

DOI: 10.1515/aa-2018-0001

## The landscape of trauma, pain and hope in Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse*

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### Abstract:

*Jim Crace likes to refer to himself as a “landscape writer” and indeed, in each of his eleven novels he has created a distinct yet recognizable imaginary landscape or cityscape. This has led critics to coin the term “Craceland” to describe the idiosyncratic milieu he creates, which, through his remarkably authentic and poetic rendering of geography and topography, appear to be both other and familiar at the same time. In *The Pesthouse* (2007), the milieu is the devastated America of an imagined future, a country which has deteriorated into a pre-modern and pre-industrial wasteland so hostile to sustainable existence that most of its inhabitants have become refugees travelling eastwards to sail to a new life on another continent. Franklin and Margaret, two such refugees, are leaving their homes not only to flee misery and destitution, but also the trauma and pain occasioned by the loss of their relatives. Using geocriticism as a practice and theoretical point of departure, this article presents and analyses the various ways in which Crace's novel renders and explores its spaces, landscapes and places, as well as how it links them with the transformation of the protagonists' psyches and mental worlds.*

To characterize the status and renown of Jim Crace (b.1946) is an ambiguous task, all the more so in that he himself is very dismissive and self-deprecating in this regard, calling his writing enjoyment rather than hard work or even real work (Jim Crace Website, 2002). As a member of the influential generation of authors born soon after the Second World War, he has been one of the most interesting figures on the British literary scene for the past four decades. Ever since his debut, *Continent* (1986), his fiction has drawn a great deal of attention from both critics and readers. His novels have won a number of prestigious literary awards, including the Whitbread Award, the James Tait Black Memorial Award and the International Dublin Literary Award, and two of them, *Quarantine* (1998) and *Harvest* (2013), were shortlisted for the (Man) Booker Prize. Yet although his books are also popular in the United States, where he has

received the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Windham-Campbell Literature Prize, compared to his more internationally acclaimed peers, namely Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis and the Nobel Prize laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, he is still not much known outside Britain.

One of the reasons may be that Crace has never really engaged with the emblematic postmodernist narrative techniques and strategies. On the other hand, he can hardly be regarded as a realistic writer either, despite his fiction appearing realistic or naturalistic and the remarkable sense of detail with which he depicts the settings of his stories. In discussing his work himself, he points to the distinction between “conventional” and “traditional” writing: while by conventional he means the mainstream realist novel that primarily strives to mirror the historical reality of the world in which it is supposedly set, the traditional refers to imaginative storytelling in the tradition of folktales, legends, fables, parables and myths that tend to reflect the real world indirectly by means of universality and allegory. Though his stories may read as allegories of the contemporary world, their attention is on “the aesthetic act as a redemptive force”, one which records “the semiotic via the symbolic” (Lane, 2003, pp. 37-38). Crace professes the latter mode of writing, which not only abandons the claim of verisimilitude, but also effaces the personality of the teller. “If you look at the old traditional stories, the character of the storyteller is completely absent – but the invention is entire. [...] I lose myself in the realms of pure invention”. And so, as he concludes on the peculiar relationship between his fiction and reality, “[r]ealist fiction locates you, imaginative fiction dislocates. What traditional writing does – what I do – is to dislocate the issues of the real world and place them elsewhere” (Begley, 2002). This dislocation then inevitably makes the narration in many respects elusive and equivocal, and thus difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to situate and pin down for temporal, spatial and at times even experiential appropriation.

A consequence of this unrestricted imaginative inventiveness is the diversity of Crace’s work in terms of historical time, geographic location, protagonists and their societies, which includes, among others, a village community of the late Neolithic age, a quarantining group of people in the Judean desert shortly before the beginning of the Common Era, a small, early Victorian seaport, and an unnamed early modern Western city. This disparate range of times, places and individuals may render a clearly distinct thematic link between them rather imperceptible, as Frank Kermode notes: “This intense focusing on, or inhabitation of, a particular milieu means that there is little obvious thematic continuity from one book to the next. What they share is this imaginative power, these variously obsessed landscapes and cultures” (1998). Another possible complication can be found in Crace’s distinctive writing

style which can be characterized as a rhythmic prose reconciling poetic figurativeness with “preciseness of observed detail” (Tew, 2006, p. xiii). Unlike, for instance, Kazuo Ishiguro whose narration is determined by his wish that his words should “survive translation” (Adams, 2005), the immediate effect of Crace’s style is the opposite: the core of his fiction is in the descriptive passages that almost resist translation due to their specific narrative rhythm and diction, which combines subtle metaphors with earthy and minute details, and newly coined terms for non-existent species of plants, animals and minerals.

