27). Only then can one reacquire a sense of one’s identity.

I suggest, following Taylor, that one way in which to do this is to re-situate oneself within community as a source of grounding. Doing so will enable one, for example, to affirm and celebrate “ordinary life,” which, Taylor suggests, is an integral value in the modern world.² I argue this by examining a particular fictional narrative, E. Annie Proulx’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Shipping News*. I propose in particular to examine this by exploring the character development of the novel’s protagonist, Quoye. I shall argue that Quoye, an expatriate Newfoundlander once removed, living in a small town in upstate New York, is a complex character. Although Proulx describes the early Quoye mostly in negative,

indeed harsh terms — e.g., as “a dog dressed in a man’s suit for a comic photo” (5) who possesses “a great damp loaf of a body” (2) — he has some redeeming features as well. He is a caring, gentle, and sensitive man. However, these positive features do not and cannot become fully actual-ized until he becomes immersed within a community: only then, according to Taylor and to Proulx, can Quoyle establish a secure sense of self, which is mostly absent early in the novel. At this early stage, he is mired in a job as a journalist that he cannot do, is married to a nymphomaniac and unfaithful wife, and lives in a community of which he is not a part; eventually, however, Quoyle is saved by a move back to his ancestral homeland, Killic-Claw, a small outport community in Newfoundland. In tracing this slow, incremental process of self-discovery and reclamation, we can perhaps read this narrative as a small-scale model of our age’s spiritual journey to self-identity.

Before proceeding to the main body of this essay, however, let me say in more detail what I see myself doing in this paper and what I am not. Although the essay is an interdisciplinary work in philosophy and literature, my aim is to use Taylor’s communitarian position as a heuristic device to help explain certain features of Proulx’s fictional narrative. Doing this has at least two important implications. First, because my primary focus here is on *The Shipping News*, my discussion of Taylor is purely expository. As a result, except in a tentative and rather brief fashion at the end of the essay, I engage in no critical analysis of Taylor’s communitarianism. As Bentham once stated (I.11), all arguments have to begin somewhere, and mine begins by outlining and assuming some central points in Taylor’s position.

Second, using Taylor as a heuristic device also means that I must work within the language he establishes. One rather striking feature of this language, given, as many would claim, that we now live in the postmodern world, is his almost complete avoidance of this term. Taylor prefers simply to speak of “modernism” and refers to writers such as Derrida and Foucault as “the decentring strands of modernism” (487), thus giving to postmodernism an even more derivative role than its name suggests. Indeed, modernism too is viewed by Taylor as derivative of Romanticism, which, in turn, arises out of Enlightenment rationalism. And even though all these post-Enlightenment positions take issue with elements of the Enlightenment, they all share some common features. Most importantly, as I suggest in some detail below, they all reject a vision of a life committed to an “objective” and substantive vision of the good — what Taylor calls

a hypergood. Indeed, postmodernism is, from Taylor's perspective, even more "guilty" of this than modernism since postmodernism has insisted on the "constructedness" of reality through the (oftentimes hegemonic) vehicle of language. Hence, although Taylor mounts a long critique of modernism, he does so in aid of his argument that we must return to some sort of pre-modern position rather than a postmodern one.

1. Problems with "Scientism"

Just as Taylor's *Sources of the Self* is a work about retrieval, so too is Proulx's *The Shipping News*. And although there are obvious differences between the two works — one is a discursive treatise that spans philosophical accounts of self-identity over two millennia while the other is fictional narrative about one man's life — they both seek to retrieve similar things, or so I shall argue. Taylor's main target, and that which he believes is problematic to the retrieval he hopes to establish, is what I shall refer to as "scientism,"³ especially to its modern application in understanding personal identity and ethics, and most particularly to modern liberalism, broadly construed. In brief, as Richard Keshen puts it in his review of Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity*:

the key characteristic of modernity is that we no longer share the vision of a purposive order by which to measure and inspire our lives. Given this, it can seem that all values are 'up for grabs' (5) and that the world external to ourselves is valuable only as a means to our ends... [T]he liberal state, with its procedural neutrality, makes it all the more difficult to articulate a shared moral order.

In light of this confluence of forces, Taylor understands why people are so prone to experience 'loss of resonance, depth, [and] richness' (6). (Keshen 423-424)

According to Taylor, scientific accounts of ethics, and the scientific explanations of personal identity they engender, have created problems because such views have become inarticulate regarding these sources of depth and richness in our lives: in short, such views have become inarticulate about the good. Part of the reason for this stems from scientism's preference for quantification and its disdain of qualitative distinctions. Indeed, such views "homogenize human motivation, [and] do not recognize the distinction between higher and lower motivations" (Taylor, *Comments* 242). Modern moral philosophy, as a result, fails to see the necessity of making substantive value claims; it fails to see "that orientation to the

good is not some optional extra, something we can engage in or abstain from at will, but a condition of our being selves with an identity” (Taylor, *Sources* 68). We cannot, *contra* modern liberalism, construct ourselves from some *tabula rasa*, nor does our valuative language exist in the vacuum of neutrality. As we shall see, it is this depth and richness of life that is initially lost on Quoyle; capturing it will require a shift in orientation in ways described below.

