



The Representational Impasse of Post-Apocalyptic Fiction: The Pesthouse by Jim Crace

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“Some times theres mor in the emty paper nor there is when you get the writing down on it. You try to word the big things and they tern ther backs on you” (Hoban 2002: 161), writes the eponymous protagonist of Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* (1980) in his ungrammatical post-apocalyptic English. Jim Crace seems to have followed this advice, as *The Pesthouse* (2007) never hints at the nature and causes of the apocalyptic event, resisting every attempt of the readers to decipher what happened.¹ The apocalypse remains unspecified, a gap in the story.

The present article contends that this narrative choice depends on a representational impasse which makes the depiction of the apocalypse and its aftermath impossible and which post-apocalyptic fiction has to address, in order to grant its own existence. A theoretical discussion of the impasse, divided, for the purposes of a more detailed analysis, into two dilemmas, is followed by an outline of

¹ In what follows I will use ‘Event’ with capital E as a synonym of ‘apocalypse’, in turn understood in the contemporary sense of eschatological catastrophe, rather than in its etymological meaning of revelation.



how *The Pesthouse* engages with this unrepresentability through the devices of the absent referent and temporal inversion.

THE REPRESENTATIONAL IMPASSE

What defines the apocalypse is its uniqueness, its intensity and scale, the vastness of its consequences, and the fact of being totally unprecedented. The apocalypse can be thus identified by its radical otherness from anything human beings may have experienced before. This same characteristic, though, makes the apocalypse and its aftermath, if there is any, unimaginable and unrepresentable: it constitutes a representational impasse.

According to the definition above, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction should be the writing of alterity, it should depict the end of the world we know, followed by either a new world order or total annihilation. However, as James Berger underlines, "it is impossible to write absolute alterity. The other can only be inscribed in an already existing discourse" (1999: 13). This epistemological impossibility is what Fredric Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future* terms "the Unknowability Thesis": human beings cannot really imagine and represent the radical Other – whether this is utopia, alien life, the future, or, in the context of this paper, the apocalypse and its aftermath – but they can only look at themselves "in a mirror" (Jameson 2007: 111), that is, they can only represent what they already know.

Our conceptual frameworks, thus, cannot account for a singularity that should bring about, if not a complete end, at least a profound reorganization of reality, and consequently a reorganization of the conceptual tools needed to describe it.² Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives are therefore inherently impossible, and yet these two subjects hold such a fascination – and dread – on mankind that there have always existed stories dealing with them. These tales cannot truly be about this absolute Event and its aftermath, but they can solely approximate and inevitably trivialise it, generally by borrowing elements from actual catastrophes and magnifying them. The strategies deployed by post-apocalyptic novels will be further examined in the following pages, thanks to the analysis of the two dilemmas in which the representational impasse can be broken down.

The first of these dilemmas depends on a temporal aporia which complicates the relationship between the apocalypse and narration. The Event, in its singularity, stands outside the time of history, disrupting the linear succession of events from past to

² The term "singularity" here is used purposefully, as it commonly qualifies the Big Bang, black holes, and the hypothetical future emergence of a superhuman intellect through technology, all events which cause the breakdown of our current theories and frameworks and are, strictly speaking, unrepresentable, unless through extreme simplifications which cannot really express the complexity of these phenomena.



present and to future, perhaps once and for all.³ Let us not forget that in Christian theology the apocalypse is a teleological conception, signifying the end of history and of time. However, this means that, strictly speaking, the Event and its aftermath cannot be emplotted, since narratives are essentially temporal forms of representation which generally rely on the time of history. The first dilemma, therefore, allows us to specify that the representational impasse consists in the problem of recounting a radical temporal alterity, or an alterity which might as well be completely non-temporal and, therefore, utterly non-narrative.

While it is structurally impossible for a novel to depict a timeless world, post-apocalyptic fiction, in order to approximate the conception of the apocalypse as the end of time, often suggests that after the Event time has lost its meaning and relevance.⁴ On the other hand, to allude to the ahistorical time of the singularity, these novels experiment with counter-narratives to the Western paradigm of a linear time which is to be recounted through history, such as cyclical temporalities and plots.⁵ Our common understanding of time can also be undermined by not providing any clear information about how the post-apocalyptic world came to be and by depicting a society mostly oblivious of its past, as in *The Pesthouse*. Alternative temporalities to the present one obviously communicate to the readers a sense of apocalyptic change as well, which brings us to the second dilemma.