However, in spite of the diversity of his writing there are a number of thematic and aesthetic concerns he typically addresses. Philip Tew lists them as follows: “a crisis of faith and meaning, the elusive quality of love, an interrogation of the essentials of identity within a broader social context, a consideration of the crisis of modernity in terms of its mercantile/capitalist instincts, and an awareness of the human narrative impulse” (2006, p. 24). In order to explore these issues in their close interconnectedness, Crace situates his stories in what he calls “communities in transition” (Begley, 2002), that is groups of people who find themselves on the verge of an historical shift that necessitates certain social, economic, political and/or cultural changes. The overriding story of his novels is that of fateful loss as his protagonists are exposed to the consequences of the process by which one era gives way to another. Forced by circumstances, they have to learn to cope with an uncommon, liminal situation which is defined by a collapse, transformation or even eradication of existing values, norms and beliefs before new ones have been fully determined and established. The power of Crace’s novels lies in the fact that they present a narrative of recovery (Lane, 2003, p. 37) – his protagonists, though at first distressed and confused, never resign but keep on struggling to restore their broken identities and adapt to the transformed reality.

It is the combination of the above-mentioned attributes of Crace’s writing – the imaginative diversity, allegorical and mythopoetic sensibility, distinctive narrative style and recurrent thematic preoccupations – that results in the creation of unique fictional worlds which, though highly varied, share a set of common features and properties. This has led critics to coin the term “Craceland” to denote the idiosyncratic milieux that, due to the author’s exceptionally authentic and poetic spatial rendering, appear both recognisable yet other, “a somewhere familiar, but not quite here” (Sansom, 2001), “a world proportioned to reality, and yet largely a system within itself” (Tew, 2006, p. 4). Crace describes himself as a “landscape writer”, one who makes up “alternate landscapes to fill with invented people and invented narratives” (Begley, 2003), and in each of his 11 novels he has created an externally distinct yet internally identifiable imaginary space which always to some extent reflects the troublesome process of

the characters' reassessment and reformation of their identities. This article focuses on Crace's 2007 novel, *The Pesthouse*, and explores the ways in which he links his protagonists' mental, emotional and spiritual worlds with the geography and topography of territories they journey through and, consequently, how the novel's fictional space-time transforms from one of pain, despair and confusion to one of hope, consolation and promise.

### **Geocriticism**

Ever since the postmodern "spatial turn" based on the premise that "[t]here is no unspatialized social reality" (Soja, 1996, p. 46), representation of space and place has received a considerable degree of attention from literary theory, studies and criticism. As a result, space has drawn level with or even surpassed time as the key focal point of analysis, and has broken itself free from the constraint of being taken as a mere setting or background, gradually assuming the position of "a central metaphor and *topos* in literature" (Peraldo, 2016, p. 1). We live in time and space and both these coordinates are essential not only for our understanding of when and where we are, but also who we are and why. The spaces and places we inhabit, move within and pass through inevitably form a part of our experience, and as we ascribe them various attributes and properties they become inseparable from our perception and interpretation of everyday reality. Such spaces/places are then permeated with meanings of different kinds, from public ones, such as the social and political, to more private or intimate ones, such as the aesthetic and emotional. Once endowed with such meanings they enter the network of signs through which we attempt to make sense of the world around and our place within it. These meanings accumulate, layer, concatenate and otherwise interact, creating larger meaningful formations by which spaces/places get "narrativized", which is why they naturally invite, or even call for, representation, including artistic mimesis. Our understanding of a particular place/space is thus determined not only by our own experience, but also by reading (or watching) other people's experience and, consequently, by our interpretation of these representations.

This increased interest has given rise to a number of critical approaches and practices focusing in various ways on representation of space in literature and other media, such as psychogeography, ecocriticism and geopoetics. The most comprehensive and stimulating one, however, has proved to be geocriticism. Broadly speaking, it can be defined as "an exploratory practice, or set of practices, whereby readers, scholars, and critics engage with the spaces that make life, through lived experience and through imaginary projections, meaningful" (Tally, 2011, "Translator's Preface", p. xii). Geocriticism is based on the premise that in our perception and understanding of place/space the factual always combines with the invented, be the latter

our emotions, projections, biases, or images derived from others' texts. It argues that we may better understand what we call "actual" places by being familiar with their "fictional" representations, and vice versa, yet it also insists that no such thing as a "real" place exists as all places are "real-and-imagined", to use Edward W. Soja's term. Bertrand Westphal, a French literary scholar and the theoretical founder of geocriticism, outlines three fundamental concepts of this approach: spatiotemporality, transgressivity and referentiality.

Simply put, spatiotemporality means that no spatial analysis may avoid the temporal aspect. However, this temporality has to observe the relative laws of space-time, which are best expressed by the tropes of "bifurcation" and "entropy". Bifurcation refers to the replacement of the linear timeline with labyrinthine patterns of diverging or forking paths, as a result of which the dynamics of a continuous line gives way to the fragmenting dynamics of the point of instability. Entropy, the state of increasing disorder in a system that allows evolution into a new one, thus serves as an ideal metaphor for such temporized space. Its state is that of nonequilibrium (or turbulence), which is viewed positively as one containing a complex story, as opposed to equilibrium, which is a preserved state without history, a nonstory. Therefore, the geocritical concept of space favours heterogeneity, an isotropic universe which defies hierarchy and unequivocal progression. Transgressivity refers to the fact that no representation is stable, but is rather a process of permanent fluidity as a characteristic element of contemporary space in its capacity for mobility and movement. Such heterogeneous, or smooth, space is in a state of perpetual transgression, boundary crossing and oscillation between centre and periphery, governed by the almost impalpable deterritorializing evolutionary forces. Consequently, referentiality points to the fact that as any representation is related to the referential world, the link between the referent and its representation is of constant movement and oscillation, blurring the distinction between the real and the represented. The depiction of the place does not reproduce a referent, rather it is a discourse that establishes the space, through which the fictional enters into an interactive relationship with the real with a variable degree of correlation (Westphal, 2011).

