

A Parable of Humanity – Character and Landscape Construction in Jim Crace’s *Signals of Distress*

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Abstract

Jim Crace is a remarkable contemporary British novelist in the realistic tradition, who deliberately avoids postmodernist experimentation or playfulness. The power of his writing rests in the combination of distinctive main characters and the sense of constructing unique fictional topographies. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that his novel Signals of Distress (1994) can be read as both a counterpart and a sequel to its more famous predecessor, Arcadia (1992), as it also explores, through the form of the satirical parable, the position of an individual in the process of a community’s transition due to larger historical, social and economic circumstances.

Keywords: character, landscape, community, transition, parable, social satire

The power of Jim Crace’s writing stems from his extraordinary imagination, which enables his predominantly straightforward narrative style and plain language to convey meanings that by far transcend the novels’ seemingly uncomplicated plots. He purposefully avoids any self-conscious experimentation or playful postmodernist strategies, espousing instead the tradition of realistic storytelling, perhaps with the small exception of *Being Dead* (1999), in which death “is elevated to the principle of a metaphysics” (Gašiorek 42) as accounts of the life story of a middle-aged married couple take turns with detailed and precise descriptions of their brutal murder and the subsequent decomposition of their corpses. However, what distinguishes Crace from post-war realistic and naturalistic fiction is the fact that his novels are set in distinct imaginary places and landscapes that allow their author a thorough exploration of numerous other possible worlds, both physical and mental, geographically specific as well as metaphorical. These are inhabited by protagonists

whose positive character traits and troubled fates invite understanding and sympathy but who are also treated by the author with a more or less apparent irony that makes any profound identification with them almost impossible. It is through the interconnection and coexistence of settings and characters that Crace touches on his favourite themes: “a crisis of faith and meaning, the elusive quality of love, an interrogation of the essentials of identity within a broader social context, a consideration of the crisis of modernity in terms of its mercantile/capitalist instincts, and an awareness of the human narrative impulse” (Tew 24).

Despite the above tendency towards diverse landscape construction, it is possible to trace several idiosyncrasies of Crace’s fictional world that constitute a certain continuity from one work to another, especially in his novels written during the 1990s. The imaginary milieus he creates always appear familiar, yet simultaneously distant and unrecognisable to the reader, be it the unnamed city in *Arcadia* (1992), the Judean desert in *Quarantine* (1997), or the sandy Baritone Bay coast in *Being Dead*. This combination of the mundane, the “immediacy of the everyday” (Tew 30), and the enchantingly other results in what Adam Begley identifies as “Craceland”, claiming that Crace is “brilliant at exploiting the tension between the highly specific and the generic, between an historical moment and timelessness, between an imaginary topography and the invented landscape’s familiar features, which feel as real as your backyard”, all of which mean that in his novels “nearly everything is equivocal” (Begley). The characters of these worlds are caught in some greater social, economic, or spiritual processes that in effect significantly transform the customary paradigms of their everyday existence, making them part of “communities in transition” caused by change that “comes suddenly, irrevocably, and the human response to it is captured with wonderfully uncluttered intensity” (Begley). The wonder of Crace’s novels rests in the immense variety of these transformations, from the transition between the modern, urban, mercantile social patterns and their dehumanised, postmodern hyper-consumer simulacra in *Arcadia*, to the very birth of Christianity through the enigmatic miracle-making Galilean who dies after his forty days of fasting only to rise and be seen in the end by those who have just begun their quest for hope and liberation in *Quarantine*.