2. “Hypergoods”

Taylor hopes to show by way of a transcendental argument that modern theories of ethics and identity explicitly deny but implicitly must accept a substantive vision of the good which involves the making of qualitative distinctions. What Taylor calls “hypergoods,” are central to his argument. Phenomenologically, we rank various goods “in a qualitative contrast, but some people live according to a higher-order contrast between such goods as well” (*Sources* 62). As such, some goods outweigh others, and some goods are of incomparably greater worth than others. Standing atop these higher-order goods are Taylor’s “hypergoods,” defined by him, in part, as “goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about” (63). Hypergoods, in effect, provide a similar function, albeit in a different sphere, to the basic tenets of a theory which comprise a Kuhnian paradigm. They provide a framework within which value explanation is possible. They effect “what Nietzsche called a ‘transvaluation of values.’ The new highest good is not only erected as a standard by which other, ordinary goods are judged but often radically alters our view of their value, in some cases taking what was previously an ideal and branding it a temptation” (65).

To lose or never to acquire these hypergoods, as is the case with Quoyle, is “devastating and insufferable. It threatens to plunge me into a despair at my unworthiness which strikes at the very root of my being as a person” (63); hence Quoyle’s repeated self-criticism early in the novel. Avoiding this loss requires becoming articulate about hypergoods; Taylor suggests, however, that such articulation comes by means of non-discursive argumentation, which proceeds by way of a “showing” whereby one displays that a move from one hypergood to another is error-reducing. One accomplishes this either “by articulating what underlies your existing moral intuitions or perhaps by my description [of my alternative hypergood] moving you to the point of making it your own” (77). Central to

Taylor's position here is his claim that it is impossible to move completely outside of any and all context. In this sense, "showing" must occur from "within." Beginning in the Enlightenment with such figures as Descartes, modernism has shown a decided preference for a linear and foundational form of argumentation. In common with postmodernists, Taylor eschews this type of argumentation, along with its epistemological assumptions: unlike postmodernism, however, Taylor does so in order to endorse a more holistic approach modelled roughly on an Aristotelian account of ethics where "the good life as a whole doesn't stand to the partial goods as a basic reason. There is no asymmetrical conferral of their status as goods. A good life should include, *inter alia*, some contemplation, some participation in politics, a well-run household and family. These should figure in their right proportion. But we can't say informatively that contemplation is a good because it figures in the good life. It is much more that this life is good because, in part, it includes contemplation" (77).

What I hope to show in my discussion of Quoyle's development is that his transition from one culture (or lack thereof) to another represents a gain epistemically in the sense spoken of above: it is a "better" form of life not in the Cartesian sense of a basic reason confirmed by reference to no background commitments, but better in the sense that Quoyle's new life begins to provide meaning *within* the set of background beliefs — a hypergood — to which he becomes committed. To begin this argument, consider the following narrative provided by Proulx at a structurally significant point midway through her novel. The narrative provides an account of her protagonist, Quoyle, on an expedition to his ancestral homeland, Gaze Island, which is situated just off the coast of Newfoundland. His guide, Billy Pretty, who also hails from this island, attempts to explain to Quoyle, to "show" to him to use Taylor's phrase, what life was like on the island in the early part of this century, long before Newfoundland joined the Canadian confederation in 1949. Canadians from the rest of Canada have always felt, I believe, a certain bafflement at the reticence of a great number of Newfoundlanders to join confederation. (The vote regarding whether to join Confederation was, in fact very close: 51% for, 49% against.)⁴ After all, here was, in the opinion of many Canadians, a very backward colony, stuck in the middle of nowhere, which had, outside of voluminous stocks of fish, no marketable resources. The people lived a very hard life, ravaged by diseases such as tuberculosis, by poverty, and by high levels of illiteracy. Here was their chance to join a modern, prosperous, industrialized state; and yet, many declined the offer. Billy Pretty

obliquely explains why: “if it was hard times, they shared, they helped their neighbour. No, they didn’t have any money, the sea was dangerous and men were lost, but it was a satisfying life in a way people today do not understand. There was a joinery of lives all worked together, smooth in places, or lumpy, but joined. The work and the living you did was the same things, not separated out like today” (169). From this perspective, Canada seemed a foreign place, cruel and hard.⁵ Pretty’s father had himself ended up in Newfoundland by mistake. “Orphaned” in England, he was being shipped to Ontario to work on a farm when the ship bringing them hit an iceberg off Gaze Island: Pretty’s father was one of the few who survived the wreck and unlike the other survivors, he stayed put while the others were sent on to Ontario. Several of the boys corresponded, and the tales they told shocked and disgusted the inhabitants of Gaze Island. The boys, essentially, were nothing more than slaves treated, at best, as badly as the animals they cared for.

Father’d get those pathetic letters, sometimes six months after they was written, and he’d read them out loud here and the tears would stream down people’s faces. Oh, how they wanted to get their hands on those hard Ontario farmers. There was never a one from Gaze Island that voted for confederation with Canada! My father would of wore a black armband on Confederation Day. If he’d lived that long. (169)

Here, then, we get a conflict between two paradigms, one with a firm commitment to the hypergoods of community, to “joinery” as Billy Pretty puts it, against a view committed to the proceduralism of modern liberalism. Given an acceptance of instrumental rationality, it may have been that the Newfoundlanders against Confederation were irrational. But this assumes a concomitant commitment to the goods of capitalism and the separation, not just of labour, but of people’s lives, one from another. Confederation, for Newfoundland, especially from today’s perspective when the fish stocks have disappeared almost completely and there is a moratorium on fishing cod, has, arguably, not made instrumental sense; perhaps worse, however, it has almost destroyed the communities confederation was supposed to help. Yet, despite this, Newfoundlanders have struggled on, and in so doing, in spite of the new economy (or perhaps because of it) have attempted to retain traditional ways of life, at least in terms of the hypergoods to which they are committed. As such, though jobs are scarce to non-existent, Newfoundlanders continue to have a firm and secure sense of self, of who and what they are, and where they come from. And this is exactly what Quoye has to come to learn — what he has to retrieve — as he moves back to his ancestral home.