These three concepts are further supported by the principles of multifocalization of views on a given referential space, the polysensoriality of the experience of an environment resulting in synesthetic "sensory" landscapes, stratigraphy, which claims that space does not unfold in pure simultaneity due to the permanent reactivation of temporal layers that constitute and crisscross it, and intertextuality pointing to the inherently (inter)textual dimension of space (Westphal, 2011). In Westphal's understanding, geocriticism is geo-centred rather than ego-centred. This means that the spatial referent alone is the basis for the mostly comparative

analysis, unlike what he calls imagology which pays attention to the construction and properties of the other's imagined territory, while the actual location itself is of little relevance. He aims at understanding given, individual places through the lens of their textual representation, which makes it "a kind of metacritical endeavour [...] that extends literary studies into the domain of the geographical referent in a way that transcends literature's aesthetic function" (Prieto, 2011, p. 22). However, his concept is not dogmatic or doctrinaire in the sense that would delegitimize other approaches, and as such invites a plurality of geocritical practices while maintaining its underlying concepts.

Robert T. Tally Jr., for instance, endorses a broader understanding of geocriticism as "a way of looking at the spaces of literature" which include "not only those places that readers and writers experience by means of texts but also the experience of space and place within ourselves" (2011, "On Geocriticism", p. 8), which is why spatial criticism should not examine only literary representations of places themselves, "but also of the experience of place and of displacement, while exploring the interrelations between lived experience and a more abstract or unrepresentable spatial network that subtly or directly shapes it" (2014, "Series Editor's Preface", p. x). Tally speaks of so called "mapping narratives", an inherently ambiguous concept since a mapping narrative is simultaneously something that maps – the real-and-imagined spaces of human existence – and something to be mapped – formed by its interpretations or by the interpretive frameworks in which readers situate it and through which they situate it into a spatiotemporal context in which it makes sense to them (2014, "Introduction", p. 3). He thus extends the geographically restricted scope of Westphal's geocriticism by placing greater focus on the aesthetic and reader-response dimensions of the interaction between space/place and its narrative. Eric Prieto goes even further than this when he argues in favour of employing the phenomenological perspective and emphasizes the human, subjective and experiential dimension of place. He proposes geocritical textual analysis which would explore "the impact that the environmental constraints of place have on the human psyche", and study place as "a manifestation of the dynamic interpretation of consciousness and world" (2011, p. 25). Through the trajectory of conceptions from Westphal via Tally to Prieto, the spatial literary representation in question has transformed from a singular place with a specific real-life referent, via mental places based on a real-life referent yet largely independent of its actual character, to abstract imagined places which may not have any direct referent at all.

At this point a distinction between space and place should be made. Space is a more indefinite, general concept: in a broad sense, it is an environment in which an individual exists.

Place, on the other hand, is a concretized, localized segment or element of space, and this concretization and localization necessarily involves ascribing further meanings to it than to space. It is a specific environment which an individual inhabits, which is meaningful to them and to which they relate on the basis of their personal projections and interpretations. Space thus becomes place by “being named: as the flows of power and negotiations of social relations are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population” (Carter *et al.*, 1993, p. xii). Therefore, even though space does have some impact on a person’s life and personality, it is place that truly grounds their identity and identity-formation. Importantly for the present analysis, “landscape” comes into this space-place-human relationship as a middle-term which “negotiates the difference between the relatively fixed term ‘place’ and the more indeterminate ‘space’. A landscape typically consists of several places, and yet it is linked to an area, a region, in a way space is not” (de Lange *et al.*, 2008, pp. xv-xvi). Landscape can thus be taken as a kind of mediator of the immediacy of place and the indeterminacy of space and their respective influences upon a human being, in particular when this individual is on the move, in the process of journeying in space from one place to another.

Having material, mental and temporal dimensions and being ascribed with numerous meanings, the concepts of space and place, and landscape along with them, also possess a considerable narrative potential. Imaginative spatial textual representation, or literary cartography as it may be termed, is thus a complex, intricate project “insofar as its activity requires the meticulous coordination of different registers, from the individual subject’s subjective experience of space and places to the vaster, abstract or even scientific apprehension of a spatial and historical constellation of forces” (Tally, 2016, p. 21). It is a form of mapping of real-and-imagined landscapes, yet one that by far transcends mere reproduction of a geospatial referent as the writer not only figuratively (re)presents the social space in his/her narrative, but also attempts to situate the story’s protagonists in a larger matrix of relations within which the spatial factors play a crucial role. Exploring such a literary cartographic narrative then offers its readers the opportunity and instruments to encounter and empathize with others’ experience as well as better understand their own, as it “not only represents the places depicted in it, but also shapes them, giving form to imaginary world in the text while also projecting a ‘world’ that can be apprehended all at once” (Tally, 2016, p. 26). This is most apparent in adventure stories that trace the protagonists’ advancement in space and time, their physical as well as mental movement on the narrative “map” of the fictitious world, as is the case of Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse*.