Although these processes occur within wider communities, Crace always concentrates on individuals and the ways in which they experience their development and its consequences. As these people are exposed to changes far beyond their control, they are forced to cope with often conflicting demands in order to survive or preserve the community. The tension between adapting to such changes and preserving one’s beliefs, values and personal integrity is inevitably accompanied by anxieties and fatal losses for these individuals. Moreover, it suddenly places them outside the social group, making them fully responsible for the further course of their life. That is why Crace’s protagonists tend to be loners and outsiders living on the edge of their community, partly out of necessity, partly due to circumstances, but partly also because they somehow differ from the other members. “These protagonists all suffer in a sense an ontological and epistemological displacement from the world: they are in the world, but do not live according to its rules; they think they understand the world, but they are using the wrong interpretative parameters” (Lane 27). It is precisely the combination of a rich imaginative landscape and the individual’s irreversible fate and profound moral dilemma that invites readings and interpretations that reach beyond the scope of the actual story. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how

Crace renders these idiosyncrasies in his second novel of the decade, *Signals of Distress* (1994), and how it can be read, in terms of ideas, narration and character construction, not only as a sequel to its immediate predecessor, *Arcadia*, but also as a unique component of its author's fictional universe.

Of Words and Deeds: Aymer Smith

The cast of characters Crace creates to inhabit the world of *Signals of Distress* is rich and miscellaneous in order to embody the different aspects of humanity the story needs to confront, from grave seriousness to obscure eccentricity. "Generally the characters represent traditional (recognisably Shakespearean) archetypes: a radical male virginal puritan, an unsympathetic ambitious brother, two young lovers brought together by fate, a Rabelaisian female innkeeper, and a grasping merchant" (Tew 95). However, stereotypical as they might appear, the characters are brought to life and made vivid and plausible through the various situations in which they find themselves and their encounters with one another. What connects most of these characters is their feeling of or need for dislocation, either willing and voluntary or not. As Crace notes, "most of the main players are out of place. They're either waiting to be dislocated entirely – they're going to the New World as emigrants – or they are dislocated because they are washed up on the shores of this place where their culture, and their attitudes and their responses don't really gel" (quoted in Tew 97). It is this feeling of displacement and unbelonging that brings together individuals who under normal circumstances are unlikely to ever meet, and which thus forms the backbone of the novel's captivating plot.

Aymer Smith, the protagonist of the novel, represents in many respects a reverse counterpart to Victor from *Arcadia*, as the only thing that connects them is their isolation due to their lack of basic social competences. However, even their isolation differs in nature and cause: while Victor likes being left alone and spends most of his time fortified in his "Big Vic" tower overlooking the city, Aymer wishes to be a respectable member of society and so he keeps striving to socialise with everyone he encounters, yet these attempts might be described as desperate or even disastrous since other people at best regard him as ridiculously odd, at worst as arrogant. Compared to the cold, calculating, self-centered and businesslike Victor, Aymer is a humanist character with a sincere persuasion that his destiny is to make the world a better place for those less fortunate than himself. Unlike Victor, who as a child was forced to live in the city and eventually became a multimillionaire entrepreneur but who is still at heart a country boy with a dream of leaving a mark on the city by building a pastoral oasis in its very bustling centre, Aymer is a prototypical city person with urban habits and manners who foolishly believes that he will be able to impress the rural community of Wherrytown and even find himself a wife there.

Aymer Smith is one of Crace's most vivid and tragicomic characters, an illustration that high-quality ingredients do not automatically make a tasty meal, and that the best intentions do not always achieve good results. Despite all his admirable character traits – he is kind, helpful, charitable, generous, altruistic, well-mannered, educated and well-read – he rarely makes the desired impression on those he would like to befriend. Because of his lack of empathy, his naivety, inexperience and ultimate inability to communicate, to the ordinary villagers from Wherrytown he appears detached, conceited, pompous, self-important

