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The Utopian and the Gothic in Ellis James Davis's *Pyrna*: *A Commune; or, Under The Ice*

ABSTRACT
The paper discusses spatial modelling in Ellis James Davis's Victorian utopia, *Pyrna*: *A Commune; or, Under The Ice* (1875) regarding its appropriation of the Gothic mode into the utopian convention. By examining selected aspects of the novella's world, this article argues that the Gothic tropes of numinosity and sublime constitute significant elements as major defamiliarizing components of the semiotically monolithic utopian spatial model.
Keywords: utopia, Gothic, sublime, numinous, space

On the surface, Ellis James Davis's *Pyrna: A Commune; or, Under the Ice* (1875), an obscure late Victorian utopia, blends the conventional utopian model with references to some of the dominant socio-political trends of the era, Darwinism and social Darwinism in particular (Claeys, 2009, p. x).[1] At the same time, Davis's narrative is structured upon the fusion of two distinct generic conventions – utopia and the Gothic – which accounts for *Pyrna*'s distinct spatiotemporal modelling.

In his typology of literary models, Andrzej Zgorzelski classifies utopian and Gothic narratives both as secondary genres of fantastic literature, which "presupposes the *confrontation* of [phenomenal reality's] order with a different one, signalling the presupposition by the presentation of both or more orders *within the text*" (Zgorzelski, 2004, p. 32). In effect, fantastic literature *sensu* Zgorzelski foregrounds "the *strangeness* of those it confronts with the known order

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[1]   As Gregory Claeys contends, "the discussion of Social Darwinist and eugenic themes, and the debate over the promise or threat presented by the socialist movement" were "the two most important innovations" in the utopian genre (Claeys, 2009, p. x). For further information on the subject, see, for instance, Gregory Claeys "General Introduction: *The Reshaping of the Utopian Genre in Britain, c. 1870-1900*."

of phenomenal reality" (p. 32) (emphasis added). While both utopia and Gothic are based on the juxtaposition – or, as Zgorzelski would have it, confrontation – of various models of reality, the idea of "strangeness" is approached differently in the two genres. Gothic narratives foreground an inherently dichotomous approach to spatial modelling, based on the genre's paradigmatic liminality established in-between "the human domain of rationality and intelligible events" and "the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic Numinous which transcends human reason (but which need not be the supernatural)" (Aguirre, 2008, p. 3). Almost invariably associated with fear, terror, and entrapment in Gothic narratives, numinous space functions thus as the nucleus of transgression in the given text, whose key role is "to destabilize assumptions as to the physical, ontological, or moral order of the cosmos" (p. 6). Structured upon signs that elude comprehension, the essential unknowability of the Numinous alienates both the readers and the characters of the Gothic narrative, and since "[a]mbivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning" (Botting, 1996, p. 2), the intensely defamiliarizing effect of the Numinous constitutes the core element of Gothic sensibility.[2]

Bearing in mind the dualistic quality of Gothic spatiality, it is important to notice that utopian space is also an essentially binary construct, signified by the boundary between the largely static utopian centre and the disordered peripheries of the outside world.[3] The Gothic emphasis on disarray and conflict, made evident in the genre's disorderly aesthetics, is in direct contradistinction to utopian beauty and harmony that, by default, resist ambivalence and heterogeneity. Drawing on Foucault's definition of a heterotopia as a "counter-site," Fred Botting points out that

> the main features of Gothic fiction, in neoclassical terms, are heterotopias: the wild landscapes, the ruined castles and abbeys, the dark, dank labyrinths, the marvelous, supernatural events, distant times and customs are not only excluded from the Augustan social world but introduce the passions, desires, and excitements it suppressed. (Botting, 2012, p. 19)

Conversely, utopias model space in correlation with the their socio-political organisation: utopian architecture, language, landscape design, and the overall aesthetics function as reflections of the state's underlying principles, which

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[2]   For the purpose of this paper, the Numinous or numinosity (used interchangeably) are used as an umbrella term following Manuel Aguirre's definition based on Rudolf Otto's original description of the numinous as that "which transcends the rational, that which by human definition lies beyond our conception of morality and reason (...)" (Aguirre, 1990, p. 3). As such, the adjective "numinous" will be applied to various elements of the presented world in order to highlight their defamiliarizing influence upon the text's protagonist.