### **The heterogeneous space of Crace's imagined America**

*The Pesthouse* presents a dystopian vision of America's imagined future. Once the safest and most prosperous place on earth, Crace's America has regressed and deteriorated into a quasi-medieval, pre-modern and pre-industrial state. It has turned into a devastated, disorderly wasteland: the soil is barely fertile, the technologies almost forgotten and no longer used, communities have fallen apart. The country is slowly being deserted as most of its dwellers have found it uninhabitable and have made the decision to pack up their essential belongings and travel eastward to board a ship sailing for Europe in the hope of making a new start there. This America is a dismal, sparsely populated place as only those settlements and villages that can prosper from providing lodging and catering for the refugees survive, though their social structure and relations are far from unaffected by the larger historical circumstances. Living in despair and destitution and having lost all certainties, the people's lives are dominated by superstition and irrational beliefs. Life has taught them selfishness, distrust, prejudice and suspiciousness, which is true of both the emigrants and the few who still reside in their semi-derelict homes. Moreover, they live in constant fear as the main roads are raided by gangs of merciless rustlers and highwaymen who take advantage of the anarchy to rob the travelling families, rape the women and take the fit for work men as captives and slaves.

Even in this extreme context, Franklin and Margaret are a curious-looking pair of refugees. Under normal circumstances, they would have probably never met or got together because of their age difference. Franklin and his older brother Jackson are heading towards the East Coast before the winter comes when the younger's inflamed and swollen knee necessitates an unwelcome stop in their hasty journey. As he cannot walk, the brothers agree to leave Franklin on a hill overlooking the village of Ferrytown to rest his knee while Jackson goes down to see what the place is like. The previous day, the 31-year-old and still unmarried Margaret who is ill with a contagious disease called "the flux" is taken by her grandfather from Ferrytown to spend time in quarantine in the pesthouse, a boulder hut located on Butter Hill, which rises above the village. Driven to seek shelter by heavy night rain, Franklin finds the older and, despite her weak frame and shorn head, beautiful woman sleeping in the hut and, against all reason, stays there with her and even massages the soles of her feet the way his mother used to do for him when he was ill, which Margaret later comes to believe saved her life. When she gets better and his brother does not come back as he promised, Franklin decides to resume walking and the two lonely strangers out of necessity, drawn to each other by mutual sympathies

bordering on affection, become a particularly unusual couple: a tall, limping young man carrying on his back a woman with a shaven head who is eight years his senior.

The world in which the story is set in is an example of a heterogeneous space as it lacks all the crucial properties of a homogeneous, or striated, space that is determined and kept under surveillance by the state apparatus, which makes it “the space of the polis, politics, the policed, and the police” (Westphal, 2011, *Geocriticism*, p. 39), an orderly and ordered space of parallel verticals and layers. America in *The Pesthouse* is the opposite – the space of “the nomos” which does not revolve around regular parallel lines but “unfolds between points [...] that can connect as many lines as one chooses” (Westphal, 2011, *Geocriticism*, p. 39). It is a place in which the government has collapsed and no longer has any control over the country’s communal and political functioning. As there is no single site of power, the distinction between centre and periphery has become meaningless, as has the concept of a border or any other geographic or social delineation. As a result, the prevailing state of affairs is that of chaos and anarchy in which rules and laws are observed habitually and instinctively rather than enforced by an external, institutional authority. This America has transformed into a decentred no man’s land whose inhabitants have lost much of their sense of belonging and territorial identity as it is dominated by strong deterritorializing forces making life for its people one of permanent uprootedness, movement and exile. These people, forced to be on the move rather than moving by choice, roam this space, crossing what little has remained of the former boundaries of territorial units and social hierarchies as well as of universal human morality and decency.

In terms of spatiotemporality, it is a space simultaneously in and out of time. On the one hand, the overall condition is that of some sort of timelessness, of time stopped still or even turned backwards, as the country is being depopulated and the existing communities or settlements are surviving in a state of stasis rather than evolving in time. On the other hand, the sense of temporal chronology has not diminished completely; people have a notion of the past, the present and the future, nostalgically missing the first, fleeing the second and fixing their hopes on the latter, which is for most of them the only way in which they can cope with the fluid world of permanent instability. The state of this space-time is that of a non-equilibrium whose principal operating forces are bifurcation and entropy. Although the migrants’ progress seems to observe a linear timeline of going directly to the east, in reality this line is crucially violated: first of all, it disintegrates into isolated, disparate points as the travellers are forced by various unforeseen circumstances to make unplanned stops and breaks. Subsequently, their journey becomes rather labyrinthine as they have to change their pace and direction, some of them have to stay in one place and cannot move further on, ceasing in their effort, the fit ones

settle down, others choose alternate paths to the main and shortest one. Moreover, most of those who reach the coast get stuck, oscillating between the encampment and the shore as they are repeatedly denied access to the ships, which makes the camp an ambiguous place of order and disorder, of great hope yet where “[a]nger and impatience were in the air” and “[w]orry was a full-time job” (Crace, 2007, pp. 262, 264).