and annoyingly verbose. They are especially put off by his rousing speeches in which he contemplates and preaches on countless more or less serious issues, be it slavery, botany or sea storms, and which he mistakes for evidence of his eloquence. “He liked to think of himself as a plain man, plainly spoken. He didn’t care for adjectives, or anything that was too ornamented. He liked the force of facts and objects, and he endeavoured to make his conversation instructional” (25). Aymer is both a ludicrous and miserable character, one to be mocked, pitied and liked at the same time, and Crace repeatedly treats him with a mixture of irony and sympathy. On the one hand, he presents his “hero” as aware of his limitations yet still eager to please and make a good companion: “[Aymer] knew he would never have a reputation for vivacity, and that he was more comfortable with documents than company, but still he’d meant to be amusing and relaxed” (17). On the other hand, he ironically comments on almost all Aymer’s attempts to win respect and sympathy from the local people, the sailors or fellow lodgers. When he is explaining to George why the only inn in the village should still have a distinguished name, Crace interrupts his lecturing monologue by calling it a “Comedy of Wisdoms” (15); the description of his failure to make a decent impression on the innkeeper and the parlourman is concluded by the sentence that “George the parlourman had seemed to find his conversation comic, except when [Aymer] attempted jokes” (17); and when he desperately seeks the Norrises’ company, which he much enjoys, Crace readily compares him to the dog Whip chasing sea animals on the seashore: “So while the dog played in the surf or made life difficult for crabs and sanderlings, Aymer joined the Norrises and made life difficult for them” (196-7). Aymer seems to be doomed to inhabit a social void outside any conceivable community, where he will forever experience an inexplicable clash between his theoretical mastery of the principles of humanism and the mockery, bullying and ostracising he is exposed to in reality.

The character Aymer is most comparable with is the eccentric preacher Phipps, the spiritual leader of the local congregation. Although Aymer’s attitude of Radical Sceptic Amender differs much from the religious view of the preacher, their personalities are remarkably similar. Both the men are proud of being unorthodox, educated, well-spoken, ambitious to be taken as a moral authority, with a strong tendency to patronise people and tell them how they should behave while simultaneously being unable to put most of their ideas into practice and remaining thus on the theoretical level of abstract ideas. Like Aymer, Phipps is a “man who loved debate, who took his pleasures from a book – for Mr Phipps was Aymer’s twin in many ways. Both were prisoners of priggishness, and dogma, and vocabulary. Both had Latin. Both were smitten by Katie Norris. They were two peas, except they disagreed on everything they had in common” (159). Despite their being potential intellectual allies, Aymer and Phipps can hardly stand each other precisely because they recognise in each other what they really are like, a mirror image too unbearably dissimilar to how they wish themselves to be seen. As the story proceeds, by letting the reader know their dreams Crace discloses that the two men’s detachment, verbosity and obstinate argumentation is a mere protective mechanism they employ in order to conceal their unhappiness from being lonely. After his zealous sermon aimed at the Sabbath-breakers, Phipps is haunted by his fierce words, lacking any kindness and Christian charity, and drowns his self-pity in secretly kept brandy, dreaming up “better times in Wherrytown” (205), when he spends pleasant evenings in the friendly company of Aymer Smith and the Norrises. Similarly, when the *Belle of Wilmington* eventually departs for America, the once

again desolate Aymer daydreams about Miggy and Katie being happy in their new homes, welcoming him warmly as a guest and showing him much gratitude for what he has done for them, while in reality the first finds him disagreeable and the latter views him as a difficult yet vulnerable child. He even tries to dream Otto's bright future, trying to "find a happy ending for the African as well" (252). What the two men fail to see, however, is the actual reason for their social isolation.

The inability to imagine or understand that other people need not necessarily share his view of the world in effect makes Aymer a desperate solipsist whose declared altruism and helpfulness easily transform into a self-centered obsession to prove his acts valid and beneficial. With his mission a failure and his reputation tainted, Aymer finds himself the only person in the village of no use during the catching and loading of the pilchards, realising that "even greeting enemies was better than the desolation of being the only person on the beach without a job" (139). However, even though everything suggests that it would be wiser for him to leave Wherrytown as soon as he can, Aymer decides to stay in order to show the locals and the sailors how mistaken they have been in judging him a show-off and nuisance. "He had to put the world to rights. *His* world, that is. He wanted to be liked. He wanted to regain his dignity before he left" (157). His problem is that he persistently strives to project his idealised world onto the real one around him, ignoring that these two lack almost any overlapping areas, and that the rules and values of the first are incomprehensible or even unacceptable for those inhabiting the latter. Therefore, although he wants to believe that his new Duty is to provide financial support to the Bowes, the fact that he plans to do it "in public view" so that others "would see who was charitable and who was not" (196) makes it rather an egotistical Duty to himself, one no longer motivated by a sincere desire to help those in need.