[3]   I use the term "utopia" in the context of the genre, whereas the literary model of the utopian state in the discussed text is approached as a "non-existent society described in considerable detail and located normally in time and space" (Sargent, 1994, p. 9).

accounts for the defamiliarizing effect the utopian reality has upon its visitors. Yet, in contrast to the unsettling effect evoked by Gothic narratives, the expressions of surprise and wonder at utopia's omnipresent excellence are the major factors of utopia's didactic function.[4]

Despite the semiotic incongruity between the two genres, utopia and Gothic are not mutually exclusive. Anna Kędra-Kardela posits that "the Gothic quality of the spatial arrangement is not a constant feature of a text written in this genre, but is subject to change" (Kędra-Kardela, 2015, p. 169); Kędra-Kardela describes processes of gothicisation and degothicisation during which the given spatial model absorbs or, conversely, is cleansed of Gothic elements.[5] While Kędra--Kardela's analysis focuses on texts typically classified as Gothic, it is my contention that utopian spatiality is also susceptible to the above-mentioned mechanisms, allowing utopia to incorporate the Gothic mode into its spatial structure.[6] In what follows, I argue that space in Ellis James Davis's *Pyrna* allows for a subversive re-reading of the narrative in which utopian space is gothicised not by means of the typically Gothic elements of excess and transgression, but by utopia's staple traits of control, order, and homogeneity that evoke fear in the narrative's protagonist. Perfection can be terrifying, after all. [7]

The narrator's ambiguous reaction to Pyrna's excellence becomes then a signifier of repressed numinosity that accounts for the gothicisation of utopian space. The text's brief introduction establishes the tension between the two generic conventions: the sublime setting of "mighty mountains" is inhabited by people of seemingly supernatural – and implicitly superior – qualities:[8]

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[4]   For an extensive analysis of the spatial modelling and its function in utopian narratives, see Artur Blaim (2013) *Gazing In Useless Wonder*.

[5]   Kędra-Kardela explains that "either the familiar space becomes unfamiliar and thus acquires a Gothic quality, or a reverse process can take place, when Gothic space loses its quality as a result of being 'appropriated' by the characters (…) and thus becomes 'domesticated'" (Kędra-Kardela, 2015, p. 169).

[6]   As Anna Kędra-Kardela and Andrzej Kowalczyk (2014) elucidate, with the gradual departure from the staple 18th-century format, "the [Gothic] convention has been present in literary works as a Gothic mode rather than a genre" (p. 35).

[7]   Other utopias of the period also used the defamiliarizing effect in order to induce fear towards the perfected social model. In Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), the protagonist, who becomes trapped in the subterranean utopian world of the Vril-ya (the novel's utopian race), compares at one point his hosts to "a *sabbat* of fiends and witches" (Bulwer-Lytton, 1871, p. 34).

[8]   Defining the multi-layered concept of the sublime, Philip Shaw asserts that "whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, *then* we resort to the feeling of the sublime. As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits" (Shaw, 2007, p. 2). In what follows, the sublime is often associated with "[t] e sensation of cognitive failure" (p. 2). As Kędra-Kardela and Kowalczyk (2014) contend,

> It is not generally known that the summits of these mountains and their ice-filled valleys are inhabited by *a race of beings entirely different to any others*. In our *imperfect language* they would be called *inhabitants of another world* though really of flesh and blood like ourselves, and may sometimes be seen in the *moonlight* walking over the clear blue ice of the Glacier [emphasis added]. (Davis, 2009, p. 5)

The plot begins with the narrator recalling the circumstances of his accidental nocturnal visit to the glacier city of Pyrna, situated inside the mountain of Galenstock in the Swiss Alps.[9] From the outset, the protagonist's solitary excursion across the Rhone Glacier abounds in ominous cues that enhance the sinister Walpolian atmosphere: at the very beginning of his trek, the narrator admits to "a chill of apprehension" upon hearing "the ghostly echoes of [his] voice among the mountains" (Davis, 2009, p. 8); later, as he marches next to Toden See (Lake of the Dead), he arrives at a fork in the road where he decides to take the ominous "left-hand path" (p. 8) upon which he encounters a mysterious stranger. The meeting becomes the first example of defamiliarization in Davis's narrative: "The figure turned round and confronted me. I stood stock-still, *a chill of horror* ran through my veins, for the first view of my midnight acquaintance gave me the idea that I was in the presence of *a disembodied spirit*" (p. 9) (emphasis added). The cognitive estrangement evoked by the narrator's first contact with the representative of the utopian community initiates thus the process of fusing the utopian paradigm with Gothic qualities of fear and apprehension.[10]