The whole space in the novel is thus teeming with entropic disorder, turbulence and isotropy. This entropy is still in its early phase when the energy necessary to allow evolution is being slowly accumulated, but its amount is not yet sufficient to power such a transformation. Crace provides a small-scale picture of such a world in the opening chapter of the novel when he describes an image from the wayside to the coast:

The wayside going east was already littered with melancholy camps and shallow graves – soon to be torn by wolves – of those whose bodies couldn’t take the journey, those who had been fatally chilled by wading through rivers, those who had starved and weakened, those who had been thrown by their horses or poisoned by their suppers, those who had been crushed between the fears of going forward and the dread of going back. (Crace, 2007, p. 9)

From the geocritical perspective, however, this entropy, no matter how devastating its immediate consequences may be for the lives of individuals, is a temporary and largely positive state as, infused with pulsing flows and motions, it has the potential to generate energy to drive the system forward and, as such, it contains complex stories to be told. All the protean forces of restlessness and transgression that govern such a space and its dwellers are therefore to be understood as salutary evolutionary impulses with the capacity to gradually transform it into a new, and potentially better, one. Symptomatically, out of the multiplicity of stories that his imagined America offers, Crace presents that of Franklin and Margaret, as it exemplifies precisely this trajectory from displacement to renewal within a determining set of spatiotemporal coordinates.

Crace’s treatment and rendering of place and space adheres to Tally’s and Prieto’s concepts of geocriticism rather than to Westphal’s as he is not much interested in the geographical referent. In other words, the countryside and places he describes are not truly inspired by any real-life model and the author does not strive to achieve verisimilitude with the actual landscapes of the United States. Instead, Crace’s America is a universal, imaginary construct loosely based on the referent, yet the story’s location is more significant for the novel’s thematic composition, that is on the symbolic, allegorical or mythical rather than representational level. Although he pays great attention to space and place in his narrative, they

always exist in relation to the human element, both interior, in the form of characters, and exterior, in the form of readers. As a result, his narrative has a substantial evocative and aesthetic dimension, often polysensoral and multifocal, which enables the readers to picture the rendered spaces/places and experience them within their imagination, but also the psychological dimension which examines how the protagonists experience, interpret and project these spaces/places and how this spatial perception affects their psyches and mental states. And, counter-wise, it also explores these protagonists' lived experience in relation to the spaces/places they occupy or pass through as well as within a wider socio-spatial context. With its refugee and emigrant protagonists journeying across the States in search of a better future, *The Pesthouse* has the ground plan of an adventure story yet, more importantly, it works like Tally's mapping narrative and focuses on landscape, and in consequence place, rather than on space.

### **The volatile real-and-imagined landscapes**

As the world around offers little comfort and few prospects, the inhabitants and travellers often resort to imagination as a device that can most effectively compensate for their deprived and frustrated existence. They make up stories of imaginary spaces and places of hope and consolation that may exist somewhere beyond the borders of America, diverse versions of a promised land of safety and bounty, a place "where the encouragements held out to strangers were a good climate, fertile soil, wholesome air and water, plenty of provisions, good pay for labor, kind neighbors, good laws, a free government and a hearty welcome" (Crace, 2007, p. 42). As they are exchanged during the communal evening gatherings, these stories, passed from generation to generation, have become a folk mythology, an inherent part of these people's lives, an ultimate motivation that propels them on their travels and in their daily routines. However, not all the stories of distant lands are reassuring as those too fearful, weak or lazy to set out on the troublesome journey need to come up with counter-narratives of places of danger and despair – "of rivers and swamps too wild and wide to cross, impenetrable and gloomy forests, dusty and waterless plains, and ridges sharper than a knife" (Crace, 2007, p. 43) – to justify their inertia. Even the rational and realistic Jackson and Franklin place their hopes on finding a friendlier and more welcoming place to live, though upon hearing all their fellow travellers' stories Jackson sceptically notes that there must be "at least a hundred different lands beyond the river. And none of them strikes [him] as likely" (Crace, 2007, p. 44).

No matter how important these stories of perfect places are for their tellers, Crace also shows that they are primarily constructed by men, and as such they tend to emphasize exterior

aspects, such as physical effort, work and material provisions. As the societies in *The Pesthouse* are strictly patriarchal, the women's narratives are not heard in public, yet the reader can learn of one when Margaret, terrified and hiding from rapists in a forest, pictures her own imaginary place:

...a place of greater safety, but not outside America. There were no salt-water boats or any gulls. There was no Promised Land. Her place of greater safety was a soddy on a hill. She could envisage dying there, an ancient girl, her hair as long as the bed beneath her, with hands – more hands than she could count – in touch with her, and faces she could recognize and name, all saying *Margaret, sweet Margaret, you loved us and we loved you in return.* (Crace, 2007, p. 167, emphasis original)

Her imaginary place is much more interior, permeated with human intimacy. It is not a place of stark contrast to the world she comes from, but one of simple familiarity and continuity, somewhere that may not exist too far away. In fact, the distance to such a place is not physically measurable as it involves the otherness of another person and calls for a resurgence of the basic human values of kindness, tolerance and compassion. It is only when Franklin adopts this vision as his own that the couple can truly embark on their journey towards happiness and freedom.