"Words have power, George. Words are deeds. [...] words and deeds should be the same. You make a promise, you should keep it. You hold a view, than you should stand by it. You should say what you do: you should do what you say" (141), says Aymer explaining why he revels in long speeches, to which George replies with his typical common sense turn of phrase: "People in these parts in't impressed by words. They don't mean what they say. They only mean what they do. And that, I think, makes better sense" (141). What Aymer gradually reveals is that his flawless theory about words and deeds does not tally with what he does in practice. However, long before he does, Crace provides the readers with several, more or less ironic, examples of this discrepancy: as soon as Aymer decides to travel to Wherrytown in order to perform what he sees as the moral Duty, he realises that he has "no appetite for such a long and testing journey" and that he is not "suited to the countryside" (22), and what helps him endure his unease is not so much the idea of ethical responsibility for the fate of the poor kelpers as the prospect of finding himself "a loving country wife" (22) there; he sets Otto free, "a greater duty to a greater Brotherhood" (41) as he calls it in his letter to his brother Matthias, without thinking about the consequences of his act, namely the immediate fate of the illiterate slave who cannot even speak English, thus spending much of his waking time searching for the African and daydreaming foolishly about bringing him, "disguised in a dress and bonnet" (164), secretly home and giving him a job at Hector Smith & Sons: "The plan was not preposterous. He'd dress him well. He'd mould him into shape. Otto would learn to read, write, cipher, be a gentleman, and enjoy the status of emancipation that otherwise could flourish only in his dreams"

(164); when he makes up his mind to marry Miggy Bowes, he does not think about her as a human being but as a project he has a moral duty to accomplish, similar to that concerning Otto as in his visions Aymer plans to “*liberate* the girl” and “*break her chains of poverty*” (76), with the aim of turning her into a lady. Crace ironically makes his protagonist use almost identical rhetoric as with the slave: “The thought was not preposterous. He’d dress her well. He’d mould her into shape. She’d learn to read and write and cipher. She’d pick up the proprieties of city life and adopt a more womanly demeanour” (73). Despite his noble words, Aymer’s acts run contrary to the very essence of humanism as he is unable to acknowledge other people’s desires, needs and wishes, imposing on them exclusively his own, thus “revealed to be a pompous prig out of touch with the world he wants to save” (Lane 27). The selfishness and pettiness behind his words and acts is only more clearly demonstrated by Aymer’s looking forward to his brother’s jealousy of his new young wife.

Another example of the lack of concordance between words and deeds in Aymer’s life can be seen in the book he is reading – *Truismes* by Emile dell’Ova, both the text and its author invented by Crace, namely the passage about the benefits of solitude: “The solitary Traveller has better company than those that voyage in the multitude, for he has Nature as his best Companion and no man can be lonely in its Assemblies of sky and earth and water, nor want of Friends” (159). Aymer likes to see himself as such a destined solitary traveller, a “Radical, an aesthete and a bachelor” (160), whose noble mission is higher than an ordinary person’s life and thus transcends and inevitably excludes most earthly pleasures. However, having gone through all the troubles and injustice in Wherrytown, the book offers little solace in Aymer’s loneliness as he comes to understand the naked truth of his deprivation: “He couldn’t fool himself. He’d rather be some cheerful low-jack, welcome at an inn, than the emperor of all this landscape” (160). This painful realisation of what human needs actually are in everyday life, and of the fact that words alone offer little consolation if detached from reality, is the most useful lesson Aymer learns in Wherrytown, one which makes him throw the book in the fire, watching as “[t]he fire grew strong on aphorisms, epigrams and teasing ambiguities” (176), a mocking commentary on the connection between his bookish erudition and genuine emotional warmth.