In what follows, the tension is built via a continuous juxtaposition of the narratorial expressions of admiration and awe towards Pyrna's perfection and the protagonist's increasing sense of numinosity evoked by the utopian environment. Plotwise, Davis's utopia adheres to a fairly typical pattern centred on the outsider's visit to the secluded society, whose customs and details are meant to demonstrate its overall excellence over the external world. Accordingly, Pyrna adheres to Yuri M. Lotman's definition of a concentric city-state correlated with "the image of the city on the hill (or hills)" in which the city functions as "the mediator between earth and heaven (…) – it is the eternal city" (Lotman, 1990, p. 192). Situated under "a firmament of ice" (Davis, 2009, p. 11) and suspended between heaven and earth

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"[t] e beautiful derives from the perception of harmony, smoothness, proportion," whereas the sublime "is evoked by the experience of pain, fear, and threat" (p. 42).

[9]   Similarly to other utopian narratives of the period, the narrative offers some indications pointing to the supposed unreliability of the first-person narrator, whose excursion to Pyrna begins and ends with the loss of consciousness, allowing the readers to interpret Davis's novella as an utopian rendition of a dream vision.

[10]   The moment of stepping over the threshold between the two realities (i.e. entering the glacier through a hidden door) is therefore synonymous with crossing the boundary between both the utopian centre and the outside peripheries as well as between the human world and the realm of the Numinous.

inside a mountain, Pyrna is symbolically stylized as an advanced civilization, its sublime magnificence reflecting what the narrator calls "real beauty" of the utopian metropolis, "beauty that the mind could hardly appreciate, that the eye could scarcely hold, and the tongue or the pen but inadequately describe – a grandeur to be felt, not spoken of" (p. 17).[11]

In terms of spatial organisation, Pyrna combines the aesthetic values of beauty and harmony with the rational use of space. As one of the chief components of the utopian presented world, Pyrnian architecture reflects both the elegance and pragmatism of the utopian order by means of juxtaposing imposing exterior and interior designs (modestly furnished houses are reminiscent of palaces, "for they were all too large to be called mere houses" [Davis, 2009, p. 11]) with conspicuous yet subtle opulence; "I was astonished," the narrator observes at one point, "how much gold and silver might be used without producing a vulgar effect" (p. 18).[12]

The citizens of Pyrna appear to be equally aesthetically pleasing and their physiological wellness (the protagonist admits that he "neither saw a lame nor a blind man, nor any one with a physical deformity of any sort" [Davis, 2009, p. 19]) comes to symbolize utopian tenets of harmony and uniformity. As a homogenous egalitarian society (where "all the men [and women – note added] seemed made upon the same type" [p. 19] and "[a]ll loved their neighbours more than themselves" [p. 54]), Pyrna is based on the intrinsic relationship between the body politic and the body natural; accordingly, all citizens constitute elements of a larger whole, and as such, they are components of the largely anonymous collective rather than distinctive individuals (further highlighted by the fact that, in addition to names, all citizens have numbers assigned to them). Emphasized here are unity and cooperation in the utopian community where "[a]ll were one family; each one was prepared to make any sacrifice for his or her neighbour's benefit. Self-consideration was merged in the well-being of all. Selfishness was unknown. Each thought, moved, lived for the whole of the Universal Community (...)" (p. 30).[13]

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[11] The protagonist's astonishment is further highlighted by his repeated assertions of the aesthetic singularity of the utopian state; e.g., upon seeing a street in Pyrna, the narrator explains that "never in [his] life" did he see "such a crowd anywhere but in London at a public entry (…)" (Davis, 2009, p. 12), the surrounding buildings "were the grandest of the kind [he] had ever seen" (p. 18), and eventually the entire capital becomes the emblem of perfection unattainable in the outside world: "Never had I conceived anything so magnificent as the city before me" (p. 16).