3. Constitutive Goods

There is, however, something beyond the epistemological which Quoyle (and, by extension, the rest of us within modernity) have to retrieve and become articulate about. This is what Taylor refers to as “constitutive” goods defined by him as a “moral source”; it is “a something the love of which empowers us to do and be good” (*Sources* 93). Whereas hypergoods allow for moral *explanation*, constitutive goods provide *motivation* for moral action. “The constitutive good does more than just define the content of moral theory [the function of hypergoods]. Love of it is what empowers us to be good” (93). Articulation about these constitutive goods is essential because “that articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power” (92).

Historical examples of constitutive goods range from Plato’s Form of the Good to Kant’s notion of the good as consisting in a good will which provides the background to his claim concerning the inherent dignity of humans. There has been a shift, however, from the ancient to the modern periods in conceiving of constitutive goods as something existing, as in Plato’s case, *independently external* from us to something *internal*, as is the case with Kant. That is, modern conceptions of constitutive goods see these goods as something immanent within us. Taylor believes this change to be important because it has made it easier within modernity to disavow the existence of constitutive goods altogether. For example, in arguing this within the context of an historical example, Taylor points out that “radical utilitarians rejected the constitutive good of Deism, the providential order; but at the same time, they were if anything even more strongly committed to the life goods this order had underpinned”: e.g., the life goods of “self-responsible reason” and “the ideal of universal and impartial benevolence” (322). But losing sight of and becoming inarticulate about this underlying constitutive good transforms our conception of life goods into something without motivating force. For, as Taylor says,

articulating a constitutive good is making clear what is involved in the life good one espouses. Unreflecting people in the culture, who are drawn to certain life goods, may have nothing to offer in the way of description of constitutive good, but that doesn’t mean that their sense of what is worth pursuing isn’t shaped by some unstructured intuitions about their metaphysical predicament, about their moral sources within or without. (307)

4. Quoyle's Predicament

Quoyle is situated within this predicament. As I shall argue below, he is, in a vague and inarticulate way, committed to the hypergood of some sort of Enlightenment rationalism and the life goods this position implies. But this half-hearted conviction has not become for him a constitutive good; hence his incapacity to act early in the novel. Quoyle's quest, then, is eventually to become articulate about both the constitutive and hypergoods grounding his life by immersing himself within community. He has, however, a great distance to travel given his starting point, so to speak. Indeed, Proulx seems almost to rejoice in her early descriptions of the extent of his failures: "born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate towns," Quoyle, "hive spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp" (1) is an unlikely hero. "Lardass, Snotface, Ugly Pig, Warthog, Stupid, Stinkbomb, Fart-tub, Greasebag" (2): such are the terms used to describe the young Quoyle (by his brother). "From his youngest son's failure to dog-paddle the father saw other failures multiply like an explosion of virulent cells — failure to speak clearly; failure to sit up straight; failure to get up in the morning; failure in attitude; failure in ambition and ability; indeed, in everything. His own failure" (2). Locating the source of this failure is informative. Beyond the obvious — sibling rivalry, obesity, shyness, Oedipal influences — which beleaguer any number of children, Quoyle lacks a sense of himself: "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. Until he was fourteen he cherished the idea that he had been given to the wrong family, that somewhere his real people, saddled with the changeling of the Quoyles, longed for him" (2).

Indeed, we can even see Quoyle's positive features in this light. As I said above, Quoyle, who becomes deeply committed to the love and care of his wife and children, is a sensitive, gentle, and caring man: he yearned, as his friend Partridge points out, "to be gregarious, to know his company was a pleasure to others" (4). And as Ed Punch, managing editor of *The Mockingbird Reporter*, notices: "Quoyle, who spoke little himself, inspired talkers. His only skill in the game of life" (9). But the early Quoyle's positive features — his desire for friendship and to be a good husband and father, his wish to be helpful, his "failure at loneliness" (4) as Partridge puts it —, which will later stand him in good stead, are at this point melded with negative features. As Punch says, he "smelled submission in Quoyle, guessed he was butter of fair spreading consistency" (5). Indeed, Proulx

introduces her chapter entitled “Quoyle” by quoting the following from *The Ashley Book of Knots*: “A Flemish flake is a spiral coil of one layer only. It is made on deck, so that it may be walked on if necessary” (1). With little grounding for his life and an insecure sense of himself, “nothing was clear to Quoyle.” Hence, his life continues as a series of failures. He drops out of university because he cannot understand the material being dealt with in any of his courses. Through his only friend Partridge, he lands a job as a reporter for a small newspaper, *The Mockingbird Reporter*, in upstate New York where he is to “run upbeat stories with a community slant” (5). But here too he fails: to begin, he is but a substitute for college kids when they go back to school and hence he gets laid off for a good part of every year. And for good reason. Even his friend Partridge notes: “They say reporters can be made out of anything. You’ll be a test case” (7). Unfortunately, however, “Quoyle didn’t recognize news, had no aptitude for detail. . . . Saw the commonplaces of life as newspaper headlines. Man Walks Across Parking Lot at Moderate Pace. Women Talk of Rain. Phone Rings in Empty Room” (8). Quoyle continually misses the point: “In a profession that tutored its practitioners in the baseness of human nature, that revealed the corroded metal of civilization, Quoyle constructed a personal illusion of orderly progress. In atmospheres of disintegration and smoking jealousy he imagined rational compromise” (9).