Therefore, ironically but understandably, the only instance when Aymer does something that another person finds beneficial or desirable occurs when he is not the initiator and when he is actually not aware of its effect – the sexual intercourse with Rosie Bowe during which her second child is conceived. The situation which precedes the act makes Aymer very ill at ease, as none of his speeches or wisdoms prove helpful in handling it – he is alone with a woman he has nothing in common with, and this woman is strong, independent and self-sufficient, which makes him realise his uselessness:

Nothing that he valued in himself had any value there. His modest wealth, his manners and his education – what did they count for? His charity? His Scepticism? His love of conversation and debate? His unexpected sympathy for dogs? His democratic spirit? His prodigious memory for Latin names? Which among these attributes should Rosie Bowe admire? Which of his parts and virtues could she burn for candle wax, and which would stew well with a turnip root? What use were manners for catching fish? Would Scepticism make a sauce? Would education batten down the roof against a lifting wind? (233)

It is only when he resigns from being useful in his terms and lets Rosie take the initiative that Aymer is eventually depicted as a proper human being. Without words, without giving soap or coins, he performs what he has been preaching about since he arrived in Wherrytown and makes someone's life better. His late loss of virginity thus becomes symbolic as, more than physically, it transforms him mentally by making him learn that in order to help another person it is essential to get to know what he/she is like, wants and feels, even though he might not fully understand or identify with it. This simple lesson in the necessity of empathy for any humanistic project appears to be the central moral of Crace's parable.

Symbolic Topography – Landscapes of Distress

Crace admits his keen concern with imaginative landscape construction: "I see myself as a landscape writer. There are interesting landscapes to be explored both in and out of the city, in books and in life" (quoted in Tew 6). In his novels, the landscape always serves as a mediator between the characters and the happenings of the external world. "Places lend themselves readily to symbolical extension because there is so little that is inherently affective in their physical properties" (Lutwack 35). Aware of this attribute of physical environments, Crace makes the setting a crucial component of the stories of his novels, as in each he creates a distinctly unique landscape and implements it in the novel's symbolic meaning. It is so closely linked with the characters' consciousness that it forms a kind of a "mental space that is both cognitive and emotional [...], both free floating and yet time-bound and situated, both inward-facing to the habits of pure thought yet also compromised by the circumstances of the corporeal self" (Menigan 19). Moreover, the very act of imaginative construction of a "verbal space endowed with psychological, ideational, and aesthetic dimensions" and the "retreating to the neutral territory fashioned by the imagination" gives the author a measure of freedom, as it liberates him or her from the "constrictions of the ordinary time/space matrix of 'reality'" (Malmgren 25). Place in literature evokes numerous connotations – both positive, such as "security, stability and meaningfulness", and negative, for instance "oppression, repression and the related desire to escape from the place in question" (Hardy 7). If place is rather fixed and limited, "space is more suggestive of openness and freedom to move, but also of emptiness and lack of meaning and orientation" (Hardy 7). It is therefore obvious that if the setting of a story is to fit into its meaning framework, there must be a correlation between the place and the space in the narrative. It is precisely the profound complex of geographic place with physical and mental space that generates the unique atmosphere of Crace's novels.

From the geographic point of view, *Signals of Distress* can be understood as a counterpart to *Arcadia*, which is set almost exclusively in a city and deals with urban themes, such as the implementation of rural elements into the texture of a modern city, the changing role and form of the agora, and the effects of postmodern commercial architecture on the understanding and exploitation of public space. The unnamed, imaginary city in the novel thus becomes a scene that allows its creator to explore the various sociological, architectural and city-planning issues characteristic for contemporary city life, while, at the same time, he develops a parable on humanity and morality through Victor's pitiable/admirable life story. The prevailing generic framework of *Arcadia* is that of the social satire which,

combined with psychological probes and sociological contemplations, reflects the very complexity and ambiguity of the novel's milieu.