This touches more directly upon the problem of representing the aftermath of the Event. Writers have to find a balance between the absolute, but unrepresentable, annihilation associated with the term apocalypse in contemporary usage, and a more limited, hence representable, catastrophe, which cannot be *too* limited in its consequences. The apocalypse, if truly complete in its devastation, might easily be described as the ultimate iconoclastic concept that simply proves to be utterly beyond our abilities as image-makers and story-tellers, because it has to do with the notion of an absolute end. This thought is as ungraspable for human beings as their own individual death, since it implies the non-existence of the same subject who is supposed to formulate it.

To consider the issue from a different perspective, if the apocalyptic destruction was indeed total, there would be no one left capable of representing and, therefore,

³ Cf. "*le temps de l'événement n'est pas le temps de l'histoire*" (Derrida, Soussana, and Nouss 2001: 3. Italics in original). *Dire l'événement, est-ce possible ?*, with contributions by Jacques Derrida, Gad Soussana and Alexis Nouss, questions the possibility of telling the event. 'Event' is taken in this text in the most general sense, as what comes totally unexpected, perceived as impossible before it actually takes place (Derrida, Soussana, and Nouss 2001: 96) and as what risks being effaced in its ahistorical singularity the moment it enters the iterative processes of language and narration (*ibid.*: 53, 98) – all elements that can be applied to the notion of apocalypse.

⁴ See, for instance, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003).

⁵ See, for instance, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007).



no post-apocalyptic novel. That is why there is no absolute end of the world in post-apocalyptic fiction, but only the end of a world, of a certain reality. The destructive range of the apocalypse is reduced, so that “what invariably structures narratives of apocalypse is the logic of the near-miss: near-universal annihilation with just enough life left intact [...] to guarantee a reasonable likelihood of a new beginning” (Lisboa 2011: xxv).

Yet, even though the apocalypse is, so to speak, neutralized in its destructive potential, post-apocalyptic narratives must convey an impression of significant change – where would the apocalyptic element lie otherwise? Here is where the device of temporal inversion, that is, representing the future world as a return to the past, intervenes in post-apocalyptic fiction. Since the master narrative of Western civilization is progress, temporal inversion, by abruptly interrupting and reversing this narrative, is symptomatic of an apocalyptic discontinuity to the reader. At the same time, this discontinuity is not so radical as to be unrepresentable since after all, temporal inversion makes use of elements from past societies. The rest of this article explores Crace’s ways of dealing with the representational impasse in *The Pesthouse*.

THE APOCALYPSE AS ABSENT REFERENT IN *THE PESTHOUSE*

The Pesthouse tells the story of two travellers, Margaret and Franklin, who are heading towards the East Coast of a post-apocalyptic America. The country is emptying, as its inhabitants, reversing the “tide of history” (Crace 2007: 21) and the myth of Manifest Destiny, try to emigrate eastwards hoping to reach wealthier countries across the ocean.⁶ Contrary to what one might expect, it is not the apocalyptic catastrophe but, more banally perhaps, a widespread impoverishment which is to blame for this mass migration. The apocalyptic disaster, in fact, happened a long time ago, so long that the memory of it appears now to be completely lost. However, whilst in its radical alterity the apocalypse cannot but remain inaccessible to language and narrative, Crace manages to include it in his fiction indirectly, since other events, objects and images point to this missing piece in the story, thus also contributing to stress its unrepresentability. The apocalypse is therefore absent and yet uncannily present in Crace’s novel, it is an absent referent.⁷

On a large scale, the fictional existence of this future world is already for the reader indicative of the apocalypse. The “tide of history” has reversed in more than one sense: instead of scientific reason, we find superstition and storytelling; instead of technology, a pre-industrial society. As Crace himself puts it in an interview, *The Pesthouse* is set in a “medieval future” (Lawless 2005), consonant with the typical post-

⁶ All further references to *The Pesthouse* in parentheses.