Notions of “orderly progress” and “rational compromise,” which have enthralled western culture almost to the present day, are direct descendants both of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Despite differences between, for example, seventeenth-century Cartesian rationalism, eighteenth-century Kantian deontology, and nineteenth-century Millian utilitarianism, all share the belief that we as a species and the world we inhabit are inexorably improving. Furthermore, this improvement will occur, in all three cases cited here, by reference to some abstract formula: the clear and distinct ideas of Descartes; the formal categorical imperative of Kant; and Mill’s overarching principle of utility. That is, progress is to be attained by abstract formalization and an increasing commitment to proceduralism. Now, although Quoyle is not consciously aware of this tradition, let alone well versed in it, he does fall within the tradition by way of his vague belief that the world is subject to some sort of abstract, rational, progressive process to which he is committed even though he does not understand it. In this sense, then, we might refer to Quoyle as a misplaced (and misinformed) rationalist. He is caught in the bifurcation of

Cartesian duality where, although there is a subjective “reality,” the status of such a reality, both morally and epistemologically, is uncertain and unclear, tintured as it is by personal and cultural idiosyncrasy. Quoyle wishes for an objective reality which can be known in a purely rational, value-neutral manner. In this, Quoyle suffers from that modern ailment which Taylor seeks to describe and explain. According to modern philosophical accounts beginning with Descartes, as neutral observers upon the world, we can disengage from it — adopting “the view from nowhere” as Nagel phrases it — and, with the help of the strict methodology of empirical science with its reductionistic and mechanistic presuppositions, come to know it objectively, untainted by the messiness of subjective and value-laden interpretations. Methodology takes a quantum leap in significance at this point. Attaining the correct answer to a problem now comes to be thought of as a procedural matter; that is, along with the separation of body and mind definitive of Descartes’s dualism comes a concomitant separation of procedure and substance. In the ethical sphere, such a man-euver produces a priority of the right, defined procedurally, over the good, defined substantively. As Taylor puts it: “The rationality of an agent or his thought is [now] judged by how he thinks, not in the first instance by whether the outcome is substantively correct. Good thinking is defined procedurally” (86).

According to Taylor, this has allowed the natural sciences (or disciplines such as psychology and sociology that hope to become fully matured natural sciences) to offer accounts of people, including answering questions regarding personal identity, from an observer and value-neutral perspective. As one of an increasing number of philosophers, Taylor is staunchly opposed to this approach: it is, he says, “incapable of coming clean about the deeper sources of their own thinking. Their thought is inescapably cramped” (88). They are cramped in innumerable ways: for one, such a conception of persons and their morality will be unable to answer questions concerning *why* we ought to be moral in anything but prudential ways. Second, such approaches “have the paradoxical effect of making us inarticulate on some of the most important issues of morality” (89). Scientistic accounts of personhood and identity, along with the scientistic ethics they entail, then, are deeply flawed; they are based upon the “crucial mistake” that they fail to account for “people living their lives” (58). In making phenomenological considerations irrelevant to explanations of persons simply on the basis that such considerations are not amenable to the explanations proffered by natural science, scientism can never offer a full description of human behavior. Our best account

of humans will always involve value judgements couched in terms of a substantive conception of the good. As a result, “human reality cannot be understood in the terms appropriate for... physics.... Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is a quite different matter from that which physical science claims to reveal and explain” (59).

At this point, Quoyle is unaware of his mistaken orientation, and although he desires personal attachments, he cannot yet fully and effectively realize these. Unlike his friend Partridge, who, early in the novel, has a functional personal life, Quoyle cannot yet quite see that such value is integral to life. Quoyle “abstracted his life from the times” (11). Hence Partridge but not Quoyle can at this point make the assertion that “everything that counts is for love, Quoyle. It’s the engine of life” (10).

It is interesting to note, however, that the functionality/dysfunctionality of these two characters will reverse itself over the course of the novel. Furthermore, this reversal can be explained in terms of the liberal-communitarian debate. From a communitarian perspective, Partridge’s functionality is problematic because it is based on his relationship with only one person, his wife Mercalia. Indeed, Partridge’s life appears to celebrate a lack of engagement with any particular community: instead, he endorses a cosmopolitan, modern attitude filled, for example, with many moves to various communities and with cooking exotic food from any number of different cultures. In this, Partridge follows the enlightenment and proto-liberal pronouncement of Kant: “*Sapere aude!* — Have courage to use your own reason!” (Kant 85). As one able to construct his own identity, Partridge appears as the ideal of liberal rather than communitarian values. Even his name, as a signifier of the freedom of birds, seems to indicate this, for, like birds, he is not bound to anything (except the love of his wife).

Bird analogies fulfill an important symbolic function within *The Shipping News*, as is indicated in the names of both of the papers for which Quoyle works — *The Mockingbird Reporter* and *The Gammy Bird*. But so too are rope and knot references and analogies centrally important to the novel. Indeed, in her acknowledgments for *The Shipping News*, Proulx maintains that “without the inspiration of Clifford W. Ashley’s wonderful 1944 work, *The Ashley Book of Knots*, ... this book would have remained just the thread of an idea.” Whereas birds signify freedom, knots symbolize a grounding of some sort, an attempt to tie something down. Quoyle’s name is, of course, instructive in this regard: if pronounced as “coil,” then we are led to various sorts of rope and knot metaphors; however, his name

can also be pronounced — perhaps mispronounced? — as “quayle,” a small game bird similar to a partridge. Hence, Quoyle’s name implicitly refers both to knots and to birds and we are led to the communitarian claim that human happiness will only be found in a freedom that is bound somehow within a commitment to something larger and outside of self — to something such as community. Thus, as the novel progresses, Quoyle’s early failure turns to eventual success — in ways which I explain below — while Partridge’s life, forever free-floating, becomes increasingly troublesome until, in his last appearance during a telephone call to Quoyle, he laments the absurdity of life in modern, “liberal” America:

“It’s like the whole country got infected with some rage virus, going for their guns like it used to be you’d look at your watch. Remember Edna the rewrite woman on the *Record*?...Some nut came in yesterday afternoon with a fucking machine gun and killed Punch, Al Catalog, three or four others. Wounded eight more.”