The fictional landscape of *Signals of Distress* is substantially different: not only is it that of a village, countryside and sea shore, but Wherrytown, the setting of a large part of the story, was a genuinely existing small settlement in west Cornwall until it was destroyed by a storm in 1962. However, although both the location and the time are precisely specified, the whole story, including the shipwreck of the *Belle of Wilmington*, is completely made up, which renders its actual year and place subsidiary in terms of the novel's meaning structure and enables an interconnection between the plot, the characters and the landscape in a way similar to its predecessor. What the two novels have in common is the relationship of the protagonist to the environment in which he finds himself. Although Victor has spent almost his entire life in the city, he has never become a proper "townie [...] through and through" (*Arcadia* 67) and has developed, due to his unfortunate fate, a rather detached, indifferent and at times even hostile attitude to the place where he has grown rich, still feeling like an unwanted stranger there. Aymer, on the contrary, is a townie born and bred, without a notion of what life in the countryside is like, and so he is also a stranger and loner in Wherrytown where "[t]here wasn't any city etiquette" (151), and perplexed by the realisation that the locals are not in the least "paralysed by such a visitor" (65). Both Victor and Aymer are determined to set things right by making their mark, thus showing other people their worth and, consequently, winning deserved respect and gratitude. Yet, while Victor employs the means natural to him, his money and managerial skills, and remains safe in his wished-for isolation, Aymer treads on the unfamiliar grounds of socialising with people whose values he can never fully comprehend and inevitably ends up in an isolation that causes him only despair and confusion.

Crace's construction of the landscape Aymer finds himself in reflects perfectly the relationship between the place and its uninvited intruder. That he will not feel comfortable there is already foreshadowed by the description of the inn, which becomes a metaphor of the whole local community and its attitude to strangers – wary, reticent, distrustful and suspicious. The effect is even intensified by the fact that the inn has no name, which Aymer is not willing to accept as in his view all things must have names (which he is so proud of being good at remembering), and which points to the irrelevance of words in this world. "The inn was ideal for hide-and-seek. It was a warren, untouched by architects. [...] There wasn't any logic to the place nor, even, any regimental regularity to the shapes and sizes of the building's bricks and stones" (16). It is a place where the logic, rules and values of Aymer's life do not apply, a place where more is hidden than laid bare and which will therefore forever remain a mystery to him, a place that will at best brush him away, but also with the potential to destroy him. As with Aymer's attempts at "liberating" Otto and Miggy, Crace uses a doubling image when he describes the inn and the village: Wherrytown, "just like the inn, was made for ambushes and hide and seek. It was a warren, with perplexing levels [...] There weren't streets or civic places, just a lattice of steep intersecting alleyways and lanes, some no wider than a horse and none with any compass sense or geometric logic" (89). The settlement symbolically lacks all the traditional properties of a small town, suggesting no overlap with Aymer's experience and he feels as if in a maze, a "reckless labyrinth" (90) in which he soon loses his way and himself, and which toys with him in a manner he neither likes nor is able to restrain and resist.

Another landscape essential for the story is the coastal beach around Wherrytown, namely the Cradle Rock, a massive boulder that can be swung on its pivotal stone like a cradle or seesaw. The rock assumes a symbolic meaning in the novel: if the beach is a busy, bustling and often chaotic workplace for the kelp gatherers and fishermen, the Cradle Rock is a peaceful and calm place, the only solid point in the lives of the local people, a natural monument whose remarkable quality gives it an aura of solemnity and a profound spiritual, almost religious, dimension:

It was a perfect paradise of rocks, much loved, in summer, by watercolourists and lizards. But in the winter, with so much grey about and so little light, the dull pinks of the exposed stone were warm and beckoning. [...] If it was natural masonry, then it had been weathered by a geometric wind and shaped by architectural frosts. This topmost block – the shape and size of a small stone cottage – rested with solid poise on the nipple of a flat but slightly rounded rock. If anyone sat [...] on the bench and stared for long enough it could seem the block was hovering an inch above the world. It had a tarred cross on its side. (81)

The swinging of the rock can be taken as a barometer of events and changes happening in Wherrytown and its surroundings, an indicator of social equilibrium within the local community. At the beginning of the novel, a storm makes it seesaw in the gale as the sea is bringing two ships with people on board who are to affect the life of the small and quiet port – Aymer, Otto and the crew of the *Belle of Wilmington*. Symptomatically, all of them in the course of the story have something to do with the rock, which illustratively reflects their position in the local community.