Crace shows how the landscape becomes infused with volatile and changeable meanings that the travellers attribute to it on the basis of their current prospects and expectations. Overlooking Ferrytown from Butter Hill, Franklin sees it as a place of comfort and rest, its river and lake as a grand gateway to a brighter future, glinting like a pendant on a silver chain. However, this changes overnight when the poisonous fumes from the slip in the lake turn the village and its surroundings into “the habitation of the dead” (Crace, 2007, p. 70), and when Franklin and Margaret descend the hill they find themselves in a place of pain and misery as they come across one corpse after another, including the whole of Margaret's family. The narration depicts this walk in silence with careful description of the found dead people, the exact positions of their limbs and bodies, and their facial expressions. Franklin does not find his brother's corpse, and the whole experience is particularly devastating for Margaret who is left with no hope of finding any surviving relative, moreover, because of the fear that what killed the people of Ferrytown could be contagious, she has only a very little time to come to terms with the situation and just manages to close the eyes and mouths of the dead and say a few “simple words of the burial lament to herself” (Crace, 2007, p. 73). Such an experience can easily provoke trauma which “is not locatable as a single, healable event” (Letissier, 2009, p. 211) in an individual's past, but stems from “the *missing* of this experience”, from not being experienced *in time*” (Caruth, 1996, p. 62, emphasis original). The traumatic event is too abrupt

and overwhelming for Margaret to even weep and mourn, and the only emotion she feels is that of misguided guilt that it was her flux that caused this catastrophe. Fleeing the land of ghosts, the once comfortingly glittering river and lake are now a mere inconvenience in their way, to be passed over as quickly as possible.

The novel also shows that the perception of a space/place may be substantially different for an observer than for a traveller. Once they get to the eastern shore of the lake a natural scenery so splendid opens up before them that Franklin admits he has “never seen a spot more beautiful” (Crace, 2007, p. 93). Yet this enthusiasm soon falters as they discover that in practical terms its terrain is very difficult to travel through for a person with a heavy barrow who struggles to wheel it through the slushy mix of mud and leaves. And so despite the undeniable charm of the landscape portrayed by Crace the keen “amateur natural historian” (bookgroup.info, 2007),

These wetlands, silt-rich forests – a mixture of chestnuts, marsh oaks, maples and hickories, which at this time of the year were exchanging green for oranges and reds – were distended with water and, therefore, so fertile and tightly undergrown in places that not even a mule could pass. What might look from a distance like startled outstretched hands were antlers of pink lichen, a breathtaking and a magical sight, especially in this dusk, with the sun finding angles through the hammock to pick out strips of foliage and blaze its reflection in puddles. (Crace, 2007, pp. 94-95)

the two mournful pilgrims are indifferent to the beauty around them: frail Margaret, overwhelmed with sorrow and fatigue, and Franklin, preoccupied with pulling the barrow through the dense forests, and wishing for more open countryside that would allow more speedy progress. The combination of his grief for a lost brother, compassion for Margaret’s family and exhaustion from labouring with the cargo weighs on Franklin and makes him weep secretly, an indisposition he immediately associates with the place, feeling “as inundated as the landscape he was pushing through” (Crace, 2007, p. 96).

The situation changes when they reach what is known among the emigrants as the Dreaming Highway – a wide and straight road leading to the coast. The narration then presents an ultimately different kind of landscape, a man-made construct built with a clear purpose:

...an unnaturally shallow, flat valley without a river but flanked by parallel mounds as regular as the best-plowed furrow – except that no plow was big enough [...] to throw aside so great a swath of earth. Initially, they were merely baffled. This was no escarpment provided by nature, unless nature had on this one occasion broken its own rules and failed to twist and bend, but had instead hurtled forward, all symmetry and parallels. (Crace, 2007, pp. 110-111)

Ironically for Franklin, the spacious road in effect brings them the opposite of what he hoped for. Lured by the thought of easier progression, he dismisses Margaret's legitimate worries that such open ground will leave them exposed and vulnerable. When a gang of bandits rob them and take Franklin away as a captive, Margaret is left alone to continue along the highway with complete strangers. Once again, the landscape she passes through is one of pain and desperation: first, the deserted road scattered with dreadful evidence of the highwaymen's violent raids – abandoned overthrown carts, the bodies of raped and murdered women, the carcasses of cattle and domestic animals; later, the camp at the outskirts of Tidewater, transformed out of necessity into a makeshift market where the journeymen waiting desperately to board a ship are trying to make a living to survive the impending winter; and, finally, the Tidewater estuary where a vast majority of the refugees are rejected as passengers for an overseas voyage. Margaret's disappointment and frustration is thus naturally projected into the seascape, and so is Franklin's after they reunite – the ocean is no longer viewed as a longed-for pathway to freedom and prosperity, but as a hostile, unpredictable amorphous mass – ungenerous, wearying, leaden, hard-surfaced, lacking in expression (Crace, 2007, pp. 236-246) – an obstacle, safe and promising only when imagined, and therefore “best as a memory or as a prospect” (Crace, 2007, p. 284).

