

# The Gift of Stories – Imagination and Landscape in Jim Crace's *The Gift of Stones*

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## ABSTRACT

*Jim Crace is known for his compelling, parable-like stories written in rhythmic prose and for his distinctive diction, which combines poetic figurativeness with the precision of exact description. As a writer with an exceptional sense of observed detail, Crace's narrative power lies in his ability to render places, especially various kinds of landscapes, which, in spite of their wholly fictitious character, evoke a strong feeling of plausibility and familiarity. Nevertheless, his imaginary milieux are never devoid of human experience and his stories examine the close interconnectedness between his protagonists and the places they occupy or move through. Crace likes to depict what the critics have termed "communities in transition", i.e. groups of people who need to face up to an imminent socio-economic change and adapt to the newly emerging circumstances, which is why his fictional landscapes always reflect the protagonists' disturbed psyches as they project into them the anxieties and frustrations that result from the process of revising and restoring the essentials of their shattered identities. The Gift of Stones (1988) not only explores such a transition, but also elaborates on the significance of making up stories in human life. This paper demonstrates how the novel's physical environments intertwine not only with the main protagonist's mental world but, above all, with his talent for imaginative storytelling.*

## KEYWORDS

Jim Crace, *The Gift of Stone*, storytelling, landscape, geocriticism

Jim Crace, the prize-winning writer and author of two Booker Prize shortlisted novels, *Quarantine* (1997) and *Harvest* (2013), is known for his gripping and universally humane narratives that follow the tradition of folk stories such as myths and parables. Although he has persistently avoided postmodernist narrative strategies, and experiments at playing with reader expectations and preconceptions by means of unreliable narrators, metafiction, intertextuality, parody and pastiche, he can also hardly be described as a realist. Instead, he professes what he calls the "traditional" way of writing, in the sense of impersonal folk storytelling, based on a combination of commonplace social patterns and relationships, and pure invention in terms of historical, geographical and situational location. "Realist fiction locates you", he says, "[i]maginative fiction dislocates. What traditional writing does – what I do – is to dislocate the issues of the real world and place them elsewhere".<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Crace's novels are written in an idiosyncratically rhythmic and melodious prose in which minute, exact and often crude detail alternate with inventively poetic turns of phrase. The effect of this narrative voice is further underscored by his predilection, as an avid "amateur natural historian",<sup>2</sup> for neologisms, relating mostly to botany, zoology and geology. This sense of detail, a focus on familiar human situations, and made-up expressions disguised as scientific fact might cause a "careless reader to mistake the make-believe" for a realist narrative,<sup>3</sup> which prevents them from enjoying the more complex layers of meaning his novels contain.

1 Adam Begley, "A Pilgrim in Craceland," *Southwest Review*, 87.2&3 (2002).

2 Bookgroup.info, "Jim Crace: interview," 2007.

3 Adam Begley, "Jim Crace, The Art of Fiction No. 179," *The Paris Review*, 167 (2003).

Crace's first four novels and the majority of the subsequent ones portray what he calls "communities in transition",<sup>4</sup> that is smaller groups of people, such as settlements, tribes, religious groups, villages and towns, all of whom find themselves on the verge of an historical – social, economic, political, cultural – transformation. This change is rather sudden, which is why the community's identity, collective as well as individual, is undermined, and a radical revision or even redefinition is imposed on them. As a result, the very existence of this community is at stake, as they cannot retain their previous status vis-à-vis the newly emerging circumstances, nor are they capable of or willing to accept and adapt to them. Crace's strategy is to pick out one individual whose fate he follows closely in a limited third-person narration, but this main protagonist is always an outsider who, for various reasons, is not perceived by the community as a full member. This allows the narrative to assume a perspective which is both inside and outside the flow of events, one that is subjective with regards to the protagonist yet somehow detached and observant as far as the social group as a whole is concerned. However, a pivotal role in the narrative is attributed to the environment in which the story takes place. Crace considers himself a "landscape writer"<sup>5</sup> and the various landscapes and cityscapes he has created in his novels transcend the basic role of setting. These spaces serve as an important means of plot and character development, in particular in that they always reflect the processes of the protagonists' mental worlds. In this way, these milieux, though wholly made up, appear recognisable to the reader as "somewhere familiar but not quite here"<sup>6</sup> as alternate landscapes the reader can relate to in spite of their geographical and historical otherness.

All the above mentioned properties of Crace's writing allow him to explore his major aesthetic and thematic preoccupations, namely the mythic and parabolic understandings and symbols that persist despite modernity; humankind's place within the greater evolutionary scheme of nature; belief and the self; the problematic dialectic of the individual within communities; the crisis of faith and meaning; the elusive quality of love; the interrogation of the essentials of identity within a broader social context; the consideration of the crises of modernity in terms of its mercantile/capitalist instincts; and awareness of the human narrative impulse.<sup>7</sup> His second novel, *The Gift of Stones* (1988), is especially articulate in terms of the last-mentioned preoccupation – the centrality of the human impulse to tell stories. This paper attempts to demonstrate how the novel explores the theme of storytelling not only within the framework of the transitional historical moment it depicts, but also in connection with the psychic and experiential properties of the physical environment the main protagonist inhabits.

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4 Begley, "A Pilgrim in Craceland."