⁷ I owe the expression “absent referent” to Berger, who uses it to argue that the Shoah is in Derrida’s work “an absent, or repressed, historical referent” (1999: 108).



apocalyptic *topos* of temporal inversion. Hence, the novel is immediately identified as post-apocalyptic, even though there is no mention of the Event. On a smaller scale, single elements and details hint at the absent referent of the apocalypse, above all the initial disaster.

The Pesthouse opens *in medias res*: “Everybody died at night” (1). What is narrated at the beginning of the story, though, is not the apocalyptic event but a landslide that, by falling into a lake, releases toxic gases and kills all the people sleeping in the wealthy Ferrytown, while sparing Margaret and Franklin, who are at the eponymous pesthouse just outside the village.⁸ It is clearly revealing that a text which does not represent the apocalypse, should feature a disaster, as if the author is trying to address the representational limits concerning the Event by focussing on a different but still highly destructive catastrophe. The landslide can arguably be interpreted as an icon of the Event, in Charles Sanders Peirce’s terms, in that its characteristics appear to point to those of the absent apocalypse.⁹

First of all, the position of this natural disaster at the very beginning of the novel underlines its connection with the absent apocalypse, as it is suggestive of a double function related to the notion of origin. The landslide is the origin of the love story between Margaret and Franklin and of their journey, thus triggering the whole narrative.¹⁰ At the same time, it inevitably hints at the unrepresented genesis of this post-apocalyptic world, the Event. Secondly, it is significant that the landslide should strike this rich town, which has made a fortune out of the emigrants’ need to cross the river, exactly as the apocalypse seemingly wrecked only America, one of the most prosperous countries of our times. Thirdly, this natural disaster apocalyptically decrees the end of a world, that of the village, since no one survives. Finally, the two most evident characteristics of the catastrophe, its suddenness and invisibility, also point to the Event.

The landslide hits the town when everybody is asleep, “unwarned” (1), hence recalling the apocalypse, which can only take us by surprise in its radical alterity. The suddenness of the natural disaster is actually described in terms that clearly signify the absent referent: the landslide may have been unexpected but people should have been prepared for it anyway, since they have experienced worse things – that is, the Event – and “how could anyone not know by now how mischievous the world could be?” (2). As for the invisibility of the disaster, the poisonous gases form a cloud which hits Ferrytown “without a sound and almost *without a shape*” (7. Emphasis mine). Even

⁸ In writing about this catastrophe Crace was inspired by a similar event, which happened in Cameroon, at Lake Nyos, in 1986.

⁹ According to Peirce, “if we come to interpret a sign as standing for its object in virtue of some shared quality, then the sign is an icon” (Atkin 2010).

¹⁰ In the disaster of Ferrytown Margaret loses all her family and Franklin his brother, Jackson, with whom he had started his migration. Left alone, the two protagonists, who are falling in love with each other, decide to travel together towards the East Coast.



the deathly effects of the toxic air are not actually depicted but are only alluded to through suspension dots (6-7), which symbolize the abrupt end of these people's lives and thoughts, whilst also indicating the limits of language and narrative in relation to the Event. Franklin is the "only living witness" to the "lake coming to the boil" (33) but he does not understand what he sees and, even when he is later confronted with the dead people in the town, he does not connect what he has just witnessed to this desolation. The corpses are unmarked, "seemingly untouched" (67), as is the village, so that Margaret and Franklin cannot find any explanation for what surrounds them. The devastating effects of the natural catastrophe are opaque signs for the two characters, who cannot see through them, interpret them correctly, and thus get to the true cause of this carnage. To Margaret and Franklin the disaster remains invisible, i.e. unrepresented and unrepresentable, like the apocalypse to the reader. The landslide can thus be read as the icon of the Event, for both catastrophes are origins, they hit comparable entities, and they share the characteristics of mighty destruction, suddenness and invisibility.

