Prologue

This study of Jim Crace's fiction represents a change of direction, not in terms of subject matter, as all my work is very much concerned with the novel, but regarding its theoretical emphasis. My previous critical work has been regarded as heavily theoretical. Certainly it has been informed by a conscious attempt to engage in a meta-realist understanding of literary texts, critiquing the poststructuralist-post-modern axis that has until recently so dominated literary studies in the Anglo-American world. Fortunately that tide has turned, and consequently my critical predispositions can remain largely implicit, where possible, especially given that my ambition is to facilitate reading of Crace. However, I do not imagine I can claim any mythical 'neutrality' or 'disinterestedness.' No such states exist, because all interpretation is an intervention. Like every critic, I am engaged in the 'takings of positions,' to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu. One must admit that such critical discrimination is unavoidable. Consequently, certain of my readers may well disagree with both my assumptions and conclusions, but hopefully the following exposition of Crace's texts will prove sufficiently informative.

My methodological readjustment also responds to the recent public pronouncement of certain academics avowing a notion of honouring the text, which position-taking initially suggested to me a covert intention of dismantling theory as an explicit exegetical tool, and thereby encouraging a return to naturalizing a liberal-humanist avowal of an Arnoldian–Leavisite axis of aesthetic judgment. While I could never accede to such a manoeuvre, I was inspired to rise to this challenge from a critically informed perspective, appropriately enough for the first study of an author about whom there has been limited academic response. This dictates an introductory, accessible and yet critically

instructive combination of materials. While pondering the problems peculiar to this synthesis, a strategy was suggested, that of allowing Crace and Crace's work to speak for themselves, reserving my exegesis for demonstrating both wider issues and something of the author's opinion of his creative process.

This recommendation satisfied the aforementioned shifts in the academic zeitgeist, thus offering me a 'eureka moment.' I have tried to use certain selected critical and theoretical works to supplement descriptions of Crace's texts and their major inclinations and themes, including: the narrative neo-Darwinian impulse in humankind; mythic and parabolic understandings and symbols that persist despite modernity; belief and the self; death and love; the problematic dialectic of the individual within communities; urban realities countering bucolic or pastoral myths; and humankind's place within the greater evolutionary scheme of nature. Once I had my method, a framework and methodology emerged since it seemed logical to consider Crace's work chronologically, which itself suggested certain phases and groupings of the texts; this scheme is introduced below. The major published works consist of *Continent* (1986), *The Gift of Stones* (1988), *Arcadia* (1992), *Signals of Distress* (1994), *The Slow Digestions of the Night* (1995),¹ *Quarantine* (1997), *Being Dead* (1999), *The Devil's Larder* (2001),² *Six* (2003) and forthcoming *The Pesthouse* (2007).

My first chapter, 'Exploring Craceland,' initially outlines a biographical sketch of Crace and considers its relationship to his fictional world, focusing upon the pastoral impulse which shaped his Arcadian visions and their origin in the area in which he lived until he left school at eighteen. Adam Begley, in his punning reference to Elvis Presley's fantasy domain, coined an influential term in his essay-interview in the *Southwest Review*, 'A Pilgrim in Craceland' (2002). According to Begley's preface, 'Jim Crace: The Art of Fiction,' (2003) "*Craceland*, [is] a place both strange and familiar, historically specific and timeless." (184) This chapter analyses Craceland's dynamics and characteristics, considering it as a world apart from our own, often but not always found in an additional sixth (inhabited) continent. Much derives from Crace's earlier travels, especially his understanding of Third World communities where the narrative impulse and the propensity for symbolic forms persist strongly, where one senses something beyond the literal. It also considers the development of Crace's writing, from his early attempts, his career as a journalist and finally the emergence of the rhythmic prose that has come to typify

Crace, with its preciseness of observed detail. Also considered are the traditional mythopoeic, storytelling and pastoral traditions that Crace incorporates so as to reinvigorate the novel, and as Eleazar M. Meletinsky explains in *The Poetics of Myth* (2000), “Twentieth-century mythification is unthinkable without humor and irony, which inevitably result when the modern is wedded to the archaic.” (303) This combination creates the energy of Crace’s comedy and yet sustains his serious themes.

Chapter 2, ‘Communities and change,’ outlines the sense of historical and personal transition for two communities in *Continent* and *The Gift of Stones*, one a Third World seventh continent and the other a Stone Age village. In both, traditional cultures are challenged. Crace’s commentary is embedded in the parabolic and allegorical structures of his fictions, and his worlds are not fantastical ones. *Continent* has a loose form, with varied characters and settings. Modernity consistently threatens local traditions with various interwoven tales featuring the electrification of a small town, the race of an American runner competing with a local rider on a horse, a son whose rational modern education conflicts with the superstitions of his father, the tale of a political prisoner, the recollection of a long-forgotten scientific expedition into an unexplored forest, the work of an aged calligrapher, and the madness of a company agent in a distant mining camp. Despite the dynamics of modernity, individuals retain a sense of the past and certain mythopoeic possibilities reassert themselves almost uncannily. Invented elements recur, such as the manac beans dropped by the prisoner on his arrest in ‘The World with One Eye Shut,’ which are sold to prevent erotic desire in *The Devil’s Larder*. Crace’s storytelling strategies depend on the innate, if partial, failure of more rational and familiar methods of explication.