5 Begley, "Jim Crace, The Art of Fiction No. 179."

6 Ian Sansom, "Smorgasbits," *London Review of Books*, 23.22 (2001).

7 Philip Tew, *Jim Crace* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 24.

## A Narrative Animal<sup>8</sup>

The capacity and the need for spinning and telling tales are defining aspects of the human condition. In fact, the mind of an individual dashes off to create, recall or rehearse various kinds of narratives related to their life whenever it is not engaged in a mental task which requires intense concentration, which is why most of the stories our mind conceives remain uncommunicated. Although a coherent and comprehensible narrative should adhere to a logical and plausible causality and temporal arrangement, the process of narrativising our experience of the world is not wholly governed by rationality. We build stories on facts we know and pieces of information we receive; yet these may be disparate, incomplete and jumbled, so we tend to rearrange them or even invent the missing bits so as to establish connections in order to produce a meaningful pattern that can be imposed on the sometimes chaotic and coincidental circumstances of our lives. Our very existence is thus permeated by the stories we tell to others as well as, perhaps even more crucially, to ourselves.

As we crave meaning and order in life, we are addicted to stories which supply us with these qualities when we cannot have them in reality. On a very basic level, stories entertain us, stir our emotions and nourish our imagination. However, by means of “turn[ing] the experiences of one into the knowledge of all”,<sup>9</sup> commonly shared narratives, ranging from folk tales to novels and movies, also perform far more important roles. Within the demands and difficulties of social life and the ever changing world, stories offer us opportunities “to practice reacting to the kind of challenges that are, and always were, most crucial to our success as a species”.<sup>10</sup> That is why there is a discrepancy between what we wish for in life and what we expect to have in fiction, in which we crave stories of misfortune – hardship, despair, frustration, injustice, violence and death – and we take pleasure from learning about how such difficulty can be overcome. Stories thus fill us with the hope that problems can be faced up to, that goodness is worth fighting for, but also reassure us that we cannot be blamed for everything bad that happens to us as some events and their consequences are simply accidental and unpredictable. A successful story thus requires characters “endowed with salient and robust principles of action” who can satisfy our prevailing “desire for order, coherence, and the mental mastery of circumstance”<sup>11</sup> in situations when these circumstances get beyond our physical control.

These narratives also possess a significant moral dimension, as they support and proclaim the underlying principles on which the functioning of our society rests, the most important being the belief in a system of justice that punishes vice and rewards virtue. They “make societies work better by encouraging us to behave ethically” by means of which they reduce “social friction while uniting people around common values”.<sup>12</sup> Traditional stories generally inculcate values like kindness, generosity, compassion, tolerance and diligence, regardless of the particularities of a specific

8 Andrew Lawless, “The Poet of Prose – Jim Crace in interview,” *Three Monkeys Online*.

9 Gregory Currie, *Narratives & Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), v.

10 Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2012).

11 Currie, *Narratives & Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories*, 220.

12 Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*.

situation.<sup>13</sup> In short, stories are highly beneficial for humankind, as they prepare us for a range of predicaments. By reinforcing moral values, they bind societies together and make us better equipped to resolve crucial life dilemmas. Although every human being is unique and inimitable, thus people's life stories are manifold and multifarious "anecdotes of destiny",<sup>14</sup> we do not expect something completely other and new from commonly shared narratives, but rather seek "the old comforts of the universal story grammar",<sup>15</sup> in other words those examples and paradigms which help us survive the diverse tests of life in an effective and yet ethical manner.

Crace is a keen storyteller who acknowledges the primacy of imagination. He strictly denies using autobiographical elements in his novels and refuses to do research so as to achieve a greater degree of plausibility, calling himself "a fabulist"<sup>16</sup> who believes that imaginative invention can "deliver a grander, more metaphorical portrait of our lives and landscapes than would result from a photographic approach".<sup>17</sup> He resists being categorised as a realist writer, asserting that if "[his] writing holds a lens up to the real world, then it is a cracked lens".<sup>18</sup> To Crace, the storytelling impulse is innate to us, and it has proved an invaluable device for the development of humankind – "if it were not we wouldn't still be storytellers",<sup>19</sup> he insists. He attributes his own narrative capacity to this deeply embedded trait of human nature: "I'm often mystified by the way I write [...], but the truth of the matter is that I don't have any explanation. It's just something that is there [...], it's intuitive".<sup>20</sup> Subscribing to a neo-Darwinian conception of storytelling, he sees it as an evolutionary adaptive strategy which has provided us with the ability to "come up with systems"<sup>21</sup> to make it easier and less fearful for us to confront misfortune. He is convinced that stories not only help us make better sense of the world but also, by revisiting the past and imagining the future, enable us to practice and plan our potential decisions and strategies. Literature thus "is there to rehearse us for the things in life that will test us",<sup>22</sup> which, however, by no means requires excessive verisimilitude.

In this line of argument, given their purpose to prepare people for hard times, most folk stories deal with problematic or dysfunctional communities. Likewise, Crace's novels tend to be rather grim and bleak which, however, does not mean they lack hope and consolation. On the contrary, Crace considers himself a sentimental yet strong optimist who believes in fundamental human goodness, only his optimism is always well-hidden "in the murkiest of corners where it will have had to have been strong in order to survive".<sup>23</sup> His stories follow the tradition of folk tales in that they are set in "dark places and see humankind in its worst moments, yet still find the

13 Amy E. Spaulding, *The Art of Storytelling: Telling Truths through Telling Stories* (Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2011), 134.