For Otto, the Cradle Rock becomes a hiding place, a refuge where he hopes to be at least temporarily safe from those hunting him for a financial reward, the sacred place thus ironically playing the role of sanctuary for the biggest conceivable outsider of the community. For Aymer, the rock becomes a source of momentary happiness when he and the young sailor Ralph set it swinging on their way back from the Bowes to Wherrytown. Excited that he managed to do something so astonishing, Aymer “had seldom felt such unselfish pleasure” (82). Yet, when the short moment passes, they set out on an unpleasant and tiresome journey to the village through the ice and snow, only to find the inn empty and cold. Aymer thus soon forgets his elating experience with the rock as he first realises that his clothes are gone and later even has to face an embarrassing and painful confrontation with Shipmaster Comstock. The scene shows how unwelcome Aymer is in Wherrytown and that it is only far away from the settlement and its inhabitants that he can do something he would be satisfied with. At the same time, it suggests that even such an act will be rather an irrational one, stemming from outside the realm of his manners and erudition, and therefore short-term and consequently accompanied with confusion and unease, anticipating thus his lovemaking with Rosie Bowe.

The characters who most markedly change the life and events in Wherrytown are the crew of the *Belle of Wilmington*. These sailors are typical representatives of their kind – restless, mischievous, “becalmed and idle and, almost, bored” while ashore, unable to amuse themselves and therefore looking for a “chin they’d like to punch, a silver time-piece or a pair of boots they’d like to lift, a mouth they’d like to kiss” (46). However, they

still manage to affect the lives of several people from the local community, such as Rosie Bowe, Palmer Dolly, Walter Howells, Alice Yapp and Lotty Kyte. Because they feel stuck in the dull village of hard work, sober mores and strict religious morality, they more than appreciate the opportunity to leave Wherrytown for the coast in order to drive a herd of cattle back to Howells, equipped moreover with bottles of spirits. As expected, they get drunk and decide not only to swing the Cradle Rock but to “displace it from its pivot stone” (217), and by doing so the massive rock loses its centre and falls from its platform into the sea. Palmer Dolly, the only local person in the group, does not take part and only watches the scene superstitiously, believing that destroying the rock will bring bad luck and when at home he hears “the distant impact of the Rock” he “trembled in his bed. The Rock was down. The coast would never be the same” (218). The bringing down of the rock could have several interpretations within the symbolic meaning of the story: it suggests that the very core of the local community’s livelihood, kelping and catching pilchards, might soon give way to other, possibly more industrial and mercantile, activities; it can also reflect the transformation of the community as many of its young members are to leave it in hope of finding a better future overseas; but it can also indicate the future fate of the ship, which sinks on its voyage to Canada. The Cradle Rock, much like the simple rural community of Wherrytown, which has survived all the blows of natural powers, thus symbolically succumbs to the social and economic pressures of the fast-developing capitalist world outside.