“Jesus! Why?”

“Oh, it’s part of the scene here and something to do with the Letters to the Editor. If you can believe it. This guy sent an anonymous letter saying riots were necessary to purge the system and redistribute wealth and they didn’t print it. So he came down with a machine gun ... Quoyle, they shot at Mercalia on the freeway last week. Show you how crazy the scene is, I made a joke about living in California, about LA style. Fucking bullet holes through her windshield. Missed her by inches. She’s scared to death and I’m making jokes. It hit me after Edna called what a fucking miserable crazy place we’re in. There’s no place you can go no more without getting shot or burned or beat. And I was laughing.” And Quoyle thought he heard his friend crying on the other side of the continent. Or maybe he was laughing again. (290-91)⁶

Early in the novel, however, Quoyle has not yet become sufficiently bound to a community, and life’s important value commitments are beyond his understanding: aping the sentiments of modern scepticism, “‘Who knows?’ He said. ‘Who knows?’ For no one knew. He meant, anything can happen” (11).

Bereft of any foundation upon which to base his personal life, Quoyle has the misfortune to run across Petal Bear, a woman variously described as “a bitch in high heels” and a “Ganghis Khan” had she lived “in another time, another sex.” Upon first meeting, “‘You want to marry me, don’t you?’ she says as a joke. ‘Yes’, [Quoyle] said, meaning it. ... ‘Get out of

this place,' she whispered, 'go get a drink. It's seven twenty-five. I think I'm going to fuck you by ten, what do you think of that?' Later, 'My God, that's the biggest one yet'"(13). Fleeting lust is mistaken by Quoyale, who misidentifies everything, as undying love: "There was a month of fiery happiness. Then six kinked years of suffering" (13).

5. Quoyale's Salvation: Community

Various events converge several years into Quoyale's marriage: his parents, upon discovering they are bankrupt, commit suicide, and Petal leaves with another man, taking the children with her to sell to a pedophile pornographer. Fortunately, Quoyale's aunt, Agnis Hamm, arrives several days after Petal (fortunately too, I suppose) dies in a car crash and he is able to retrieve his children. No misguided romantic, the aunt sees the absurdity of Quoyale's lament over his lost wife that "he wasn't enough for her," and that "she just couldn't get enough love" (24, 23). If Quoyale is a signifier for modern ennui and dislocation, the aunt symbolizes one firmly entrenched in a tradition to which, along with Quoyale and his children, she wants to return: "'You can look at it this way,' she said. 'You've got a chance to start out all over again. A new place, new people, new sights. A clean slate. See, you can be anything you want with a fresh start'" (27).

This passage reverberates with irony, for Quoyale's "clean slate" is actually a move back into his ancestral history. Echoing communitarian sentiments, Proulx suggests that no one, including Quoyale, can truly be "any- thing they want." For to be completely free in this sense — i.e., to conceive oneself in terms of modern liberalism, where the self constructs itself while freed absolutely from any and all *a priori* commitments to any substantive conception of the good — is, for both Proulx and Taylor, either an impossibility or an option fraught with peril. As the aunt says, "As you get older you find the place you started out pulls at you stronger and stronger and... the past few years it's been like an ache, just a longing to get back" (29). This is not yet true for Quoyale; after all, since he was born in Brooklyn, Newfoundland holds no memories for him. In this sense, then, he does not and cannot see moving to Newfoundland as any sort of salvation; rather, at this point, all he wants is "storm and peril. Difficult tasks. Exhaustion" (50).

His history, the history of the Quoyales, is uncovered slowly and obliquely through the course of *The Shipping News*. Quoyale gets his first hint from his colleague, Billy Pretty, who likens a Quoyale to an "omaloor," which he describes as a "big, stun, clumsy, witless, simple-minded

type of a fellow” (58), an entirely apt description of Quoyle himself. But there is no hint in Quoyle of the evil that infects his family. We eventually learn, for example, that the aunt was sexually abused, and impregnated by her brother, Quoyle’s father. We also learn that the Quoyles were “a savage pack. In the olden days they say Quoyles nailed a man to a tree by ’is ears, cut off ’is nose for the scent of blood to draw the nippers and flies that devoured ’im alive. Gone now, except for the odd man, Nolan, down along Capsize Cove. I never thought a one of the others would come back, and here there’s four of them” (139).

Although *The Shipping News* speaks of the necessity of finding one’s roots, of embedding oneself within a set of community values, it eschews both any connection to a “golden age” mentality and to the loathsome sort of “family values” sentimentality which infects many current discussions of that issue, particularly as employed by certain right-wing political parties: the Pat Buchanans of the United States, the Preston Mannings of Canada, and tele-evangelists everywhere. Proulx’s account of community, like the *Gammy Bird* for which Quoyle comes to work, is “a hard bite. Looked life right in its shifty, bloodshot eye. A tough little paper” (63) mirroring the tough little community it represents. Both the community and its local paper are idiosyncratic. As its owner, Jack Buggitt, tells it, he began the paper initially over his frustration in looking for work after the collapse of the fishery and the inability of modern, bureaucratic industry either to know its community or to communicate effectively. Evidence of this inability became clear for Buggitt after he was hired initially to work in a tannery which collapsed shortly after opening, only later to be hired at a glove factory which was to receive its leather from the now long defunct tannery: “So... I’m thinking. I’m thinking, ‘If I’d knew this sucker didn’t have no leather I could have saved myself a trip.’ Now, how do you know things? You read ‘em in the paper! There wasn’t no local paper.... So I goes over to Canada Manpower and I says, ‘I want to start a newspaper’.... They ate it up. They give me boxes and boxes of forms to fill out” (67).