14 Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.

15 Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*.

16 Stephanie Cross, "Jim Crace, author of Booker-shortlisted *Quarantine*: 'I'm leaving Craceland,'" *The Independent*, 2013.

17 Vishal Tayade, "An interview with British writer Jim Crace," *Indian Rumunantions*, 2011.

18 Tayade, "An interview with British writer Jim Crace."

19 The Free Library, "An Interview with Jim Crace," 2012.

20 Lawless, "The Poet of Prose – Jim Crace in interview."

21 Minna Proctor, "Jim Crace," *BOMB Magazine*, 2000.

22 The *antae* Editorial Board, "'You want to mess with people's heads': An Interview with Jim Crace," *antae*, 2.1 (2015): 12.

23 Biblio Blog, "An Interview with Jim Crace," 2007.

narrative of comfort and optimism there”<sup>24</sup> This prospect must therefore always be fought for and redeemed by painful personal sacrifices, dramatizing the author’s conviction that “[e]verything new worth having is paid for by the loss of something old worth keeping”<sup>25</sup> It is this ethical paradigm that allows readers to assign shared archetypal patterns of thought and wisdom to each of Crace’s imaginary landscapes, no matter how exotic or uncanny, to produce “a universality of meaning”<sup>26</sup> understood across cultures. This is why the feeling of familiarity readers might experience in his stories stems from their parabolic meaning rather than from their mirroring of the real world.

Crace is well aware that engaging and thrilling storytelling inevitably involves a certain degree of concocting lies and presenting them in a realistic way so that seems more credible and convincing than nebulous truths about the world. This is the kind of narrative playfulness he gladly espouses: “Literature and storytelling have got to have wisdoms and insights, they’ve got to be useful; but if they’re mischievous, than that is really valuable”<sup>27</sup> Of course, a good storyteller should be able to present the often contingent and disparate fabric of the narrative in a coherent and logical manner, and then to revolve it around a distinct and sensible plotline, but this may not be sufficient for the story to have the desired impact on the audience. Any story that does not contain the fantastic and the embroidered runs the risk of being found dull and narrow. However, when it comes to fabulation, Crace distinguishes between being mischievous and being malicious, regarding the latter to be incompatible with his notion of storytelling, as he asserts: “The kind of lying I do and always did was never to deceive you. It was to be amusing and entertaining and generous”<sup>28</sup> In other words, the fabricated must be subordinate to the story and its audience, not the other way round. *The Gift of Stones* is set at a precise moment in history in a seaside village whose landscape is influenced by those of west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly,<sup>29</sup> but the made-up elements of the novel take over the putatively realistic ones in order to provide its story with a universally meaningful interpretive framework.

## Towards a Phenomenology of Space and Place

Human beings live in time and space, and these coordinates determine not only their existence as such, but are also essential for their sense of who they are and why. In other words, historical and temporal, as well as geographical and spatial, circumstances inevitably affect both the physical and mental character of our living, that is, what we do in order to survive and live comfortably in the given environment and, simultaneously, how we construct and perpetuate our identity. The same, then, naturally applies to literature as its reflection of the human condition. Provided it aims at a certain degree of complexity, literature cannot avoid either of these defining aspects entirely. Yet, paradoxically, for centuries literary criticism was primarily concerned with time, reducing space

24 Vayu Naidu, “Words are my picture and my music,” *The Hindu*, 2014.

25 Begley, “A Pilgrim in Craceland.”

26 Naidu, “Words are my picture and my music.”

27 The *antae* Editorial Board, “‘You want to mess with people’s heads’: An Interview with Jim Crace,” 9.

28 The Free Library, “An Interview with Jim Crace,” 2012.

29 Begley, “A Pilgrim in Craceland.”

to a mere setting – a stage on which the characters move but which has little if any impact on their acts and thoughts. This situation started to change gradually throughout the last century as more and more attention was given to the literary representation of space and place, and, drawing on the premise that “[t]here is no unspatialized social reality”,<sup>30</sup> an assertion which culminated in what has been termed the postmodern spatial turn. This has led some theoreticians to conclude that not time but space “is now considered as a central metaphor and *topos* in literature”.<sup>31</sup> This shift of focus has resulted in the emergence of a number of critical approaches and practices focusing on the diverse ways in which narratives reflect the dynamic interconnectedness between people’s lives and the spaces they inhabit, such as psychogeography, geopoetics and ecocriticism.

However, most of these practices are rather narrowly delimited in terms of their scope of interest and their subversive agenda: psychogeography tries to record the derelict and disappearing city territories through “the act of urban wandering, the spirit of political radicalism, allied to a playful sense of subversion and governed by an inquiry into the methods by which we can transform our relationship to the urban environment”;<sup>32</sup> geopoetics fuses poetry and geography so as to create a productive platform where in the spirit of natural philosophy “poetry, thought and science come together, in a climate of reciprocal inspiration”;<sup>33</sup> ecocriticism is based on the close relationship between literature and the science of ecology, particularly on the examination of the “production, reproduction and transformation of large-scale [environmentalist] metaphors” which “have specific political effects or serve particular social interests”.<sup>34</sup> A broader scope is offered by geocriticism, which is an attempt at combining literary theory and criticism with a number of approaches to the study of geographical space. It is a set of critical practices, the practitioners of which inquire into how real and imaginary places make our life meaningful, either through our direct experience with them or through their textual representations, so as to cast light on “the ways we make sense of our world, of our places in the world, and of our various and complex mappings of those worldly and otherworldly spaces”.<sup>35</sup> The approach was developed by the French scholar Bertrand Westphal in the early 2000s and formulated in his *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (*La Géocritique: Réel, Fiction, Espace*, 2007).