In *The Gift of Stones* the community is prosaic and familiar, its emphases dehistoricized. The technological transformations threatening this community have clear parallels in late modernity, change demanding a process of adaptation. The bronze brought by a band of marauding horsemen supersedes the flint that has sustained this community. They fear cultural and technological redundancy, one outcome of the immovable logic of trade and the marketplace. By appealing to the imaginative dimension of narrative a disabled storyteller inspires the group first as a quixotic and comic visionary, and then literally in leading them through the environment he has described, beyond to a wider world.

The third chapter, 'Parables of distress,' considers *Arcadia* and *Signals of Distress* and the relationship of the individual to the larger community, in particular the sense of marginality. In both novels, published in the early 1990s, new arrivals and existing inhabitants face uncertainty in periods of great transition. The two settings are contrasting. The first novel is decidedly urban, and as Crace says to Begley in *The Paris Review*, echoing the central impulse of the work of Jane Jacobs discussed in Chapter 3, "I'm addicted to the imperfections of city life." (198) However, key characters are drawn from the countryside. Victor, the protagonist of *Arcadia*, first encounters the city as a baby carried by his mother, a beggar. By the end he is an ancient plutocrat developer, reshaping the market that once nurtured him, but unable to connect with the present or the past, essentially an isolated, rich old man. Crace draws upon the mythic and fairytale to sustain symbolic archetypes.

A sense of arrival is a strong element in both *Arcadia* and *Signals of Distress*, and in the latter a mix of outsiders is drawn to a small fishing town by fate. Its narrative works towards a series of departures that have unexpected consequences. In both novels certain individuals seem periodically at odds with both the landscape and the trajectory of history. All of them explore the rituals of everyday existence, especially those of trade and desire, in a series of crises of identity and social conflicts. In the imaginary settings, the first unnamed and the second a rendition of an obscure backwater in the early nineteenth century, Crace creates what might be termed an 'imaginary realism,' distinguished by a feel for social nuances and the detail of objective reality woven into a decontextualized environment where archetypes and archetypal events can be readily identified, with an emphasis on the symbolic synthesized with emotional verisimilitude. The internal coherence of the environments militates against the fabulist or magic realist dimensions, which are subtexts. *Arcadia* rather than reinventing the bucolic retrieves its persistent and recurrent ambivalence, the sense of fractured idyll that means even within the classical pastoral, as Renato Poggioli explains in *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (1975), "the few men who earnestly heeded the pastoral call found in no time that country life is at best purgatory, and that real shepherds are even less innocent and happy than citydwellers and courtiers," (2) which explains Crace's creation of Joseph to offset Victor's pastoral fantasies.

Chapter 4 considers two books published at the end of the 1990s, *Quarantine* and *Being Dead*, which together represent perhaps Crace's most lauded fiction. Each seems very different from the other, but both correlate human responses, emotional and physical, to hostile environments at the edge of civilization, away from the rhythm of people's habitual lives. Both are concerned with transformation. The first is set in the Judean desert at the time of Christ and describes five unconnected travellers who arrive in the desert for a ritual fasting. One is Crace's version of Jesus, a young boy from Galilee hesitantly seeking to test himself and his spiritual endurance and seeking a connection with God.

Being Dead is concerned with events surrounding the murder and decomposition of a middle-aged couple, with a retrospective account of their meeting, marriage and the events of the fateful day that will lead to them being bludgeoned to death on a cliff-top, their decomposition explored as part of a quasi-Darwinian metaphysical theme. Crace uses overlapping themes and episodes arranged in a complex structure which allows the intersection of different time sequences and the integration of his overarching themes. The novel opens with their bodies, and immediately diverges from this fact, most notably in a strand of the narrative that reverses the couple's activities on their last day so that the events occur as if spiralling away from the trauma of their murder. Further intercalated strands simultaneously focus on the natural world and its decomposition of their bodies, a series of memories of their first youthful meeting as students, and the search for them by their daughter, Syl.

Begley in 'Jim Crace: The Art of Fiction,' says of the two novels, they "can be read as a matched pair . . . In both, he [Crace] zigzags between the secular and the sacred." (184) More particularly, both novels present a recurrent pattern into which other recognizably Cracean elements are interwoven; the landscape itself and its place in nature subsumes and dwarfs various individuals who are faced with the issues of human belief, human identity and the universal presence of death in life and its metaphysical meaning, or lack of it. Death is immanent in life. In both texts a sense of the mundanity of the quotidian intersects with descriptions that evoke the symbolic power of nature.