The fact that a traveller's mind maps and simultaneously is mapped by the landscape is shown on their way back west. Having learnt from their past mistakes, Franklin and Margaret avoid the main routes and contact with the homesteaders, keeping to the unpeopled back ways. Their pace may be slower, but they in fact feel more comfortable as the landscape and places they journey through are for them infused with positive meanings: since they are no longer fleeing misery and devastation but heading towards renewal and happiness, all the difficulties they have to cope with this time seem “natural and inevitable” because they “no longer fe[el] defeated by America” (Crace, 2007, p. 287). And so although they travel through forests and marches as impassable as on the way eastwards, their perception of the landscape is very different:

Otherwise, the journey back proved kinder than their journey out had done. It was as if the country that had once been hostile to them was regretful for it, and was now providing recompense – fewer dangers, warmer nights, softer going in a season that was opening up rather than closing down. It even decorated the way with early flowers. (Crace, 2007, p. 290)

Their feeling of security and confidence is further reinforced by the familiarity of the places beyond the river. What once was a landscape of trauma and pain is now one of reconciliation. Even though Ferrytown is still a destroyed place Margaret has enough time to mourn and weep over the cremation of her family and remember the most precious intimate moments from her childhood, an essential act to enable a successful coming to terms with her traumatic experience and prevent the recurrence of its most obtrusive haunting symptoms, such as hallucinations and nightmares.

### **The doomed turned blessed – heterotopic places**

In the heterogeneous space of the novel's American landscape Franklin and Margaret stop at and inhabit a number of places, which are mostly unrelated in character as what only randomly connects them is that they are situated on the two pilgrims' trajectory to the sea and then back homewards. Some of these places are experienced only fleetingly and are abandoned before they can become part of the protagonists' mental space, such as the derelict factory where they are assaulted by the bandits or the refugee camp at Tidewater. Others are suffused with more positive meanings and emotions, namely the off-track cabin they stay in after Franklin is freed from slavery and they have escaped their pursuers. However, two places in the novel are particularly noteworthy as they are essentially heterotopic in nature and prove crucial for the protagonists' good fortune – the Blessed Ark and the Pesthouse. Heterotopia, as Michel Foucault defines it, is a place of otherness, a place both physical and mental, real and imaginary. It is a kind of counter-place where "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (1986, p. 24). These counter-places exist in and outside of time, as well as inside and outside of other places: although they can be found in space-time, that is in temporal chronology and geographical location, they are rather "linked to slices of time" (Foucault, 1986, p. 26) and assume meanings that transcend their territorial boundaries. Heterotopias are therefore places that display a multiplicity of heterogeneous, or even contradictory, meanings as they always also reflect and respond to other places.

Heterotopias can be of different kinds with respect to their temporal structure or their accessibility. As for the first aspect, there are heterotopias of accumulated and eternal temporal mass (such as cemeteries and museums) and those inclined to the temporary and the transient, though of regular occurrence (such as fairs and festivals). As for the latter, though they can be physically accessed, heterotopias contain a moment of exclusion, for instance in the form of a ritual, entry procedure, password or gesture, and even those which can be accessed freely do

not grant the “trespasser” the identity of an insider, but rather that of a tolerated passing visitor. A distinction between heterotopias can also be made with regard to their relation to other places as they can function as “a space of illusion” or “a space of compensation” (Foucault, 1986, p. 27). The first are illusory, self-contained places deliberately detached from outside reality (such as music halls or erotic clubs), while the latter rely on a thorough, elaborate organization and clear hierarchy and thus render outside reality elusive and disorderly (such as religious communities and sects).

The Blessed Ark is a typical example of a heterotopia as it is a place which reflects outside places by contesting them and inverting them. Although it is located in Tidewater, it is in fact an isolated social and geographic unit other than the rest of the town, a place in its own right, self-sustaining and self-governing, with its own strict rules, laws and hierarchies established by the religious community of the Finger Baptists, a highly ordered sanctuary in the chaotic and lawless world. It also stands outside of conventional time as its temporal rhythms are determined by observing the regular duties of communal work and religious practices and rituals. The Ark is thus a heterotopia of accumulated temporal mass, layering new slices of time onto ancient ones to which they bear strong structural resemblance. To be allowed in, one needs to undergo an entry procedure, a cleansing ritual of a kind, in the form of giving up all metallic objects as the Baptists believe that metal is the devil’s work and causes greed and violence. Within the novel’s narrative framework, the Ark functions as a “space of compensation”, a healing oasis which proves crucial for the restoration of Margaret’s trauma-stricken, destabilized identity manifested in a feeling of “disconnection and isolation as bonds are broken and relationships and personal safety are put into question”, which can undermine or even destroy “important beliefs: in one’s own safety or competence to act or live in the world, one’s perception of the world as meaningful and orderly, and one’s view of oneself as decent, strong and autonomous” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 23). She finds in the Ark not only a place where she can last out the winter, but also a safe and comfortable refuge from the ruthless and opportunist outside world where she can experience what she has most missed in her life: a sense of belonging, identity and neighbourliness. It is a place of peace and routine, which enables Margaret to find out who she is and what she really desires in her life.

