



Jasper, D. (2017) Jim Crace: inventor of worlds. *Theology*, 120(3), pp. 181-189.

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Deposited on: 29 May 2017

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Jim Crace – Inventor of Worlds

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Jim Crace is a novelist who makes no religious claims. He is a maker of worlds that have dark resonances, caught between time and eternity, that have their roots in forms of textuality and language that begin in the Hebrew Bible and may be traced in Christianity through the texts of the Desert Fathers to the writings of T. E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell. He is a deceiver whose deceptions reveal truths that are familiar yet strange and mysterious.

Key words: Fiction, desert, words, parable, flesh, dream, death.

The non-existent, fictional worlds of Crace's novels crackle with what Maurice Blanchot called in Kafka "the glistening flow of the eternal outside, as precisely described as the deep interiority of the mature novels of Henry James, but as exclusively exterior. Building worlds in the reader's imagination, Crace, the writer of fictions, answers no questions, his words burning in the mind seeking for meaning. His fictional Jesus in *Quarantine* (1997) challenges human possibility in his denial of the body. "He was all surface, no inside. His leaf had fallen finally. He was a dry, discarded page of scripture now. The wind embraced him, rubbed the words off him."¹ Crace's Jesus becomes a blank page of scripture, his definition and theology erased by the elements so that finally he becomes simply a vision, a figure that emerges as a mirage in the desert that can be grasped only in fiction.

In his early novels, Crace plays against other texts and literary, religious visions. Arcadias, dystopias, worlds long past, and times entered into at disturbing edges, between life and death – enter the mind of the reader, cutting

¹ Jim Crace, *Quarantine* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 193.

with sharp edges, their exterior surfaces felt at the depth of a deep interiority. Crace is, above all, a story-teller, at his best when inventing tales to explain worlds that are either long gone in history or mythic, as in *Arcadia* (1992), a disturbing, fairy tale mixture of the familiar and the strange. Such worlds persist in his later fiction in novels like *The Pesthouse* (2007) – which bears comparison with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and also written against a landscape of a future ravaged America – and *Harvest* (2013). But it is the earlier fiction that will be the subject of much of this essay. Crace would probably dismiss the idea that he is a religious writer, whatever that might mean, but the uncanny worlds of his early stories have much in common with the spiritual tradition of writing that includes certain books of the Bible and develops in the literature of the early Christian fathers and mothers of the Egyptian desert in which the sacred is felt everywhere in the landscape, and especially when 'religion' itself is either abandoned or else abandons us. Following Aristotle, for whom a writer does not simply imitate particular events, but reveals the logical coherence within human experience,² Crace invents symbolic worlds in which any suspected coherence is contested with the universality and hard, particularity of rocks and plants, of wounded and bleeding bodies. His characters have a Dickensian precision yet remaining deliberately two dimensional and therefore remote and finally inaccessible. As with the gospel Jesus, they can only be accessed through story. Theory comes much later, a decrepit follower of first narrative.

The Gift of Stones (1988) is set in some remote prehistoric period in which the age of stone is beginning to give way to that of bronze and iron. As with most of Crace's books the prefatory text hold its key. It is an excerpt from a fictional

² See, Raman Selden, Ed, *The Theory of Criticism* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 41.

book, as such material in Crace usually is, entitled *Digs and Diversions*, written by 'Sir Harry Penn Butler' in 1927. An archaeological dig has produced "the skeletal lower arm of a child." Scientific enquiry soon gives way to story-telling.

We sent the bones across to Carter for some tests – and then we entertained ourselves that night, in the darkness of our tents, inventing reasons why the arm was there, and what the fate had been of that child's other bones.³

Thus the novel begins – a story made up in the darkness of the tent. Characters have to be invented – the narrator is the step-daughter of the bone's owner and she speaks in characteristic Cracean language that is hard, precise, external, wincingly unavoidable.

My father's right arm ended not in a hand but at the elbow, in a bony swelling. Think of a pollard tree in silhouette. That was my father's stump. Its skin was drawn tight across the bone and tucked frowning into the hole left by the missing lower joint.⁴

This is the uncompromising manner of description of deuterio-Isaiah or the Psalmist as he, or she, describes the bones, the dried mouth and tongue of the desiccated body, and the taunts of those who stare at it.