Not only is the landslide a substitutive representation for an Event which is inherently unrepresentable, but it is directly linked to the first dilemma. In the opening chapters Crace manifestly complicates the concept of history, understood as a linear temporal sequence, in order to allude to the temporality of the apocalypse. The story moves continuously back and forth, revolving around the singular moment of the landslide, thanks to a third-person omniscient narrator who unifies the various strands.¹¹ The natural disaster is thus amplified, which can only suggest, once again, that its importance in the economy of the narrative lies beyond its role as a catalyst for the love story between the two protagonists.

The opening section of the novel, entirely consisting of the account of the landslide and the consequent deaths in Ferrytown, is, tellingly, unnumbered. Functioning as the double origin of the story, it is the moment which stands out from the temporal chain – represented by the numbered sequence of the chapters – in the ahistorical absolute singularity typical of the Event and of the origin itself, which makes the time of history begin. This confirms the iconic relationship, as discussed above, between the landslide and the apocalypse. It is also the moment to which the opening chapters keep returning, showing what happens to different people when the landslide hits and soon before it, while providing, through analepses, background details on the main characters and on the post-apocalyptic situation.

From the first chapter up to the fifth, the narrative follows a similar structure: focussing on Franklin, or Jackson, or Margaret, every section begins a few hours before the disaster, backs further away from it thanks to the flashbacks, and then progresses

¹¹ A similar narrative structure has already been used by Crace in the earlier *Being Dead* (1999). In this book almost all the chapters go back to the day of Celice and Joseph's deaths, the events which trigger the plot.



in the story to finish around the instant the landslide hits. The choice of verbal tenses reflects this temporal alternation: the past perfect of the beginning of each section, always retracing its steps back from the moment on which the previous chapter ends, gradually gives way to the simple past, the predominant tense in the novel. From the fifth chapter, instead, the text moves to the days after the natural disaster and a linear narrative is resumed.

These opening sections are written in a mixture of analepses and what, following Elizabeth Ermath's lead, might be defined as "paratactic narrative". This latter style "moves forward by moving sideways. Emphasizing what is parallel and synchronically patterned rather than what is linear and progressive" (Ermath 1992: 85). Ermath ascribes paratactic narrative to the crisis of history and representational time, which she sees as typical of postmodernism. Arguably though, as the first dilemma suggests, Crace is alluding to the Event, unrepresentable because it transcends history and linear time, precisely by complicating these notions through paratactic narrative. The non-linearity and the fragmentation of the story, moreover, underline the disruptive consequences of the landslide and of the apocalypse to which this points.

Besides the Event, the other striking missing piece in Crace's novel is the lack of an explicit juxtaposition between an overview of the pre-apocalyptic world, that is, the readers' present, and the post-apocalyptic future. The comparison between the two generally lies at the heart of the readers' imaginative investments in post-apocalyptic fiction, since it allows them to relate to what is narrated. By connecting the present to the fictional pre-apocalyptic pasts, a didactic function is performed, as readers are encouraged to think critically about their own world in order to avoid a catastrophe. Yet, whilst the pre-apocalyptic world is not completely absent in *The Pesthouse* – it would be impossible to qualify the novel as post-apocalyptic if it were so – it does not have a fully-fledged narrative role. Rather, it is only hinted at through a few relics, treated by the characters in an ahistorical way. All possible explanations connecting the past to the present are, in fact, deliberately omitted and the pre-apocalyptic world remains for the characters merely a trace, devoid of any significance. On the one hand, this suggests the temporal alterity of this post-apocalyptic world, coherently with the first dilemma. On the other hand, though, to the historically-minded reader, these few remains of the past cannot but point to the unrepresented apocalypse, following the logic of the absent referent.

In *The Pesthouse* the past is suggested only by a few objects and places, surrounded by an aura of atavistic superstition. When the "antiquity" (119) appears to go too much against nature, awe and uneasiness triumph: the "Dreaming Highway" is simply too unnatural to be safe (110-1) and the "massive symmetry" of the old waste must be "the craziest work of men, or of something worse than men" (261). The sect of the Finger Baptists, which gives refuge to Margaret when Franklin is kidnapped by a gang of rustlers, even considers metal as "the Devil's work. Metal is the cause of greed and war" (184). That is why every person seeking to enter the sect's quarters has to



leave their metallic possessions outside. It is also indicative that the twenty Helpless Gentlemen, namely those at the head of the Baptist community, do not use their hands at all – hence the name of *Finger* Baptists. Hands, the main means with which the *homo faber* builds his tools and his technologies, “do Devil’s work” (192) like metal. The Helpless Gentlemen’s aversion to metal and technology appears to suggest a lingering fear of the long forgotten causes of the apocalypse and the resistance to the ideology of progress, which most probably led to the Event in the first place.