The central heterotopic place in the novel, however, is the eponymous Pesthouse. Crace was inspired by the stone quarantine station on the island of St. Helens, one of the Isles of Scilly which lie about 30 miles off the coast of Cornwall, where all ships approaching the British isles were obliged to abandon passengers with any sign of contagion by an Act of Parliament in the 1760s (Biblio Blog, 2007). In the novel, the Pesthouse, located on Butter Hill above Ferrytown,

is the place where any villager who is ill with a contagious disease is supposed to be taken by their relatives and left to the mercy of fate. Like the Ark, it is a site in and outside of time and place: a timeless shelter in which the past and the future lose their relevance and only the present matters; a place which technically belongs to the village but is deliberately isolated from it, a self-contained unit detached from the community's physical and mental space. It is also a place of accumulated history consisting of the individual fates and stories of those quarantined there heaped one upon another. Although the boulder hut can be accessed freely, the outsider, that is a healthy person, is in the position of an uninvolved visitor who cannot utilize its proper purpose. Although Margaret is taken there by her grandfather to get rid of her flux at the beginning of the story, in the inverted world of the novel the function and meaning of the Pesthouse gets inverted as well.

The process of this inversion begins when Franklin peeps into the hut and catches sight of a young woman with a shaven head lying asleep on the bed. He interprets this not as a horror story whose threat must be avoided by taking immediate flight, but almost as a fairy tale in which the prince finds his sleeping beauty and brings her back to life through the magic of his fingers. The fact that Franklin refuses to take the Pesthouse as what it is supposed to be – a house of contagion, suffering and isolation – opens this originally enclosed site to new meanings, and it gradually becomes a place of restoration for both Margaret and Franklin. They attribute these positive meanings to the Pesthouse on their way back home as the place is already infused with pleasant memories of Margaret's recuperation, surviving the disaster that afflicted Ferrytown, and the earliest moments of their affection, and these are further intensified by the place's soothing familiarity:

It hadn't changed, despite the bare branches and blanched-out colors of the undergrowth. It was still a little warmer than the hillside path, its dips and hollows protected from the worst of the wind. It still appeared the safest acre in America, a place of remedy and recovery where, surely, they could at least spend the night, or spend the month or spend eternity. (Crace, 2007, p. 306)

Although they use the boulder hut for a completely new purpose, the month they stay there may actually be understood as a kind of quarantine for them in the sense that they can shake off the disagreeable germs of the world they have returned from and its dominating values: callousness, self-interest and indifference. After this symbolic purification they are ready to move on in search of their new home "in some old place, some territory begging to be used" (Crace, 2007, p. 309), begging to become the real-and-imagined place of their common future.

## Conclusion

The world portrayed in *The Pesthouse* offers fruitful material for a spatial critical approach, in particular a geocritical one. First of all, it represents a highly heterogeneous space in which all regulations, regularities and hierarchies have collapsed and been replaced by lawlessness, disorder and displacement, and in which the vector-like, arranged lines of force and operation have broken down into a profusion of disparate points that can only be connected by unpredictable and contingent convoluted patterns. It is an entropic system which is teeming with diverse stories, and narratives as meanings in such a turbulent state are not firmly tied to material realities, spatial ones included, but are unstable and rather float free of their potential referents. Accordingly, representation of this transgressive space in permanent motion is far from stable, is essentially fluid as it is determined by the volatility of meanings and perceptions. As Crace's America lacks any specific, real-life geographical referent it is the novel's discourse, or, more precisely, its narrative, that establishes the "more-imaginary-than-real" spaces/places whose correlation with the real is rather loose and indirect, as in the case of the pesthouse: what correlates is the function and perhaps the size of the hut, but the fictional quarantine station differs in all other respects, particularly in its location and appearance. Crace's depiction of the landscape and places also endorses the principles of multifocalization, though only two points of view are offered, and polysensorality, since he likes to employ a combination of visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile images.

Because the protagonists progress across the country and experience various kinds of spaces, the novel is an example of a threefold mapping narrative: the characters map the terrain both physically, by their movement, and mentally by the processes of its apprehension, interpretation and appropriation; the narration maps their progress by placing their lived experience of place and space in the larger, and more abstract, spatiotemporal network of the novel's socio-historical context of a dystopian, regressed America; and, eventually, readers are invited to map these mapped fictitious places and make them part of their interpretive and experiential frameworks. *The Pesthouse* pays specific attention to the interconnectedness of physical landscapes and how these are reflected by and projected in the human psyche, namely with regard to Franklin and Margaret. It shows how the same spatial environment can enter different kinds of relationship with the travellers' mental universe depending on their state of mind – their feelings, emotions and moods – and how real-and-imagined landscapes of trauma and pain can change, along with the recipients' inner transformation, into those of hope and consolation. Moreover, it also demonstrates how the distorted world of inverted norms and

values allows certain heterotopic places, the Pesthouse especially, to assume meanings and interpretations different from and even contrary to their original one. This can be taken as part of the entropic process of gaining momentum that would enable the society's evolvement into a new, better functioning organism. Within this transformation Franklin, Margaret and their adopted child, Jackie, thus turn from being "the final family on earth" (Crace, 2007, p. 300) into its first, founding one.

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