Such exteriority and sense of the physical can be traced back to the roots of religious textuality. *Quarantine*, which is a fictional revisiting of the gospel story of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, looks immediately back in its sense of the Judaeen desert to the travels of Gertrude Bell, who wrote of it:

... the Wilderness of Judaea has been nurse to the fiery spirit of man. Out of it strode grim prophets, menacing with doom a world of which they had neither part nor understanding; the valleys are full of the caves that held them, nay some are peopled to this day by a race of starved and gaunt ascetics, clinging to a tradition of piety that common sense has

³ Jim Crace, *The Gift of Stones* (London: Picador, 2008), Preface.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 1.

found it hard to discredit.... The Jericho Road is bare enough, but the valley of the Jordan has an aspect of inhumanity that is almost evil.⁵

And behind Bell there are centuries of desert writing on spirituality back to the late fourth century *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Behind them there are the even older desert texts of the Bible itself.

But Crace is different in one crucial respect. He is writing fiction, his fascination with the story of Jesus' temptations being with its physical impossibility and surreality. Novelists are not evangelists or theologians. They have no gospel to preach. But, as Aristotle suggests, in poetry "a likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing probability."⁶ So, Crace endeavours to convince us of an impossibility, his language echoing from the Bible, and in its exteriority and mystery it becomes a 'spiritual' narrative, an address to human weakness in its profound sense of evil. What we finally make of the story is our business. In his character of Jesus – the Gally – a fanatical youth from Galilee with a mysterious healing touch, Crace strangely touches the description of the desert Arab by another narrator, but one who directly knew the desert as a harsh reality, T. E. Lawrence.

... he hurt himself, not merely to be free, but to please himself. There followed a delight in pain, a cruelty which was more to him than goods. The desert Arab found no joy like the joy of voluntarily holding back. He found luxury in abnegation, renunciation, self-restraint. He saved his own soul, perhaps, and without danger, but in a hard selfishness.⁷

Lawrence is describing desert religion without being concerned *which* religion this is, but something found at the meeting point of sand and word. Crace's world

⁵ Gertrude Bell, *The Desert and the Sown* (1907) (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), p. 10–11.

⁶ Selden, *op.cit.*, p. 41

⁷ T. E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935) (London: World Books, 1939), Vol. 1, pp. 39-40.

is pure words, while the Desert Fathers and Lawrence etch their language from the desert's reality – and between them is the impossible figure of the Jesus of the gospels, his life and purpose constructed by the demands of theology: But not in the novel.

Simply words the novel may be, but its being and texture are drawn from its exchanges with other literature of which the language and metaphors construct our sense of religion and of evil. Yet Crace's Jesus is a creation purely in language from whose surface the words have been erased by the winds of our imaginations so that he becomes a blank sheet like the Torah that is the blueprint of creation. As has been remarked of the Rabbinic view, "the Torah is not an artifact of nature, a product of the universe; the universe, on the contrary, is the product of the Torah."⁸ Crace's Jesus is a literary creation that blends with the literature that is born from the desert wind – the *ruach*, the divine wind that swept over the face of the waters, the slow, tasteless breath known to Lawrence, the still small voice of Elijah. "No god, no gardens, just the wind."⁹

This Jesus, the fanatical youth from Galilee, is the meeting place, in words, of Lawrence's cruel Arab, the gospel Jesus, the eccentric fourth century Egyptian Fathers, but he is also himself and none of these. He does not have the luxury of the consolations of Christian theology. He is a necessary fiction, subject only to the constructions we place upon him as readers, as we do with the character of Musa, who may be the Satan of the gospels, or may just be dangerously mad.

Quarantine, like all of Crace's novels, plays with other texts in the telling of an old story. Like all re-tellings it deliberately unpicks and re-weaves the

⁸ Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (Albany: SUNY, 19820), p. 37.