[12] Blaim contends that "[t]he aesthetic qualities are most strongly associated with the image of the utopian state: they manifest themselves in its harmonious construction, alleged perfection, and timelessness" (Blaim, 2013, p. 8).

[13] The physiological perfection of the Pyrnians has a clearly defamiliarizing function, evidenced by their sense of sombre superiority over the human narrator, who admits that he "could not have approached one of them without reverence" (Davis, 2009, p. 20). "There was something

At the same time, Pyrna's grandiose architecture and superior social model stand in opposition with the natural world, whose conspicuous absence operates as the key gothicising element of the narrative's spatiality. According to Artur Blaim (2013, p. 146), the natural world, extensively appropriated by the state, constitutes a "local [manifestation] of the general principles underlying the utopian system", and thus, it is subjected to its laws and regulations. In the Gothic convention, the space of Nature often functions as the signifier of the Numinous as the site of transgression that needs to be controlled and, ultimately, familiarized.[14] Conversely, Pyrna's frozen natural world represents the all-encompassing spatial dominance of the utopian society and its mechanisms of restraint and order employed against the numinous aspect of Nature, which is recognized as potentially subversive and detrimental to the state's welfare.

It is, though, something of a paradox that the glacier realm of Pyrna, able to sustain only vestiges of what might be considered vegetation, symbolically professes its admiration of Nature, and even emulates Nature as a viable instrument of regulation. Significantly, the most impressive building in the city is the Temple erected for the glory of the Universal Creator, with the facade "formed of numberless massive marble pillars, perfectly plain, except at their tops, *which were carved and hollowed out like the branches of pine trees*" (Davis, 2009, p. 40) (emphasis added). Nature is, hence, cast in stone and effectively deprived of its restorative powers; Pyrna's main emblem is an ice pyramid called pryn, the signifier of the static perfection of the utopian realm as well as the symbol of "the passage to immortal life" after death, denoting the essential timelessness of the utopian order (p. 37).[15]

A corresponding mechanism of containment is present at the level of socio-political organisation established against the disruptive influence of the Numinous inside and outside utopia's boundary. Following the insular trope of traditional utopias, Pyrna is isolated from the peripheries, which, nevertheless, are essential to its maintenance. The centre's economic exploitation of the subjugated peripheral territories (viewed as "an inferior creation" comprising "an industrious but unintellectual people" [Davis, 2009, p. 33]) is juxtaposed with Pyrna's defence of its boundaries against any possibility of external intrusion; thus, while the servant

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awful and sublime in the faces of their old men", he confesses, "and I felt *too much abashed* in their presence to raise my eyes to theirs" (p. 52-53) (emphasis added).

   [14]   On a related note, in his discussion of dystopian narratives, Aguirre makes a valid point that "[d]ystopia offers – or enforces – protection against Nature, the Numen outside, the Numen in ourselves, by curtailing or cancelling not only the individual's freedom and his desire for freedom but also his will, his very individuality, his humanity" (Aguirre, 1990, p. 159).

   [15]   Nevertheless, the Pyrnians do not entirely reject the possibility of improving their already perfected state: "The end in view was to make Pyrna more and more beautiful and commodious, and where is it possible to build a city incapable of improvement and embellishment?" (Davis, 2009, p. 39)

peoples are expected to contribute the necessary commodities to the utopian state, their actual entry into the realm is strictly forbidden. In a similar fashion, domestic regulations foreground discipline and unity, for "[i]f one person transgressed, the whole machinery was put out of gear; the mechanism was stopped; and the mischief done was incalculable. The strictest order must be maintained and the law rigidly enforced" (p. 34).

Internally, Pyrna's socio-biological precepts clearly derive from the social Darwinist appropriation of the theory of natural selection, not uncommon in many utopias of the period, which accounts for the officially sanctioned programmes of eugenics and euthanasia (the former denounced by the horrified narrator as the "Massacre of the Innocents" [Davis, 2009, p. 51]). Susceptible to various physiological vicissitudes, the body in *Pyrna* is regarded as a potential space of numinosity that should be, if required, extirpated from the healthy society. Consequently, the Pyrnians regard severe illness as a criminal offense, and they "exterminate every form of life but that which is natural, healthy, and like to grow up capable of taking its place in our community on an equal footing with its brethren, and capable of exerting its faculties for its own and the general well-being" (p. 50).[16] The degothicised utopian body becomes then one of the key aspects of numinosity in Davis's narrative.