Drawing on poststructuralist theories of spatial heterogeneity, in particular on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of smooth spaces and Soja’s (following Lefebvre) concept of social production of space, Westphal establishes his geocritical method on three underlying principles: spatiotemporality, by which it is claimed that space is inherently an entropic system subject to relative laws of time, disorder, bifurcation and non-equilibrium, i.e. qualities which generate energies that allow the system’s current state to evolve into a new one; transgressivity, which points to space’s capacity

30 Edward W Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1996), 46.

31 Emmanuelle Peraldo, “Introduction. The Meeting of Two Practices of Space: Literature and Geography,” in *Literature and Geography: The Writing of Space throughout History*, ed. Emmanuelle Peraldo (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 1.

32 Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpندن: Pocket Essentials, 2006), 14.

33 The International Institute of Geopoetics.

34 Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 7.

35 Robert T. Tally, Jr., “Translator’s Preface: The Timely Emergence of Geocriticism,” in Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xii.

for mobility, transgression and boundary crossing; and referentiality, which refers to the fluid and unstable relations between the referent and its textual representation.<sup>36</sup> In this original form, geocriticism is strictly geo-centred, which means it concentrates solely on actual geographical spaces; a set of their textual representations, fictional as well as non-fictional are considered, so as to achieve a more thorough comprehension of these spaces. It is a kind of comparative metacritical practice that “extends literary studies into the domain of the geographical referent in a way that transcends literature’s aesthetic function”.<sup>37</sup> This practice thus cannot be used for texts whose spaces are wholly fictitious or those which tend to put forth a psychological dimension of the relationship between an individual subject and space.

Consequently, some geocritics have expanded the practice’s scope of analysis by integrating it with the phenomenological conception of place, i.e. by professing “the humanist presumption of the priority of individual experience and the subjective consciousness” over the “poststructuralist emphasis on impersonal networks of power and discourse”.<sup>38</sup> At this point a distinction between space and place should be made: while space is a generalised notion that refers to any environment a person occupies, place is a concrete, localised segment of space to which an individual is emotionally, cognitively and socially attached by ascribing to it personal meanings and interpretations. Unlike the undetermined space, the particularised place is therefore “enriched with human experience and understanding; an organized world of meaning”.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, it is place rather than space that the phenomenologically oriented geocriticism concerns itself with. Robert T. Tally Jr. emphasises the experiential dimension of spatial criticism which, in his view, should examine “literary representations not only 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”.<sup>40</sup> His geocriticism is conceived “to include not only those places that readers and writers experience by means of texts but also the experience of space and place within ourselves”.<sup>41</sup> Tally thus argues for literary cartography in the form of mapping narratives which map the real-and-imagined places of our experience, but which are at the same time mapped by readers and writers by situating them into individual interpretive frameworks and spatiotemporal contexts, which is why the practice goes “beyond the attempt to faithfully reproduce in diagrammatic fashion the places of the putatively ‘real-world’ geospace”.<sup>42</sup>

Eric Prieto’s concept of geocriticism draws even more strongly on phenomenology in the sense of examining the impacts of spatial experience on the human psyche, and he proposes “to

36 Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

37 Eric Prieto, “Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond,” in *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert T. Tally, Jr. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 22.

38 Prieto, “Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond,” 17.

39 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 179.

40 Robert T. Tally, Jr., “Series Editor’s Preface,” in *Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative*, ed. Robert T. Tally, Jr. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), x.

41 Robert T. Tally, Jr., “On Geocriticism,” in *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert T. Tally, Jr. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 8.

42 Robert T. Tally, Jr., “Adventures in Literary Cartography: Explorations, Representations, Projections,” in *Literature and Geography: The Writing of Space throughout History*, ed. Emmanuelle Peraldo (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 25.

put the emphasis on place as a manifestation of the dynamic interpretation of consciousness and world".<sup>43</sup> In his critical practice he strives to reconcile two approaches traditionally viewed as being in opposition: the subjectivist, in the form of artistic representation such as fictional narrative; and the objectivist, in the form of an abstract scientific method such as cartography. He claims that both these approaches are necessary for understanding the character of places in the rapidly developing and transforming world, which often results in the emergence of new kinds of places with a different spatiotemporal arrangement. This happens when a formerly homogeneous place becomes transformed and destabilised by heterogeneous forces into what Prieto calls *entre-deux* or "in-between" places. These liminal places are often ignored and overlooked, yet they possess dynamic productive potential, which is naturally exploited by writers as "[g]reat works of literature are drawn to the emergent, the interstitial, and the difficult to understand".<sup>44</sup> This underappreciated potential, he argues, can therefore be only revealed by geocritical practice, which "brings the particular kinds of knowledge generated by works of imaginative literature into contact with the social and spatial sciences".<sup>45</sup> Tally's and Prieto's geocritical concepts prove suitable for an analysis of Crace's novels, as they render the struggle of an individual's identity under the experience of place and displacement within a given moment of socio-historical transformation.