⁹ *Quarantine*, p. 193.

familiar and makes it new and strange. There are no rules except those set by the writer, and, even more, by the text itself. It is a novel haunted by the Bible with its familiar phrases, re-presenting us with images from which habit and the consolations of religion have erased the oddity. The Gospel of Matthew simply writes: “He fasted forty days and forty nights and afterwards he was famished” (4:2). “Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him” (4:11). What sort of a figure would you expect to emerge from the desert at the end of forty days, when common sense could expect nothing more than a corpse, and the gospel does not flinch but has Jesus return, without blemish, to Galilee to be about his business. Is fiction, then, closer to the truth in Musa’s fevered brain with its impossibility (with just a hint of the gospel Passion that is yet to come).

Musa looked towards the distant scree again. He told himself this was no merchant fantasy. His Gally was no longer thin and watery, diluted by the mirage heat, distorted by the ripples in the air. He made his slow, painstaking way, naked and bare-footed, down the scree, his feet blood-red from wounds, and as he came closer to the valley floor, his outline hardened and his body put on flesh.¹⁰

“And the Word became flesh.” The Greek word in John 1: 14 is *σὰρξ*, a harsh word meaning the fleshy substance of the body, which cannot bear forty days without food or drink. A body of this world, or just a form, pure exteriority, a figure from fiction – or something more, in our imaginations?

Many of Crace’s fictions tarry in that religious space between life and death, when the flesh rots and we begin to think again of the soul. Another of Crace’s deceiving epigraphs by a false poet, Sherwin Stephens, prefaces his 1999 novel *Being Dead*. The poem is entitled, “The Biologist’s Valediction to his Wife.”

Don’t count on Heaven, or on Hell.
You’re dead. That’s it. *Adieu*. Farewell.

¹⁰ *Quarantine*, p. 243.

Eternity awaits? Oh, sure!
 It's Putrefaction and Manure
 And unrelenting Rot, Rot, Rot,
 As you regress, from *Zoo*. to *Bot*.

Reading Crace demands a sensitivity to tone, the text often hidden by layers of irony and surface paint. And if there are echoes of Kafka's "eternal outside", Crace might also be compared with Blanchot's Kafka and his obsession with salvation.

Kafka's passion is just as purely literary [as Hölderlin], but it is not always only literary. Salvation is an enormous preoccupation with him, all the stronger because it is hopeless, and all the more hopeless because it is totally uncompromising.¹¹

People in novels, like Jesus, live in letters and words. Their fates transcend the grubby, harsh material realities of flesh. They become, like the Jesus of *Quarantine*, voyagers between the heavens and the earth. But if, for Kafka, salvation is hopeless, Crace is more ambivalent, perhaps less cynical.

The murder in the dunes of Baritone Bay and the slow decay of the entwined bodies of Celice and Joseph in *Being Dead* are described in graphic detail. Finally:

The crabs had gone. Celice and Joseph were not fresh enough for them. And though the swag flies had deposited more eggs in the couple's open cavities, most of the flies had now departed, kept away first by the covering of wind-borne sand that was embalming Joseph and Celice and then by the busy presence of the police. The forensic officers had hovered out the maggots, 'making them presentable', before the daughter came.¹²

In 'real' life the signs of mortality are made presentable, distanced from the reality of decay, while the novelist grants no such protections. But seeing things as they are, as in Mathias Grünewald, can open our eyes to the love that can often

¹¹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 57.

¹² Jim Crace, *Being Dead*. (London: Picador, 2010), p. 167.

missed. In *Being Dead*, the daughter, Syl, sees not the putrefaction of the bodies but something closer to love and “was too touched by the gentle nakedness and disposition of her parents to stop herself from sobbing.”¹³ In life Celice and Joseph’s relationship had been far from perfect, but beneath the surface there is something more – yet known only in a fierce acknowledgement of the surface reality of things: “...the corpses and the broken, thinned remains of fish and birds, or barnacles and rats, of molluscs, mammals, mussels, crabs are lifted, washed and sorted by the waves. And Joseph and Celice enjoy a loving and unconscious end, beyond experience. These are the everending days of being dead.”¹⁴ The couple, untouched by earthly years, join Wordsworth’s Lucy swept into earth’s diurnal course, “with rocks, and stones, and trees.” At the same time, in the poetry of Crace’s prose, the affirmation is never allowed to slip into doctrine. To link with another skeptical poet, Philip Larkin and the stony figures of “An Arundel Tomb” with its hesitant concluding lines, wanting the truth:

Our almost instinct almost true
What will survive of us is love.¹⁵

We see how text piles upon text, each affirmation falling short of religious profession in the genesis of secrecy, beginning with the intransigent stuff of experience and its glistening, gorgeous, putrefying outside. Yet the writer knows the truth of the saying of Jesus in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, “when you

¹³ Ibid. p. 167.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 210.