Crace’s narrative, however, refuses to make an overt connection with the apocalypse, thus exhibiting an ahistorical approach. The people of *The Pesthouse* know that there existed a different America – they see its traces – but they seem to ignore how this came to an end and how their medieval world came to be. No written accounts of the earlier period have survived and the oral tradition about the era is extremely limited. There are only confused rumors about cities with “sky-high buildings” (241) but nothing about why they do not exist anymore. No trace of the Event is to be found in collective memory, whereas in post-apocalyptic fiction, especially when the story is set a long time after the disaster, the apocalypse is generally preserved in myths and tales. The disappearance of the readers’ present is perceived by the characters simply as part of a natural process, and not as the consequence of something extraordinary, to be remembered, like the apocalypse. This surely implies a critique of mankind’s technological hubris, since its achievements are now useless debris made “by a race of fools” who “ha[ve] lost their grip on the world” (262), but it also undermines the notion of history.

History is based precisely on the preservation of significant events and on intelligible links of cause-effect between them. Historical time is homogeneous and continuous since it “maintain [s] the communication between past, present and future, and thus the possibility of causal sequences from one to another” (Ermath 1992: 28). The characters of *The Pesthouse*, instead, do not seem to perceive the past of the “antiquities” as continuous with their present, as something that can be put in relation. Rather, these times appear discontinuous, as typical of a medieval conception of time (Ermath 1983: 11). When Crace defines the world of *The Pesthouse* as pre-modern (Tew 2006: 195), therefore, he is not only referring to the lack of technologies and science, but he is also inevitably bringing up the alternative temporality exhibited in the novel. Arguably, as illustrated by the first dilemma, this is, too, a way of alluding to the radical temporal alterity of the Event, which, in its singularity, brings about a disruption in the continuum of history.

Crace’s readership, however, is living in a world which is informed by history and its engagement with the novel cannot but be framed by this way of conceiving time. That is why, when presented with objects strikingly similar to those of the present, but littering a landscape which is hardly the future the readers can expect according to a continuous view of history, they try to fill the void in the narrative. The only possible connection between the present and the fictional future, though, is an Event that



affects mankind so deeply that previous conceptual frameworks, including a continuous and progressive history, no longer hold. The novel, therefore, comes to be defined by two absences, that of the apocalypse and that of a historical narration, which are inherently connected, as the latter inevitably points to the former.

AN AMBIVALENT DOUBLE TEMPORAL INVERSION

As has been argued in the first section, temporal inversion provides a solution to the problem of representing a future which, in its radical alterity, would otherwise be unimaginable, while conveying at the same time the impression of an apocalyptic change in human evolution. Whilst the device of temporal inversion is often used to give a dystopic quality to life after the Event, Crace orchestrates a more nuanced version of the aftermath than the unilaterally ravaged and hopeless scenarios presented by other writers. In fact, it will be maintained that the novel exhibits a dialectic between utopia and dystopia¹².

Crace draws on what Kim Selling defines as the polarization between two popular images of the medieval era, “the dark and dirty Middle Ages, and the preindustrial Golden Age of Myth” (2004: 214). On the one hand, the temporal inversion depicted in *The Pesthouse* definitely marks a dystopian decline, given the implicit contrast between this fictional future and the readers’ present. *The Pesthouse* makes the end of the world order dominated by the USA tangible and it represents the once mighty nation as insecure, depopulating, impoverished, subject to pestilences, lacking technologies and prone to superstition. If these elements provide “an implied critique of America’s new imperium with its hubristic sense of power and authority” (Tew 2006: 197), they also closely recall a neo-medieval atmosphere.