### From the Wild Plant into the Raconteur

The story of *The Gift of Stones* is set in a coastal Neolithic village in the transition period between the Stone Age and the Bronze Age. The village's stonecutter community has been living on making stone tools and weapons. Proud of their craft, the hard-working stoneworkers are confident, yet complacent, convinced that their prosperity is not imperilled as long as there are enough traders to buy their products and sell them elsewhere. These people like who and where they are; they are earthbound and, possessing no nomadic or belligerent inclinations, most of them have never been beyond the perimeter of the village, with their only connection to the outside world being the traders and the occasional visits of horsemen who come to trade "exotic" goods, such as fabrics and perfumes, for spears, axes and arrow tips. On such occasions, the serene and purposeful village temporarily succumbs to commotion and turmoil, as in a kicked anthill whose industrious and disciplined dwellers have been "sent wild and spirited by the unheralded disorder of the day and by this thin excuse to shout and smile and swagger".<sup>46</sup> The next morning, however, everything returns to normal and their life is again one of order, routine and custom. As a result, the community is enclosed and withdrawn, rigid in their values and beliefs, suspicious and fearful of any form of otherness. While the outside world is believed to be one of chaos, peril and viciousness, full of "blows and careless brawls and sudden gusts of hardship to blow good fortune down", the village life makes people "tame, secure and virtuous by labour", seeming to be "as snug as poppy seeds.

43 Prieto, "Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond," 25.

44 Eric Prieto, *Literature, Geography and the Postmodern Poetics of Place* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9.

45 Prieto, *Literature, Geography and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*, 2.

46 Jim Crace, *The Gift of Stones* (London: Picador, 1997), 21.



Such was the gift of stones".<sup>47</sup> However, fostering this illusion proves more harmful than protective for them.

The problem of these self-contained and inflexible people, whose horizon ends with the limits of their settlement, is that they are unable to notice that the world around them is changing to their disadvantage. Year by year, the trade in flint and weaponry is getting worse, fewer and fewer traders and horsemen are passing through the village to barter goods for stone, but the villagers can only seek explanation within the realm of their experience, that is in wars, diseases and natural disasters. None of them leaves the village to find out what is actually preventing their trade from being as thriving as it once had been; they just lament, wait and hope for a reversal, although they would not have to go too far, just to the nearby seashore, to see the merchant ships from which the sailors are bringing ashore tools and components made of bronze. It is not until one of these transformative implements literally arrives on their doorstep in the form of a bronze arrowhead so thin, hard and sharp that it easily outdoes even the best flint, that they fully realise they have been hoping in vain, and thus they eventually become willing to admit the naked truth: "The outside world was closing in like lichen on a stone. [...] And all our world was shrinking, breath by breath. [...] We lived like rabbits, sociable and bored and easy prey".<sup>48</sup> The question arises as to if such a destiny could have been averted and, if so, how.

Typically of Crace, the main protagonist of the novel is a misfit in his community. Already as a small boy he showed little interest in helping the adults to mine flint; instead he liked to slip away from the village and spend the day roaming the countryside and playing with other boys in a horsemen's encampment. Being an orphan adopted by his uncaring uncle, he soon realises upon his return to the village that no one has missed him the whole day, and so he runs away more and more frequently. One time he does this he is unlucky, as his arm is badly injured by a young bowman's arrow, and the limb must later be amputated to save his life. From this moment, he is taken as a true outsider as he is now "officially" useless for stonecutting. As not even his foster family takes the trouble to find him some useful occupation, he grows up ignored and unloved, irritating the stoneworkers by hanging about and idly gawping at what they do. His wandering expeditions beyond the limits of the village thus become for him a practical necessity rather than a boyish adventure, i.e. the only way in which he can flee the insults and scorn of his foster family. It is no wonder he grows bitter and frustrated, as he himself admits: "Malice and my elbow stump are twins".<sup>49</sup> "An arrow ruled my world; it made me what I am [...] the vengeful sort".<sup>50</sup> Yet the situation changes for the better when he discovers in himself a talent for telling stories.

The pivotal moment comes when he transforms "in that village, overnight, from the wild plant, not much use, into their raconteur".<sup>51</sup> This happens when he decides to respond to his uncle's annoyed, conventionally rhetorical question "Where have you been?" after he returns from a journey on which he met a husbandless woman living with her child in a hut near the coast. The very mention of the strange woman rivets the cousins, and their avid curiosity proves

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47 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 119.

48 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 169, 195.

49 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 36.

50 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 157.

51 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 66.

to be “an invitation far too good to miss” for his storytelling mind.<sup>52</sup> Already during his earlier roamings he had rehearsed in his mind stories he could tell the villagers if they were interested, but this unusual encounter emboldens him to speak up. Yet he knows that a mere retelling of what actually happened to him would not do, and so, instead of telling his tale straight, he showers his listeners with a large number of seemingly unrelated details – colourful and figurative descriptions of the seaside, the birds, and the ships upon the sea – so as to stir their imagination and increase suspense. As the storytelling phrases spring from his mouth, he realises that to make the story sound really attractive, these “crafted and well turned”<sup>53</sup> descriptions must spice up the bare facts and give them a dramatic aspect. His real experience is thus reduced to a template for his story, to a backbone plotline encased in rich and exciting fabrication. “This is my moment of betrayal, both of the woman and the truth,”<sup>54</sup> he notes, knowing that being truthful to the story at times rules out being faithful to reality.