Buggitt was clear, however, that the journalistic rules of Toronto were inappropriate for Killic-Claw:

They sent me off to Toronto to learn about the newspaper business. They give me money. What the hell, I hung around Toronto what, four or five weeks, listening to them rave at me about editorial balance, integrity, the new journalism, reporter ethics, service to the community. Give me the fits. I couldn’t understand the half of what they said. Learned what I had to know finally by doing it right here

in my old shop. I been running *Gammy Bird* for seven years now, and the circulation is up to thirteen thousand, gaining every year. All along this coast. Because I know what people want to read about. And no arguments about it. (67)

And what he knew primarily is that his local paper would thrive with very little “mainstream” news (and most of that is merely a rewrite of stories taken from the radio), but rather with a hodgepodge of “women’s stuff” called the “Home Page,” a “near libelous gossip column” called “Scrun-cheons,” a bit of shipping news, loads of advertisements, mostly made up, a plethora of sexual abuse stories, and voluminous numbers of stories (with pictures) about automobile accidents: “We run a front-page photo of a car wreck every week, whether we have a wreck or not. That’s our golden rule. No exceptions” (69). As such, the paper, as well as the community he comes to call home, initially gives “Quoye an uneasy feeling, the feeling of standing on a playground watching others play games whose rules he didn’t know. Nothing like the *Record*. He didn’t know how to write this stuff” (63).

6. Quoye’s salvation: Articulation

Quoye’s claim here is ironic, of course, since he couldn’t write for the *Record* either. He will, however, come to learn to write for the *Gammy Bird*. Taylor maintains that we are and will remain inarticulate about our selves unless and until we abandon “scientism” — until we become immersed in a substantive conception of the good such as is embedded within the ordinary lives and values of a community. This is exactly what happens to Quoye. Completely inarticulate in New York, Quoye comes to be a competent writer for the *Gammy Bird*. His first breakthrough comes when writing a section of the paper called the shipping news. Originally intended as a purely descriptive report of which ships were in port, where they were registered, and so forth, Quoye, not one for taking chances nor for having reliable intuitions about anything, decides to write a narrative account of one rather odd ship in port at the time. “The words,” we are told, “fell out as fast as he could type them. He had a sense of writing well” (142). And the story *is* well written: unlike the dry, political beat he had covered previously for the *Record*, which dealt, at least from Quoye’s perspective (or lack of writing ability), with matters abstracted completely from the personal, this piece for the shipping news has a personal hook, and tells a *story*. Indeed, despite worries that the piece will lead to his dismissal, the story is well received and leads to Quoye

getting to write a weekly column on shipping news; not the sort originally intended, but a personal, narrative account of ships and the people who lived and oftentimes died on them: “Thirty-six years old and this was the first time anybody ever said he’d done it right” (144).

“Telling stories” is a long-standing Newfoundland (indeed, maritime) tradition, and Proulx notes this early along in Quoyle’s return there. Indeed, Proulx seems to find her own voice in *The Shipping News* only after getting her characters to Newfoundland. Before that point, *The Shipping News* is itself a bit of a “hard bite” and difficult either to get a sense of or to immerse oneself within. The explanation of this, I believe, has to do with Quoyle’s lack of a self. As such, early in the novel, readers have no one with whom they can identify and with which to empathize. We begin to care for Quoyle and his predicament only when he begins to acquire at least a minimal sense of himself, and this occurs only when he arrives in Newfoundland amidst the conglomeration of odd characters such as populate the *Gammy Bird*. These people, says the narrator, “could have been declaiming from a stage” (57), as evidenced by Tert Card’s introduction of Quoyle to the other members of the *Gammy Bird*: “Come in then, Quoyle, and meet the band of brigands, the worst of them damn Nutbeem, and his strangling hands. Himself, Mr. Jack Buggitt, is up at the house having charms said over his scrawny chest to clear out a wonderful accumulation of phlegm which he’s been hawking for a week” (57). Perhaps by osmosis, Quoyle acquires this gift and not only comes to write stories well but gets attached to them, finding a part of himself in them. In fact, his first attempt to defend himself occurs over a story he had written for the shipping news which contained a covert attack on oil tankers. The subject of oil for Newfoundlanders is a rather touchy one: huge deposits of oil have been found off the coast of Newfoundland, and this has led to what by now are familiar arguments concerning the benefits and risks of such an enterprise. Tert Card, the managing editor, is pro-oil and, as a result, savagely edits/rewrites Quoyle’s column, turning it into an advocacy piece for oil companies, contrary to Quoyle’s intent. Quoyle’s adamant defense of his piece leads Billy Pretty to note: “You’re a surprise, Quoyle... I didn’t think you had that much steam in your boiler.” “I’m surprised myself” says Quoyle (204).