At the same time, though, what Kim Moreland terms the “medievalist impulse” functions in Crace’s novel also in a different, and more utopian, way. The Middle Ages can become a mythical object of nostalgia, the epitome of a better age, opposed to the decadence of the modern world. In medieval revivals the values of this era, especially chivalry and courtly love, are seen as offering “a positive alternative to the problems inherent in a technological society” (Moreland 1996: 11). Thus, in opposition to one of the recurring features of temporal inversion, where the disaster usually marks the awakening of brutish human nature, the world of *The Pesthouse* is no

¹² Caroline Edwards identifies a “dialectic between optimism and pessimism” which “settles around the crucial unknowability of the utopian destination that lies across the ocean” and the migrants’ storytelling practices (2009: 776). The present section, instead, frames these mythopoeic productions as part of a broader dialectical movement, that between utopia and dystopia, centered around the nature of the novel’s temporal inversion and, hence, of the fictional post-apocalyptic world itself.



Hobbesian state of nature. On the contrary, the ethics of “the Golden Obligation” (47) and traditional values structure social relationships in *The Pesthouse*. As Tew suggests, these values evidently point to deficiencies of the readers’ present (2006: 195) and the same holds for the conception of love found in the novel, which is close to the romantic idealization of *les chansons de geste*. Although Franklin is no knight in a shining armour – on several occasions he is described as weak, timid and childish – his courtship of Margaret is definitely chivalric, considering, too, that their love remains chaste throughout the story. The author, through the representation of this neo-medieval society, seems at first sight to be exalting a past way of life. However, in the typical movement between utopia and dystopia subtending the novel, it is not entirely so. If this way of life was that desirable, people would not try to emigrate: these are “pressured times when conventions and proprieties d[o]n’t count for much” (102).

It is mostly the glorious depictions of nature and its opposition to the residues of the pre-disaster world which point to a nostalgic and utopian strand in Crace’s use of medievalism.¹³ In fact, in medieval revivals a recurring element is the fantasy of an almost prelapsarian, more authentic pastoral world, in which man’s relationship with the environment is not yet mediated by intrusive technology. In *The Pesthouse* nature has mostly succeeded in obliterating America’s pre-apocalyptic history. The highway, for instance, is “much degraded by weather and time” (115) and by a river. There remain only a few areas, the “jungle”, Crace’s take on the trope of the wasteland, in which the past resurfaces with its potential for destruction: nothing grows in them because the soil is poisoned. To save their earthly paradise from these pre-apocalyptic residues and from a relapse into “best-forgotten practices” (192), the Finger Baptists strenuously fight man’s technological impulses. Yet, the satirical depiction of the sect, fanatically rejecting everything metallic – even buttons, or children’s toys – renders this pastoral idyll more problematic. The community of the Ark is *imposing* on its inhabitants a strict and vexing return to nature which doubles that forced on them by the apocalyptic event. No migrant truly believes, that is, freely chooses, the ridiculous rules of the sect, but everyone has to abide in order to survive the winter and then, hopefully, sail away. This shows that the pastoral fantasy of *The Pesthouse* is not uncomplicatedly utopian as it might appear. Moreover, the sect’s impositions turn out to be useless as, despite its name, the Ark fails to provide a safe place of refuge and is raided by the rustlers. Violence finds a way into this virtually technology-free world, thus decreeing the definitive failure of this “utopian” community.

It is worth noting that the agrarian world of *The Pesthouse* is reminiscent not only of the Middle Ages but also recalls the later American pioneer era, with the interesting reversal that the characters are actually escaping from the USA rather than settling down. According to Tew as a matter of fact “Crace researched variously for the

¹³ Nature has always been a “characterized presence” (Tew 2006: 6) in Crace’s prose and the dichotomy natural-artificial is the protagonist of one of Crace’s earlier novels, *Arcadia* (1992).



novel, including details of the medieval world in Europe, of the Way West and pioneer journeys" (2006: 194). Carts and wagons, the iconic images of pioneer life, abound in this story where everybody is on the move (12, 41, 111, 264). With the ideology of Manifest Destiny long dead, the frontier for these post-apocalyptic pioneers is not the American West, but what lies beyond the ocean in the East and, since nothing is truly known about the Non-American reality, this becomes the object of the migrants' mythopoeic projections. Storytelling practices about the future overseas are numerous and contribute to the dialectic between utopia and dystopia active in the novel: the desire to emigrate, framed through utopian motifs, qualifies post-apocalyptic USA as a dystopia people desperately want to flee.