The new-born storyteller gradually converts the bitter reality he has been suffering into a bottomless source of well-plotted stories, ranging from those explaining his injury to those describing marvellous ships offloading ever new and more remarkable merchandise. In the first place, his storytelling represents for him a protective, auto-therapeutic mechanism that makes him forget the injustices of the real world, and which allows him to show his fellow-villagers his worth. He thus becomes two persons: the disdained roamer with a personal life of misfortune and failure, and the mesmerizer who can “hold a household silent with the magic of his words,”<sup>55</sup> the “minstrel-king of lies” who can “concoct from, say, geese, ships and smells, a world more real than real.”<sup>56</sup> In fact, for his audience he has turned himself into fiction, having told and retold the stories of his life so many times in so many different versions. Although people know his tales are full of lies and manipulated truths, they are so transfixed and delighted by them that they desire to hear more each day: “The paradox is this – we do love lies. The truth is dull and half-asleep. But lies are nimble, spirited, alive. And lying is a craft.”<sup>57</sup> They no longer mind his wanderings, knowing that the material for his narratives can only be sought elsewhere, and they cannot wait for him to come back and, using all his storyteller’s tricks, take their pragmatic, mundane minds to “simple, freer, less ordained”<sup>58</sup> imaginary worlds. Having learnt to adapt his fictions to match the expectations of different kinds of audience – men, women and children – his stories gradually become the only diversion for the villagers, a much-prized escape from their laborious day-to-day routine.

Although his narrative gift provides his audience with much pleasure and amusement, he cannot really be regarded as a true bardic figure, as his stories tend to lack an ethical dimension. Although he often leaves crucial parts of the story unsaid to make the listener ask questions and seek answers, these always remain on the level of the action. His implied questioning does not lead to an abstract moral framework by forcing the audience to contemplate and reflect on their

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52 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 62.

53 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 63.

54 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 63.

55 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 66.

56 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 97.

57 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 73.

58 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 68.

own acts and decisions, or to confront them with the implications of the actions of the fictitious characters. However, it would be unfair to say that he does not try at all – when he brings Doe and her daughter to the village to find refuge for them and the reception from his fellow villagers is rather cold and hostile, he invents a number of versions of how she might have lost her husband and son to provoke sympathy in the listeners. The stoneworkers listen eagerly as long as these stories do not concern them personally. Yet, when in the last version he suggests that perhaps they were to be blamed when they did not help a woman in need, the atmosphere changes instantly from interest to amazement and consternation as his audience quickly creeps away “unamused and angered by the venom in his voice”.<sup>59</sup> Some of them in their smug conceitedness consider themselves too righteous and principled to be criticised or reprimanded; others fear that their hidden insecurities, worries and anxieties may be brought to life. In either case, all of them still look down upon the loquacious amputee, and even though they condescendingly allow him to be their entertainer, they cannot really stand the thought that he should be the voice of their conscience. As a result, his stories entertain but fail to perform the other two crucial functions outlined above: they neither prepare and rehearse the audience for hard times, nor do they foster and strengthen their moral qualities.

After the experience of the community's reaction to a displeasing story, he decides to no longer give them even a hint of unsettling truth any more. As a result, they remain fully isolated from and unaware of the radical transformations that are reaching their village. He often wonders how calm and cheerful they are while the world around “was tumbling, spinning, wild”,<sup>60</sup> but in reality it is also his fault; as village storyteller he rejected the potentially unpopular ethical dimension of his craft while enjoying his position as a well-liked entertainer. And so, even though his mind is full of unease as he watches new ships and people coming from the sea, he keeps the information to himself: “The ritual of our trade was this – I did not tell the truth. They looked to me for comfort, not for gloom”.<sup>61</sup> The problem is that seeing storytelling as a trade in which you merely barter pretty tales for laughter and applause means fatally misunderstanding its public function, as one of the crucial, though admittedly the most demanding and thankless, roles of a raconteur is to cleverly confront his community with inconvenient truths in order to make them conscious of their flaws and encourage them to rectify them. He is, however, forced to change his strategy when the villagers eventually understand that leaving their settlement is unavoidable, and they turn to their temporarily out of favour storyteller to be their guide as the only “worldly-wise” member of the community. Although he is at first happy to have his former authority restored, he soon realises that the power of his fanciful tales will be exhausted after a two-day journey when the travellers enter territories he himself has never been to. “At last his lies had caught him out. [...] The stories that he'd told were now our past. His new task was to invent a future for us all”.<sup>62</sup> The stories he is then asked to concoct to retain his status as communal storyteller must do far more than just amuse – they should give his community hope, courage and moral strength to face up to the trials of the days to come.

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59 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 133.

60 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 158.

61 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 162.

62 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 201–202.