Back in Newfoundland, Quoyle has found himself. As it is put at one point:

Quoyle was not going back to New York... If life was an arc of light that began in darkness, ended in darkness, the first part of his life had happened in ordinary glare. Here it was as though he had found

a polarized lens that deepened and intensified all seen through it. Thought of his stupid self in Mockingburg, taking whatever came at him. No wonder love had shot him through the heart and lungs, caused internal bleeding. (241)

7. Quoyle's Salvation: Identity and Love

A part of what provides Quoyle's life in Killic-Claw with intensified light is his relationship with Wavey Prowse. In part, *The Shipping News* is a love story of a fairly standard sort. Quoyle initially meets a "demon-lover" (Petal Bear), and is eventually saved by a "tall and quiet woman" (Wavey Prowse) as he comes to realize, at the very end of the novel, "it may be that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery" (337). Yet, there are aspects of this "common" love story that echo sentiments expressed earlier in this paper having to do with a retrieval of one's sense of self through commitment to a hypergood embedded within the values and traditions of a culture. Just as Quoyle begins by being incapable of articulation, so too is he unable to love. And the reasons are similar: a lack of embeddedness, of foundation, of a failure to be a part of the community's rules and practices. Hence, the first meeting between Quoyle and Wavey makes a point regarding his ignorance of such practices: driving along a road with Billy Pretty, he needs to be told that it is proper social grace to offer a ride to someone (in this case Wavey and her son) even when they happen to be walking in the opposite direction. These small niceties of "everyday life" are things Quoyle needs to learn in order to be capable of establishing a sense of self, and to be able to learn to love.⁷

That first meeting is filled with portent, both because Quoyle and Wavey are at this point equally incapable of speaking and because of the connection Quoyle draws between her and this new place: "she seemed sprung from wet stones, the stench of fish and tide" (115). Later, upon first realizing his attraction to her and his desire for her, which he unsuccessfully attempts to bring to fruition, he lies stranded on a seaside sheet of granite:

He pressed his groin against the barrens as if he were in union with the earth. His aroused senses imbued the far scene with enormous importance.... All the complex wires of life were stripped out and he could see the structure of life. Nothing but rock and sea, the tiny figures of humans and animals against them for a brief time.

... Saw the Quoyle's rinsed of evil by the passage of time. He

imagined the aunt buried and gone, himself old, Wavey stooped with age, his daughters in faraway lives....

A sense of purity renewed, a sense of events in trembling balance flooded him (196).

Once again, then, we are back to that communitarian and Aristotelian notion of harmony, of balance, of the golden mean, and of a life firmly committed to and enlivened by substantive goods, articulated by constitutive and hypergoods. Only then, according to Proulx, and to Taylor, can “the complex wires of life” — those purely instrumental and procedural goods — be “stripped out,” and “the structure of life” be shown.

8. Concluding Remarks

As I said in my introduction, my hope in this paper was to use Taylor’s work on identity to bring into focus several features of *The Shipping News*. Let me close by reversing this and examining, albeit briefly, what *The Shipping News* has to say about Taylor’s communitarianism. That is, does *The Shipping News* offer support for Taylor’s position? If what I have argued during the course of this paper is at all correct, then the answer here has to be ‘yes,’ but only partially so and with some qualification. First, it simply strikes me as implausible that a work of literature would be able to offer anything like full support for a philosophical position. For one thing, good literature needs to be oblique and complex in a way that it cannot be if it attempts to make a dogmatic point in a direct manner. Even a writer like Bertolt Brecht, who had a definite political agenda to promote, felt called upon to avoid simple propaganda in his drama. As he sardonically put it at one point: “So we had philosophy and we had instruction. And where was the amusement in all that? Were they sending us back to school, teaching us how to read and write? Were we supposed to pass exams, work for diplomas?” (Brecht 72). Good literature, I would suggest, often achieves this complexity and avoids dogmatism by deconstructing itself, that is, by offering a critique of those positions which, in the main, it supports. Hence, *The Shipping News*, as an instance of good literature, offers a critique of the communitarian position which, in general, it endorses. Indeed, I shall argue that Proulx provides a critique of communitarianism that echoes two standard criticisms often made with respect to that position.

Communitarianism, which has its roots in Greek philosophy and in the polis of Ancient Greek city-states is, some critics suggest, not amenable to an analysis of contemporary states. Whereas the Greek polis was

relatively small and homogeneous, contemporary societies are large are heterogeneous. As such, contemporary states cannot be expected to have only one substantive conception of the good. Indeed, the lure of a position such as liberalism is that, in theory at least, it can explain some element of social stability without imposing one substantive conception of the good to which everyone must adhere. Hence the proceduralism and official state neutrality of modern liberalism. Now, while the small out-ports of contemporary Newfoundland are rather like the city-states of ancient Greece in being small and (mostly) homogeneous communities,⁸ they are quite different from a typical modern state. This, of course, makes communities such as Killic-Claw quite amenable to communitarian analysis, but, unfortunately, these same features make it difficult to draw general points about communitarianism vis-à-vis modernity: rural Newfoundland is simply too idiosyncratic and atypical for that.

A second, related criticism often directed toward communitarianism is that it is, or at least can be, too rigidly conformist and, as such, hostile both to change and to minorities. Marilyn Friedman has written recently that because communitarianism, like feminism, has rejected abstract individualism in favour of some view of self as social that “one might anticipate that communitarian theory would offer important insights for feminism” (305). Despite this commonality, however, she claims that “communitarian philosophy is a perilous ally for feminist theory” because communitarianism has focused on a “model of community [which has]... been highly oppressive to women” (305). The problem here can be reduced to two major flaws, as Friedman sees it: (1) “communitarian theory pays insufficient regard to the illegitimate claims which communities make on their members, linked, for example, to hierarchies of domination and subordination;” (2) “the specific communities...so commonly invoked by communitarianism are troubling paradigms of social relationships and communal life” (307).