Wishing to leave a country where there is "no work or trade" (120), the emigrants imagine a utopian Cockaigne where "Hogs run through their woods ready-roasted with forks sticking out of them" (106). Naivety aside, beyond the ocean, rumor has it, there are opportunities, "land enough for everyone" and fertile soil (52), what the USA once was for the actual emigrants. There are, surely, also those who are less optimistic about what lies ahead, but, tellingly, their fears are aroused more by what could lie on the other side of the river from Ferrytown – cannibals, no boats to take them overseas, impenetrable forests, dangerous wildlife (43) – than by the countries across the ocean. Dystopia, then, lies in America and, once this is fled, "the future could begin" (6).

However, after the perilous journey, most people find out that they cannot board the ships, as these only accept strong men, single girls and rich people. The "mass utopian myth of emigration" (Edwards 2009: 770) fails. There is no way out of this post-apocalyptic reality, no revelation of a better alternative. The world lying beyond the ocean, as imagined by the migrants, remains a utopia in the etymological sense of 'nowhere' (from the Greek *ou*, not, and *topos*, place). *The Pesthouse* is hardly "a tale of the pioneering spirit" (Moore 2007) but, rather, it is about the frustration of this same spirit, as a dystopic America closes on the migrants and declines becoming "a nightmare left behind" (199).

Yet to Margaret and Franklin the impossibility of sailing away is not a defeat. The two decide to go back full circle to the pesthouse and, as Crace declares, the final pages of the novel are "unambiguously, generously optimistic" (Moore 2007). Not only do Margaret and Franklin reunite, but the last chapter opens with the woman finding again the lucky charms she had inadvertently left in the pesthouse, so that "Now good fortune showed its face" (307), and closes on the promising sentence "Going westward, they go free" (309). The concluding chapters represent the synthesis of the dialectic between utopia and dystopia active in the book.

In order to frame the passage from their initial longing for a utopian and faraway land of abundance to the final "microtopia" (Edwards 2009) of a simple "soddy on a hill" (167), it is useful to notice how Margaret and Franklin's attitudes towards the ocean are transformed in time. They too, as everybody else, begin their journey thinking that the sea will be "flat and safe" (18) "like an old friend" (145), the means to



leaving a country that does not ensure a good life anymore and entering a utopian future. Gradually, though, Margaret and Franklin's decision to go west again is anticipated by the negative direction their descriptions of the ocean take. In the turning point of the novel, Franklin "recognized [the ocean] now for what it was, an obstacle and not a route to liberty. That was a shock to realize that he did not truly want to leave America. His dream was not the future but the past" (249). The reversal undergone by the image of the sea, from utopian "route to liberty" to dystopian "obstacle", is complementary to Franklin's realization that the future he longs for is indeed his past.

The temporal inversion of *The Pesthouse* doubles up, as the couple, already living in a regressed society, return to where the story had started. This undoubtedly endows the text with a cyclical structure, a feature which is frequent in post-apocalyptic fiction. However, this cyclical structure does not mean the closing off of future possibilities, but it allows a final synthesis, with utopian possibilities being disclosed in a reality once considered dystopian. Margaret and Franklin "no longer fe[el] defeated by America" (287). On the contrary, while going back westward they appear to rediscover the country's potential and the old ideology of Manifest Destiny: the "territory [is] begging to be used" (309). Their destination is the pesthouse, the real fulcrum of this double temporal inversion and the embodiment of the final synthesis.