## A World That's Upside Down – the Landscapes of the Imagination

As is typical of Crace's novels, the narration of *The Gift of Stone* devotes substantial attention to the landscape in which its story is set along with how it is interconnected with the characters' minds. The central landscape pattern of the story is based on the contrast between the village, surrounded by the stony hills, and the nearby seashore. While the first is appreciated by the villagers as safe, orderly and stable, the latter is perceived as unruly, unpredictable and unutilizable, something that defies any attempt to impose order, control and meaning: "Our village looked inland. [...] The sea brought no one luck so we stayed away. Lives were passed in this one place, working stone and seeking respite from the wind".<sup>63</sup> Uneventfully comfortable as the village is for the stoneworkers, it is too monotonous and uninspiring for the main protagonist's restless and wayward nature. The village is an example of a homogeneous, or striated, space dominated by the linearity of spatiotemporal arrangement. In this space, "lines or trajectories tend to be subordinated to points: one goes from one point to another";<sup>64</sup> a condition for which Westphal uses the term *equilibrium*, i.e. a state which is "deprived of history" and therefore is "equivalent to a nonstory".<sup>65</sup> This is why the handicapped young man's storytelling mind is so attracted by the places beyond the surrounding hills, especially those of the seashore, whose turbulent and changeable state of non-equilibrium has, in Westphal's words, the potential of "a very complex story, which corresponds to a garden of forking paths, of points (not lines!) of instability".<sup>66</sup> And so the barely trodden clifftop path becomes for him a gateway into the limitless realm of the imagination.

The climate and the landscape of the seashore, with its winds and storms, cliffs and coves with narrow paths and thickets, prove exceptionally stimulating for his imagination, as each time he finds himself in this territory the landscape seems to be somewhat distinct, which is why it invites a variety of narrative renderings that depend not only on reality, but also on the character of the story and the listeners' expectations. And so, when one day he briefly spots a ship on the sea passing on the horizon, he knows immediately what kind of story he will tell that night – one in which the ship comes to the shore, for which he needs the weather and the waves to be calm: "I could invent for you a sea and wind and sky that flung saltweed in my face and emptied water from the pools and cast a light so dark and feeble that even lugworms took the day for night, mistook the wind for tide [...] But I will keep it calm and windless".<sup>67</sup> The seashore not only provides him with a narrative stimulus and material for his stories, it also enables him to assume a new viewpoint, both literally and metaphorically, one that is detached from and unfettered by the mundane reality of his village, one that allows him to see even familiar objects from a fresh perspective: "The sea viewed from the clifftop is a world that's upside down. Its gulls have backs. You are looking down on wind. The shallows, from above, are flat and patterned, green with arcs of white where the water

63 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 16.

64 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 478.

65 Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, 19.

66 Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, 19.

67 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 41.

runs to phlegm”<sup>68</sup> It is the excitement derived from the different landscape and seascape that drives him to walk further along the beaches into low heathland where he comes across a hut inhabited by a young woman with her baby girl, another source of inspiration for tale-telling.

However, he soon realises that the otherness of this environment is of a different kind than that of the unpeopled seashore. The presence of various kinds of human beings, whether long-term, temporary or merely fleeting, infuse the setting with contrary connotations that are absent in the natural world, such as negative emotions, hostility, rage and violence: Doe callously rejects her one-armed benefactor's offers of help, and resorts rather to occasional prostitution in order to obtain food and other necessities; people from a distant village arrive on the coast to slaughter wild geese that has destroyed their crops; gangs of raiding horsemen ride through the countryside looking for settlements to plunder, women to rape and men to kill. Accordingly, the landscape and his perception of it adapts to correspond with these meanings. When going to see Doe for a second time, the description of the environment foreshadows the hardships and misfortunes he is going to encounter: “The sea, that night, curled and lisped and whispered in a voice which said, Dismay, Dismay, Dismay. [...] The landscape and the tide conspired to chase him off the beach”<sup>69</sup> And before the slaughtering of the geese begins, Crace offers the image of the stinking moorland which seemed to anticipate the brutal act to come: “The saltland heath – saddened and yellowed by the winter – was sweating in the sun. It smelled like rotten fruit, like beer, like cow's breath. The earth was passing wind; it belched at every footfall; its boil had burst; it was brackish and spongy with sap and pus and marsh”<sup>70</sup>

This heterogeneous world does not lack story-generating potential, but it is different to that of the almost fairy tale-like seascape, where each imaginary ship that comes ashore “could offload a new and untried plot; a different set of characters with untold loves and enmities could disembark”<sup>71</sup> While the landscape of the shore has worked as a stepping stone for concocting sensational tales, the eventful valley makes the protagonist construct stories in order to fend off the vicissitudes of distressing reality. His stories deceive the villagers by concealing from them the truth about the changing socio-economic conditions of the outside world, but he also deludes himself into believing that Doe is a woman who could love him as a husband. When he realises that not even when she has relocated to the village will she turn into his wished for caring wife, he is not able to accept the truth, and instead runs away to the imaginary safety of the shore in search of herbs for “his” Doe, consoling himself in his mind with images of their fulfilled relationship when he returns home: “You know the route. I'll not detail the landmarks that are old friends to us. [...] I picked her fill. My filling her was all I had in mind. I marvelled at my speed and skill, and at the luck which brought me through the bracken, over rocks, without a sprain or scratch”<sup>72</sup> He has associated the landscape of the seashore, which has inspired so many of his successful tales, with escapist nostalgia and illusion, making it the only place where he can feel contented. Similarly, his stories make the stonecutters believe that their village is a secure oasis of happiness, a delusion

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68 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 43.

69 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 78, 79.