The first point stems from communitarians legitimizing all communal norms and traditions as the given starting points from and within which all moral evaluations are made. Because some or many — perhaps all — communities are intolerant of some groups and/or practices, “besides excluding and suppressing outsiders, [communitarianism can also be]... exploitative and oppressive toward many of their own members” (309). We can see this point at work in *The Shipping News* by a brief consideration of two characters, Nutbeam and Quoyle’s aunt, Agnis Hamm.

“Come-from-aways” — i.e., people not originally from Newfoundland — have almost a formal status as outsiders within Newfoundland. As

one of them, Nutbeam can never hope to be fully integrated within the local culture. Communitarians such as Taylor, who speak of communities as “given” and thus “discovered” as opposed to socially constructed creations, run the risk of legitimizing this form of social ostracization. Indeed, Nutbeam himself, following the lead of the local community, perceives himself as a foreigner and is continually planning his departure. It is interesting to note that the only time the community moves to accept him fully as a legitimate member, and begs him to stay, occurs during the drunken debauchery of his farewell party. In the end, community members attempt to effect their desire of including him in the group by destroying both his home and the boat by which he plans to leave Newfoundland. Symbolically, then, inclusion of an outsider involves destruction.

As an “insider” — that is, as one who has her genealogical roots in the community — Agnis Hamm does not suffer from this predicament. She is, however, faced with another problem. Before her return to Newfoundland, she lived her life in what was presumably an open lesbian relationship. Her return to Killic-Claw, however, necessitates a return to the closet and a denial of her sexual life. And after she has done what she in part came for — to deal with her history as a victim of sexual abuse by her brother, Quoyle’s father (a point made brilliantly in the novel when she dumps his ashes down the hole of an outhouse and urinates on them) — she decides, at the end of the novel, to leave Newfoundland. We see, then, that while the hypergoods of community — those “moral starting points” as Friedman puts it — can have positive results for those such as Quoyle, that same set of substantive goods can have deleterious effects for others. While Quoyle finds himself in Newfoundland, others, such as the outsider Nutbeam or those with “deviant” sexual identities such as Agnis, are either (symbolically) destroyed or forced into denial and/or hiding.

This relates to Friedman’s second point noted above concerning the fact that communities are given rather than created and hence make poor models of social being. According to Michael Sandel, for example, a community is “not a relationship [its members] choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity” (Friedman 311). If this is the case, then not only will the marginalized within a community run the risk of being ignored or oppressed, those members will have the added burden that they will have little theoretical grounds for critique since those found norms are said to be constitutive of the self.⁹ Thus, not only will Nutbeam and Agnis Hamm be subject to persecution, there exists the risk, under

communitarianism, that they will have little basis for complaint. Their options may be reduced to assimilation, perhaps by a denial of sexual identity, or departure.

In conclusion, then, while Taylor's communitarianism may be useful and fecund as a heuristic device in understanding Proulx's novel, *The Shipping News* cannot be said, without qualification, to endorse communitarianism wholeheartedly.¹⁰

NOTES

¹ Since the ennui and dislocation of which Taylor speaks is central to the claims of post-modernism as well, one could speak of it as well as to modernity. Because I am using Taylor as a template for understanding certain features of *The Shipping News*, however, I will follow him and refer solely to modernity. As I explain in greater detail above, Taylor does this because although, as with postmodernists, Taylor reacts negatively to many of the features of modernism, primarily to what he perceives as its preference for 'scientific' explanation, he has no desire to adopt the relativism of postmodernism.

² Taylor is actually somewhat ambivalent about the value of ordinary life. I take it, however, that his problem is not with these values per se, but with the way modernity has divorced itself from the constitutive and hypergoods unpinning these values. These types of goods will be discussed in some detail.

³ The term Taylor uses is "naturalism," but that is a notoriously vague term, referring as it does not only to positions such as utilitarianism to which Taylor is opposed but also to Aristotelian virtue ethics, a variant of which Taylor endorses. What Taylor is referring to by "naturalism" in this context is any position which models itself after the conceptual framework of modern science and which assumes materialism, reductionism, mechanism, and determinism.

⁴ It is interesting to note that, although false, it is widely believed that these results were 'cooked' by then premier Joey Smallwood and that the vote against actually won.

⁵ Indeed, the local paper, *Gammy Bird*, continues to include news of and from Canada in the "foreign news" section.

⁶ I thank David Stewart for making this point and directing me to this passage.

⁷ Becoming accustomed to customs, and being able to operate within them fluently, takes time, as Proulx emphasizes throughout the novel. Some practices, such as the idiosyncratic comedy of a culture, are particularly difficult since they rely so heavily on being 'inside' the group. Thus, we are informed very late in the novel that "Quoyle still couldn't recognize a joke when he heard one" (246).

⁸ One must add "mostly" here because there are, of course, a number of divisive issues in Newfoundland of a sort not typical of completely homogeneous communities. As Calvin Normore insightfully pointed out to me, religion in Newfoundland is just one of these issues, and it is interesting that this subject is never broached by Proulx in *The Shipping News*.

⁹ Hence Friedman's concluding remarks regarding the necessity of legitimizing voluntary, created communities. See Friedman 313-319.

¹⁰ Richard Keshen, Joe Wickens, Paul Dumouchel, David Stewart and two anonymous referees from this journal have all helped in the production of this paper. So too have all those people, particularly Andrew Plaw as the official commentator at my CPA presentation, who have commented on the paper at one of the following conferences where this paper, in various forms, has been presented: American Society for Aesthetics, Rocky Mountain Division

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