¹⁵ Philip Larkin, “An Arundel Tomb,” in *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 46.

make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner... then you will enter the Father's domain."¹⁶

In other words we have to spin yarns. All readers are outsiders longing, like the disciples, to be the insiders they are thought to be. And Grace is the teller of parables that are told to keep us out (Mark 4: 12) – yet that is not the end. All story-tellers are liars and purveyors of fiction, like the father in *The Gift of Stones*, his story told by his daughter, who is not his daughter, and whose narratives are at last found out as the fibs they really are.

At last his lies had caught him out. He knew what no one else had guessed, that this salt heath was the limit of his knowledge of the outside world, that all he knew of better days was those few times with Doe. He looked out at the night beyond the heath where, next day we would go. The stars were just the same, the moon, the wind. No doubt they had a sun there too. The stories that he'd told were now our past. His new task was to invent a future for us all.¹⁷

The story-teller is the creator of necessary religions – things to hold on to the slippery surface of the eternal outside. And stories come and go, each claiming its truth until the Old Covenant is overwhelmed, or consumed by the New. Grace's fellow novelist Iris Murdoch once stated the paradox clearly, for although "the novelist is potentially the greatest truth-teller of them all, he is also an expert fantasy-monger."¹⁸

The Jesus of the gospels spun yarns to his disciples (insiders but always on the outside of his stories and signs) and the crowds (outsiders who would be insiders), to persuade them of the truth of his gospel. His was a new story, or rather, as always, an old one revamped: And so Grace too, with his narrators. As

¹⁶ Saying 22 of the *Gospel of Thomas*. Ed. Richard Valantasis (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 95.

¹⁷ *The Gift of Stones*, pp. 201-2.

¹⁸ Iris Murdoch, "Existentialists and Mystics" (1970).

we begin to read *Signals of Distress* (1994) we know that something is being constructed and the pattern suggests that there is more to this than meets the eye. Who would name a steampacket the *Ha'porth of Tar* (any more than a ship would be called *Rights-of-Man*, as in *Billy Budd, Sailor*)? Something is going on here. The harbouring of the one ship and the wreck of the other, *The Belle of Wilmington*, experienced through the figures of the two helpless characters, Aymer Smith and chained black slave Otto, are described in graphic detail. One of the unnerving characteristics of Crace is that he seems to know how everything works, and can describe in detail the death-throes of a sailing ship, or the fashioning of flints, or the intricacies of jazz composition.¹⁹ But that, of course, is the point. We have to think that he knows everything, while his readers, like Aymer and Otto, stumble through a mysterious world in which we are sickened and buffeted, unable to help. But what Aymer does is dream.

Yet now his ship had found a haven, he sought a haven, too, in sleep, roped to the granite of the quay. His dream was kelp and some young country wife, ensnared and going down, with Aymer drowning in the girl, the girl sucked under by the weed, the weed pitchforked like hay on tines of sea and wind.²⁰

Crace is a careful writer, layering his language as, in Aymer's sleep, the 'haven' shifts into his dream, protected by the solid granite of the quay. His dream entangles with the stuff of experience – kelp, the fear of drowning, the sea and the wind, and mixes with erotic fancy. But there is no escape in this haven, no Heaven-Haven, even in dreaming.

But Aymer Smith, a man of good intentions, finds no spiritual peace or escape. Finally as he is beaten nearly to death (an event described in graphic

¹⁹ For the last see *All That Follows* (2010).

²⁰ Jim Crace, *Signals of Distress* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 2.

detail), the novel ends, as it began, with him sleeping and dreaming. In his childish dream all is put to rights. "He made amends. He put the world to rights again. Helped only by the muscle of the wind, and by the charity of dreams, the Cradle Rock ascended and declined."²¹ And so the story ends, and begins again, perhaps just a dream.