It is by virtue of the narrator's inherent human inadequacy that ambiguity and confusion, associated with the experience of numinosity, resurface in Pyrna; the utopian model becomes precisely the site of fear and unknowability it has been striving to suppress, as its underlying precepts are revealed to be beyond the comprehension of the human visitor. "Your people in the now state of your world could not understand our simplicity," his utopian guide tells him. "Their minds would be unable to grasp our idea of unity (…)" (Davis, 2009, p. 43). It is small wonder then that the narrator's initial astonishment gradually gives way to an increasing sense of alienation, enhanced by his growing awareness of the unbridgeability of the gap between his hosts and himself: "I felt I was in the presence of Gods, and not men," he admits, "and a strange, yet not disagreeable dread took possession of me" (p. 24). Subsequently, the astounding environment of the utopian *polis* is progressively gothicised into "the cold look of the stony city" (p. 53), the epitome of "a strange cold, world", inhabited by "beings with whom [the narrator] had no sympathy, and who appeared scarcely mortal" (p. 31):

> Beside me was one of them: I was at his mercy. His cold, clear features looked colder and clearer in repose, and his glittering eyes lost none of their lustre. *He was white as a corpse. The idea and dread of death stole over me*. I felt as if I were in the power

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[16] One needs only to mention Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), one of the principal utopian satires of the late Victorian era, in which punishing citizens for their failing health is considered a just and necessary countermeasure against the corruption of the society.

of some *malignant spirit* who was chilling and freezing me *into the grave* with an icy breath and a glassy stare, and *I shivered from head to foot with fear*. (p. 31) (emphasis added)

The process of gothicisation reaches its culminating point during the protagonist's visit to the city's graveyard, the core heterotopic component of the presented world, described appropriately as "a world of death" where bodies, entombed in the translucent ice pyramids, remain visible "fresh and ghastly as the day on which [they were] placed there" (Davis, 2009, p. 60). Michel Foucault observes that "[t]he cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces," for it is "a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance" (Foucault, 1984). In keeping with the Gothic paradigm, the heterotopic spatiotemporality of the graveyard is appropriated in Davis's text by means of the conspicuous visibility of the entombed bodies that remain suspended in the liminal state of the above-mentioned "quasi-eternity" beneath the dome of the ice pyramid as an unsettling reminder of Pyrna's living citizens encased under the glacier's roof.

Understandably, the utopian necropolis evokes a highly ambivalent response in the narrator, who at first muses upon his own inexplicable terror of dying ("Why is that the mortal frame shrinks so much from the sight of its brother mortality? Why does the body fear to contemplate its end? Who shall answer! [Davis, 2009, pp. 60-61]), only to reflect later had he "had no great desire to be out in a pryn of ice and frozen up among those frightful corpses (…)" (p. 62). Most importantly, however, the protagonist's ambiguous reaction towards the utopian reality (highlighted by his parting desire to return to Pyrna) points to the fundamentally indeterminate nature of space in Davis's utopia, evocative of the seemingly contradictory reactions of delight and dread. Immediately after leaving Pyrna, the protagonist finds himself upon the mountain's summit in front of "a scene of unparalleled beauty" of the Alpine landscape (p. 62), filled with "that *sublime majestic grandeur* that those who have not seen can never hope to imagine," capable of inducing both awe and terror in the enraptured spectator (p. 63) (emphasis added). This Burkean epiphany provides thus a fitting finale to the narrator's transformative journey through the realm of the utopian Numinous.

As an amalgam of the Gothic and utopia, *Pyrna* highlights some of the key aspects of the genres in question, inviting, as a result, further exploration on the reciprocal influence between both genres. At the same time, the numinous underside of Davis's utopia might be seen as an inadvert, perhaps, foreshadowing of the 20th-century dystopian narratives, in which the state-approved standards of excellence become a hotbed of authoritarian practices. Since "[t]he most horrible always forms the strongest impression on the mind" (Davis, 2009,

p. 63), the sublime terror of god-like perfection in *Pyrna* is a reflection of both its turbulent present and the anxieties of the future.

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