The pesthouse is inspired by an actual building from the eighteenth century on St. Helen's, on the Isles of Scilly, where ill people travelling to the British Isles were "quarantined and left to die" (Begley 2003). The image of the fictional pesthouse, though, is not at all reminiscent of a dystopic forced confinement and mass death. Rather, it is a utopian place "of greater safety" (167), "remedy and recovery" (306) and a recurrent dream for Franklin and for Margaret (89, 167, 200). After all, Margaret survives the flux that takes her to the pesthouse. Indeed, it is this illness that prevents her from perishing with her family in the disaster in Ferrytown and that makes her meet Franklin. It is once again the flux, or at least the visible sign of it, namely Margaret's shaven head, that saves her from the rustlers who kidnap Franklin. And on the way back west it is the young man's turn to be shaven – which once again makes the cyclical structure of the plot explicit – in order to pretend he has the flux, thus discouraging any marauder and ensuring them a journey free from harm. The pesthouse is, therefore, the very embodiment of a synthesis which finds utopian possibilities in dystopia: what historically houses death and despair here houses life and hope; what is originally the epitome of danger becomes "the safest acre in America" (306). Thanks to this image, America, which at the beginning only "used to be the safest place on earth" (7. Emphasis mine), now regains its utopian status.

A dialectical synthesis, however, is not a mere reversal. Rather, a proper synthesis maintains alive in itself the conflict from which it originates, that between thesis and antithesis. Hence, Margaret and Franklin's utopia of the pesthouse might ultimately reveal itself to be just another illusion, as the ones entertained by the hopeful



emigrants. And in fact some of these emigrants with their dreams of reaching overseas countries still intact come forth on the final page to parallel Margaret and Franklin “imagin[ing] striking out to claim a piece of long-abandoned land and making home in some old place” (309). After all, the dystopian side of this post-apocalyptic America, the one that pushed all these people to emigrate, is still there.

To conclude, it is appropriate to wonder why Crace ends the novel with Margaret and Franklin finding their utopian synthesis by retreating into their past rather than in a different future overseas. Certainly, as Caroline Edwards argues, Crace’s purpose is critical (2009: 775). Through the failure of the collective dream of emigrating overseas, he deconstructs utopian desire itself and reflects on its limits, showing how only realistic ambitions can ensure happiness. The migrants’ utopian wishes are in fact described as a “murderous and treacherous” disease (83) that needs to be cured before it transforms into its opposite, dystopia. Arguably, though, through the choice of going back to the pesthouse the book also accesses a revelatory dimension, not in the sense of revealing a better world to come after the apocalypse, as in Christian eschatology, but in the sense of “clarify[ing] and illuminat[ing] the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (Berger 1999: 5), namely the readers’ present world. Crace, in fact, declares that his purpose in *The Pesthouse* was “to learn the nature of our 21st century existence by [...] taking away those things that define the 21st century: science, technology, the abandonment of belief, etc.” (Lawless 2005).

Franklin puts his decision in interesting terms: “We can’t stay here. We can’t go forward, you say. But why can’t we go back? You’ll think me crazy, though, if I ever mention it. I think I’m crazy myself” (277). Given that in contemporary fiction the apocalypse is usually provoked by unrestrained development – be it in the form of rampant consumerism, environmental exploitations, or uncontrolled scientific developments – and given the celebration of nature in the book, it is possible to read Franklin’s sentences as voicing current concerns about ecological disasters and as suggesting a step back from indiscriminate progress. The utopian dream of infinite progress risks leading to an apocalyptic catastrophe. Humankind cannot remain in its current situation because it is eating up all the resources of the planet and polluting the earth possibly beyond repair, besides worsening social inequalities between the North and the South of the world. For these very reasons, most definitely, it cannot continue to develop at this rate. Its only chance might be to go back, as Crace seems to suggest through Franklin.¹⁴

Surely, Crace is no naïve writer and the dialectic between utopia and dystopia subtending the novel highlights the fact that there is never a perfect solution to problems, as every utopia carries with it dystopian possibilities. In addition, the British writer does not concretely specify what kind of step back would allow mankind to avoid Margaret and Franklin’s post-apocalyptic medieval future. Yet a novel is not a

¹⁴ The need for this step back has been theorized, among others, by Serge Latouche, who calls for a happy degrowth (*décroissance sereine*) (Latouche 2009)



pamphlet and Crace's "modest proposal" is there, with its revelatory ending full of promises: by "Going westward", that is, by going back to the past, Margaret and Franklin "go free" (309).

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