This sense of dream pervades all of Crace's writing. It is a biblical quality, just as the sharp, precise and exactly descriptive prose is Dickensian. But there is another, more hidden, less purely literary and less conscious tradition that Crace follows. The characters in *Arcadia* are perhaps not so much two dimensional as translucent, in Erich Auerbach's phrase in *Mimesis*, "fraught with background" in the tumbling world of the market place. To take the name of one street character, all are cellophane, known by the contexts of which they are the products. Crace's world is a kind of indeterminate present – in *Arcadia* a mixture of something like a medieval past and a dystopic future. Within such temporal indeterminacies, Crace is a dissector of souls, his characters strange religious beings in a world abandoned by religion. This, perhaps, it is to be like the Jesus of *Quarantine*, floating in his madness between the heavens and the earth, or else like Victor in *Arcadia*, who exists between two worlds, one dead the other powerless to be born. We see Victor only through a few conventional broad brushstrokes, but that, perhaps, is the point. He does not exist, even, perhaps, to himself. He is a lost soul, kept too long at his mother's breast, a dream even to himself. In all of its teeming curiosities, *Arcadia's* world is oddly Hebraic and remote, its externals sharply representative and destructive of that which remains darkly mysterious. Of its strange cast of characters – Victor, Rook, Anna, Em – their speaking, such

²¹ Ibid. p. 276.

as it is, is like that described by Auerbach of characters in the Hebrew Bible whose “speech does not serve, as does speech in Homer, to manifest, to externalize thoughts – on the contrary, it serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed.”²²

At the heart of all Crace’s novels there is a yearning, buried within and beneath the teaming stuff of his worlds. It is freed from any precise time, for the human condition is to be found anywhere and at any time, though always located in the particularities of place. Bodies, especially in Crace’s earlier works, struggle. They suffer abuse and beatings, rape and misuse, even death – and all of these have their consequences. Yet there is also a deep asceticism that finds its conclusion in the Jesus of *Quarantine*, a daring exercise in the imagination and the closest of all of Crace’s characters to an historical personage, though perhaps the one that is least accessible to historical attention. Crace’s strange, clipped prose that is half-way to poetry, resonates with traditions of spiritual writing, above all those rooted in the harsh, inhuman conditions of the early Desert Fathers, those characters who are stripped down, their souls and bodies exposed to suffering and the sacred.

Theology, of all enterprises of the human mind, is the one most likely to become flat and predictable because of its addiction to orthodoxy and correctness. Yet tradition shows that it also becomes the most creative when its authors step outside the charmed circle of what is permitted – but such people, from the fictive Jesus of the gospels onwards, usually pay a heavy price. Novelists, of course, are different. They create worlds, and if such are criticized, they are free to move on to new worlds. They bow to no orthodoxy. But what is

²² Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 11.

most strange and unnerving, is that the truths found in their shifting language, their most engaging fantasies, have a dark familiarity – for they are the truths known to Job which common sense found it hard to discredit, known to the gospel Jesus for a moment in Gethsemane or on the cross, and known to St. John of the Cross in his tiny cell. Crace’s fictional “Gally” is driven to the edge of his humanity.

This was his final blasphemy. He begged the devil to fly up and save him from the wind. He’d almost welcome the devil more than god. For the devil can be traded with, and exorcised. But god is ruthless and unstable. No one can cast out god. It was too late. Jesus was already standing at the threshold to the trembling world which he had sought, where he would spend his forty everlasting days.²³

People who do not claim to be ‘religious’ dislike it, and quite understandably, when people who do try to tell them that they are ‘religious’ after all, whether they know it or not. That is certainly not what I am saying of Jim Crace. But (there is always a ‘but’), I do wish to suggest that as an artist and a story-teller, Jim Crace the novelist is working within a tradition of language and textuality that connects him through his writing and imagination with traditions that have their roots in Western literature, in the Bible, and especially the Hebrew Bible, and the history of soul searching that extends from biblical revelations and their playing with human time and culture: that sense that the fragile, fleshly stuff of our being is susceptible to mysteries for which there is no direct expression, but may be glimpsed only by hauntings and in stories that we make up – some simply to deceive, some to reveal something like the truth by even more devious forms of deception.

²³ *Quarantine*, p. 193.