In order to complete the novel’s irony, in the last chapter Crace moves the story to the city where Aymer lives. Although he seems to be a different person now, “less preacherly, and more resigned” (258) as his brother points out, deep inside he has remained the same self-deluded fool and idealist, which can be seen from the very first lines of the chapter: “City air makes free? Well, yes. It was a liberation to be home again amongst the soft civilities of city life, and free from the embarrassments of Wherrytown. But Aymer Smith affected not to like the taste of city air that much. He was a travelled man now, amphibious between the country and the town” (256). Based solely on his short and, to a large extent, unfortunate stay in Wherrytown, Aymer already considers himself a well-travelled man with a newly acquired capacity to feel natural both in the country and the city, while in reality he will always be a stranger in both, though in the latter it is easier for him to sink into the anonymity and refined manners of the crowds. Therefore, although the city is the milieu in which he should be happy and safe, the opposite is in fact the case. When in search of adventure and education he decides to visit the poorest area of the city, dressed “democratically” in plain clothes, because “[o]ne ought to know the city of one’s birth, including those parts that were not well furbished” (264), so as to prove that “[i]t would be wrong to regard as low and mean in character those people whose homes are low and mean in built” (264), he gets terribly beaten, not only because Howells asked for it, but also because his appearance enrages the rogues, especially the apparent discrepancy between his shabby dress and “that bony, educated face, those soft and fussy hands, that self-esteem” (265). Once again, his inability to empathise with other people turns his theoretical humanism into pompous conceitedness in the eyes of those who should supposedly benefit from it. The fact that he is attacked in his city but on the order of a person from Wherrytown symbolically demonstrates that he will never fit into either of these two environments, as his truly natural milieu is that of his books and dreamt-up world, his “childish landscape” where he can always “put the world to rights again” (276).

Conclusion: the Old, the New and the Unchanging

In terms of genre, characterisation and plot construction, *Arcadia* and *Signals of Distress* do share several features: they both feature a male protagonist, a loner with difficulties in dealing with other people who, nevertheless, strives to win their respect and sympathy; despite the serious issues they deal with they both bear distinctive elements of social satire, with surprisingly intense employment of irony directed at the fracturing between the naivety of a character and the world that has always moved on (Lane 28). However, they at the same time differ significantly in the setting and time of their stories, as well as in their central thematic preoccupations. *Signals of Distress* should thus be rather understood within the complex framework of the idiosyncrasies of Jim Crace's fictional world. Like his other novels, it portrays a community in transition, an establishment facing inevitable transformations and losses due to external social and economic developments; its fictional landscape becomes an inseparable component of the story; it explores the essential human moral concerns through allegorical meanings. The novel also demonstrates its author's remarkable descriptive powers, an "uncanny talent for making invented places and events feel here-and-now real" (Begley): the characters and settings are vivid, sharply observed, convincing, authentic and agreeably unpredictable and through them he creates unique imaginary microcosms, the "variously obsessed landscape and cultures" (Kermode 8), in which his uncomplicated stories assume a larger symbolic or even mythic dimension.

Signals of Distress can be read, above all, as a parable of the passing of the old establishments, either antiquated, obstructive, or redundant, and their replacement by new, dynamic and progressive social and economic forces. Set shortly before the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign, in the winter of 1836 and 1837, the novel depicts the community of Wherrytown, enclosed, rural and self-sufficient, at the dawn of a new era in which it will be forced to open to fresh impulses and become part of the surrounding industrial and commercial world. Aymer realises this immediate progress when watching the coastal steam packet *Ha'porth of Tar* passing the sailing boat the *Belle of Wilmington*: "It seemed to Aymer that the tussling spirits of the age were passing on the sea; the old, the new, the wind, the steam, the modest and the brash. The future would be driven by steam, he was sure. It was a more compliant slave than wind" (228). Being an anachronism himself, he sees the upcoming changes as dangerous if not downright shameful but, as in *Arcadia* with the rainbow that symbolically connects the old and the new at the end of the story, pointing to "urban renewal, and the human possibility of a city that retains its pastoral symbolism" (Head 210), *Signals of Distress* is rather muted as far as some conclusive interpretation of the scene is concerned. When read as a parable, the novel has a strong moral dimension, which, however, does not side with either party of the conflict; Walter Howells and Matthias Smith, the two men who represent the spirit of the new era, are shown as inconsiderate and immoral, while Aymer, an advocate of the good old days, is depicted as an impractical and unfortunate dreamer. As is characteristic of Crace's writing, the key moral focus of *Signals of Distress* is put on the universal, unchanging and timeless human and humanist values which constitute any functioning social paradigm, regardless of particular historical circumstances, and whose implementation can never be achieved through self-centered idealisation or plain theoreticising.

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