70 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 88.

71 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 67.

72 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 166.

they succumb to so much that when they see the bronze arrowhead they think it is one of his tricks and they demand a comforting story that would explain the appearance of this mysterious object.

With the collapsing trade in stone and flint, the village gradually transforms into an in-between place. Its homogeneity breaks down as the former routines, hierarchies and value systems lose their legitimacy, and people no longer feel bound by them. Although some still persist in stoneworking, foolishly believing the good times will return again, the majority of them are forced to leave the shells of their selfish complacency and seek the company of others so as to face the sad reality together. “The village seemed a shabby and a friendly place at last. People did not shut themselves inside. They strolled. [...] They took an interest in each other’s grieving, empty inside worlds and in the outside world as well”.<sup>73</sup> The heterogenising forces thus generate positive, creative energies that make the community stronger and more evolutionarily adaptive, thanks to which they finally make the decision to leave their homeland. At this point, the vital significance of stories emerges again, as the tales prevent the will and courage of the populace from faltering, and their minds from dwelling on memories. Yet the storyteller knows that his old stories will not do this time, as his new task is “to invent a future”<sup>74</sup> for his fellow refugees. Out of habit, he seeks inspiration in the landscape:

He closed his eyes and what he saw was the shingled margin of the sea with horses wild and riderless close by. He tried to place a sail upon the sea, but could not. He tried to fill the air with human sounds. But all he saw were horses in the wind, the tide in loops upon the beach, the spray-wet rocks and stones reflecting all the changes in the sky, and no one there to notice or applaud.<sup>75</sup>

Once again, the landscape becomes a metaphor for the character of his storytelling – it is different from what he is used to, rich and promising but stern and unyielding, just what his new stories will have to be like. He is facing the greatest challenge of his craft: to create stories that would entertain and instruct at the same time, i.e. tales that would be told for the sake of the community as a whole rather than for the benefit of their maker.

## Conclusion

Like most of Crace’s novels, *The Gift of Stones* renders, through the perspective of an outsider as its main protagonist, the fate of a community in transition set in a landscape made vivid through the use of precise and minute descriptive detail combined with distinctive poetic diction. However, it differs from his other similarly constructed narratives by strongly accentuating and foregrounding the theme of storytelling and its significance for humankind. In many respects, the novel exemplifies its author’s conviction about the defining properties of good and effective storytelling, namely the primacy of imagination and the necessity of inventive fabulation. Yet, although the novel features a gifted and well-liked storyteller, he cannot be regarded as a fully-fledged one since for the sake of his own popularity and comfort he fails to provide his listeners with a moral which would, by

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73 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 194.

74 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 202.

75 Crace, *The Gift of Stones*, 202.

depicting troublesome situations and the virtues and vices of imaginary characters, prepare them to cope with potential hardships. By being self-complacent in the role of entertainer, a conceiver of sensational worlds, his tales fail to perform the function of an evolutionary adaptive mechanism that allows the community to make better sense of the changing world they find themselves in. The stories force readers to reflect on their own stances, as rather than seeking consolation in the most demanding tests of human will and strength, they make do with mere escapist fabrication. Maybe this is also the reason why the story is not told by Crace but by his foster-daughter, who was just a small child at the time when he emerged as a storytelling celebrity. However, the humanist-optimist Crace gives his protagonist a second chance at the end of the story in the form of the challenge to come up with stories that would make the stoneworkers' passage to a new future more bearable and hopeful.

In *The Gift of Stones*, the theme of storytelling is closely linked with the motif of landscape. As the village, dominated by routine and hard work, offers the storyteller's imagination no stimulus, he seeks it along the seashore, which becomes for him the landscape of his imagination. The sea and its coastline prove to be a rich source of stories, but these are bound to the realm of the fantastic and not only the audience but even the storyteller himself turns to them to flee the pressures of the real world. The dubious nature of his tale-telling is determined by selfish needs and motivations from both his own side as well as that of his audience: the storyteller longs to be liked and accepted; the readers want to be entertained yet soothed and reassured in their delusions. And although Crace is a sensitive observer of space and place, always projecting into the environments he finds himself in his feelings and emotions, not all of these environments turn out to be suitable material for the kind of tales he wishes to tell. As a result, in his tales the representations of both the village and the spaces outside its limits transform from real to wholly imaginary, or even escapist, so as to reflect and console the insecurities and anxieties that prompt their creation. The landscape of his imagination, like his stories, thus remains illusory, i.e. with little if any overlap with the listeners' actual or potential experience.

Also typically of Crace, the novel pictures a homogeneous place which, affected by heterogenising forces, evolves into an in-between place, a liminal territory temporarily stuck between two socio-historical developmental phases. As such, these transitory dynamics generate energies which transform the place into a turbulent non-equilibrium with a latent capacity for a multiplicity of stories. An immediate result is that the illusion of a safe place unimpered by external changes fostered and perpetuated by the storyteller breaks down, yet the transforming spatial forces also contain potential for new, possibly restorative and revitalising, narratives. And so, although he no longer needs to travel far for his narrative inspiration, the storyteller faces a true ordeal by fire: to make up stories, and places, that are real-and-imaginary, i.e. both inventive enough to allow the listeners to wonder, and yet implicitly tied to the listeners' socio-spatial reality so as to retain these stories' reflective and instructive capacity.

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