The fifth chapter, 'Excess, passion and the uncanny,' considers the two books that were published at the beginning of the new millennium. Crace particularizes issues of love, family and other intimate or

domestic interpersonal relations in *The Devil's Larder*, and *Six* (2003), or *Genesis* as it was entitled in North America. Of *The Devil's Larder*, some of whose stories had appeared previously in *Slow Digestions of the Night*, Crace admits the project was long planned, and represents "an attempt at a piecemeal, patchwork novel," something inspired by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Primo Levy's *The Periodic Table*.³ In Crace the short pieces at times feel like narrative equivalents of philosophic aphorisms, particularly with their broadly common gastronomic themes and the implicit architectonic of an overriding cumulative intention. Generally, the recurrent contexts and themes are overt and therefore easy to identify, they include: relationships, sexuality and desire; families and their patterns of behaviour and traditions; sociability, jollity and its absence; and forms of poisoning or allergies. The protagonist of *Six* is a famous stage actor, Felix Dern, or Lix, and his performativity in life is one of the themes of the novel. The other is his serial procreative successes, despite his failing in relationships and lovemaking. The novel both begins and ends with Lix in his middle age, when Mouetta, Lix's second wife, announces an unexpected pregnancy. "Every woman he dares to sleep with bears his child. So now it is Mouetta's turn. Whispering and smudging his ear with her lipstick, her breath a little sour from the garlic in her lunch, she confirms her first, his sixth pregnancy. His sixth at least." (1) The slight concluding provisionality echoes throughout the text.

The novel has seven chapters, the first preliminary one is unnumbered and focuses largely on the conception of Mouetta's child; of the following six numbered chapters, the first five are concerned with the different phases of his life that bring about the conceptions of the first five children. The final chapter returns to Lix's middle age and in almost Woolfian manner depicts a simultaneous moment in the overlapping and yet disconnected lives of all of his children, implying an overarching intersection. The only commonality is genealogical and biological, something larger than the self.

Finally there is a short, critical addendum on Crace's work-in-progress, *The Pesthouse*, which will be published in 2007. I have been privileged to read and discuss with Crace several drafts of his as yet incomplete electronic manuscript. I attempt to explore its major themes, deriving largely from its setting in a post-industrial America where society has regressed to the kind of superstition and ignorance associated with the medieval. Planned some years before

its commencement, Crace says in a short note, 'THE PEST HOUSE (working title only) – to be delivered summer 2004 (?)': "The theme is *The Gift of Stones* in reverse. It is not about a prehistoric community adapting itself to progress, but a modern, slightly futuristic community adapting itself to a world without science, political institutions or social coherence."

There are consistent features throughout Crace's work, many of which I will identify subsequently. The notion and significance of storytelling recurs, largely because the figure of the storyteller illuminates and helps explore the curious and persistent interdependence of people even in modernity. Narrative may be manipulated, but it is finally concerned with the coming together of subjects, a fusion of imaginations. As Georges Bataille comments in *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy; Vol. II The History of Eroticism* (1976): "That man who assumes in the eyes of each participant of a community the value of the *others* can do so ... insofar as he signifies the *subjectivity* of the others. That presupposes the communication from *subject* to *subject* of which I speak, in which *objects* are intermediaries, but only if they are, in the operation, reduced to insignificance, *if they are destroyed as objects*." (243) Crace reinforces a sense that just as each person cannot absent himself from the living stream other than through death, neither can the story nor its narrative eye sever itself from the material detail and its constant perceptual intersection with the world of humanity.

In conclusion, I hope this study engages in what might be described as 'plain criticism.' If there is an emergent critical shift in literary studies it needs close reading techniques (a method that survived in many seminars, tutorials and classrooms) informed by appropriate secondary material, preferable to my mind than the aggressively theoretically deconstructive approach. As readers will see below, each book by Crace is dissected, its features explained as I draw upon Crace's own statements of his intentions and his retrospective interpretations of his *oeuvre*, in very large part drawn from a series of interviews undertaken over a period of eight months, a protracted engagement specifically aimed at supporting and augmenting my critical efforts. Other supplementary critical and theoretical materials are deployed where appropriate and illuminating.

Notes

- 1 This pamphlet contains stories that were already scheduled to be published in *The Devil's Larder*, which will be considered with the full collection and not separately.
- 2 *Six* was published under the title of *Genesis* in North America at the suggestion of his publishers, the original alluding to the six children of its protagonist.
- 3 Telephone conversation between Jim Crace and Prof. Philip Tew, 21 March 2005, part A 14:30–15:10; hereafter referred to as 'Crace–Tew: Telephone Interview 6A.'