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Book review

'I stand at the threshold of the gleaning field'

Harvest by Jim Crace

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Natalie Joelle and Dan Eltringham



JIM CRACE'S *HARVEST* BEGINS WITH 'HARVEST END'.¹ It is a time for the village to glean, to bend and gather grain that has been left behind by the reapers. For Walter Thirsk, Crace's conflicted narrator, gleaning during this time after harvest is a timeless practice: 'ancient gleaning rights' are linked to an equally 'ancient understanding' that the village's paternal landowner, Master Kent, will take 'care of us'.² Yet Walter sees his world alter. As in Crace's first collection, *Continent*, 'Modernisations are in progress'.³ Gleaning in the unnamed every-village takes place not only after harvest but after every harvest: the villagers' 'break from labour' a severing from field-work as such; the reapers' 'final sheaf' their last.⁴ In the course of the narrative, Walter comes to call gleaning 'that ancient day', calling time on customary rights that are scratched out in the name of the 'Progress and Prosperity' promised by enclosure.⁵

Enclosure in the text is out of time. The English enclosures were a series of locally-variable changes in land use and ownership lasting several centuries; but just as its village is every-village, the text 'looks and behaves like

an historical novel' without such specificity: 'the history is invented', Crace states.⁶ *Harvest* is not set in any particular period, evoking at once a Tudor world and the demographic disruptions and large-scale vagrancy of the late 1700s. The Parliamentary Enclosures around the end of the eighteenth century represented social and economic shifts in the mode of production from an earlier feudal system to increasingly capitalised organisation.

These shifts are particularly at stake in the novel. The central narrative relates the arrival to Walter's village of Edmund Jordan, cousin-in-law to Master Kent, who seeks to reclaim the estate that the childless and now-widowed Kent held by marriage. Jordan is a villainous mouthpiece for 'the impulse to improve', the discursive bulwark of enclosure, expounding 'a zeal for progress' in agricultural organisation.⁷ This deceptive vision for the community unfolds a new pastoral idyll: 'Master Kent has had a dream which makes us rich and leisurely. Every day becomes a day of rest for us. We walk about our fenced-in fields with crooks'.⁸ The basis for that leisure is a kind of magical accumulation. The sheep, Walter reports incredulously, are to be units of production with incredible properties, seemingly divorced from the necessary environmental conditions of their pasture: 'a fleece of wool will grow and thicken in the dark'.⁹ The unspoken subtext of this 'dream' is that production that requires no labour also allows the landowner to dispense with labourers: Master Jordan's arrival in the village soon leads to its almost complete desertion, a resonant image of the effects of enclosure recalling Oliver Goldsmith's classic poem on the subject, *The Deserted Village* (1770).¹⁰

Crace's execution of the enclosure narrative is more complex than has been acknowledged. According to Sam Leith's *TLS* critique Crace's contrast between the pre-enclosure commons and Jordan's intended transition to sheep farming is overly dichotomised and depoliticised. 'The organic unities of the pre-enclosure commons appear as an unproblematic good', Leith writes, 'politics and economics don't enter: this is a fall from Eden'.¹¹ While Leith is right to note the novel's biblical allusions, the text's treatment of gleaning and of life pre-enclosure complicates this fall.

Crace's initial account of the village pre-enclosure nevertheless has strong affinities with the plangent rhetoric of anti-enclosure scholarship, such as J.M. Neeson's *Commoners*. Neeson stresses the ease of communication in the open field systems which often preceded enclosure: 'distances are shorter' so 'you can call from one field to the next'.¹² This seems echoed in Thirsk's celebration of being 'gathered in one space and bounded by common ditches and collective hopes': we 'chat in unison [...] heard by everyone'.¹³ It is then unsurprising that preparation for changes in land use starts to reduce the villagers' dialogue to mere muttering. As a strange 'skew-whiff' official – a stumbling, crooked 'Mr Quill' – maps and charts the curved territory into squares, the villagers become 'too anxious to raise our voices loud enough to reach our neighbours'.¹⁴ In 'common ditches', Walter says, 'there is openness and jollity'.¹⁵ In the presumption that open field farming connotes tighter communal bonds, there is pre-enclosure communal cliché. David Harvey suggests in his recent theoretical work on the commons that there is a form of conceptual enclosure in thinking of the open and the enclosed as, respectively, connoting overly simplistic positive or negative qualities.¹⁶

The character of the open field system is partially typified by ritualised gleaning: 'Every year after harvest' Neeson writes in *Commoners*, 'the field officers opened the wheat field to the gleaners and cried the hours of gleaning round the village. Gleaners came in procession, the women and children led by their Queen'.¹⁷ Gleaning is an ordered ritual of the open field, a sense that

Crace reprises as the bending gesture of the Gleaning Queen balances the unfolding of seasonal time:

We should face the rest day with easy hearts, and then enjoy the gleaning that would follow it, with our own Gleaning Queen the first to bend and pick a grain. We should expect our seasons to unfold in all their usual sequences, and so on through the harvests and the years. Everything was bound to keep its shape.¹⁸

In the foreboding tone of the proleptic addendum – ‘That’s what we thought’ – Crace hints that we are to be bound by a binary that privileges past models of land use.¹⁹

The theme of gleaning in the novel in part articulates a trajectory from subsistence to sale, or, in the words of Edmund Jordan, from ‘Enough’ to ‘More’.²⁰ The promise of gleaning is that ‘anything we glean is ours to keep [...] we do not need to add it to the common wealth, or store’.²¹ As Walter, characteristically implicated by inertia, muses fatalistically ‘I stand at the threshold of the gleaning field and wonder what the future has in mind for me’, behind ‘in mind’ we cannot but hear the more idiomatic ‘in store’, evoking both common wealth and commerce.²² The novel’s Gleaning Queen is indeed despatched forcibly from the village into a commercial economy: abducted from her brief reign to be ‘secured amongst the luggage like a market goose’.²³ Walter’s wonder at enclosure maps that make the fields ‘less commonplace’ by their ‘compound patterns’ – and less common and more compounded – is ‘more’ than his admiration of gleaning. Co-creating this new cartography with ‘Mr Quill’ is ‘more pleasing than a barleycorn’; ‘more valuable than gleaning’.²⁴

Crace’s writing of his narrator as ‘not a product of these commons but just a visitor who’s stayed’ allows Walter to perpetuate clichés of rural community: to project onto the ‘country folk’, with whom he only half-identifies, the Wordsworthian insight that they ‘are born to recognise [...] the amity in everything’.²⁵ The fluctuating commoner-narrator has what he calls a ‘great abundance of uncommon words’, partially learnt in his previous metropolitan life in the service of Master Kent (his employment conditions are feudal; when his master moved to the country, so did he).²⁶ His ‘uncommon’ diction and status can estrange him from his village neighbours: his character is caught between common and uncommon words. The shifting allegiances of the novel’s narrator to the community, underscored by this uncommon vocabulary, means the reader can conceive of no uncomplicated pre-enclosure commons from which to define the village’s decline. Rather than being ‘an unproblematic good’ in Leith’s terms, it is the construction of the pre-enclosure commons that is problematised in Crace’s account.

Beyond Jordan’s stark contrast between ‘Enough’ and ‘More’, and Leith’s corresponding ‘fall’, the subsistence conditions of ‘Enough’ are shown to be less than idyllic in terms of pre-enclosure social relations and agrarian labour.²⁷ Whilst Thirsk laments the anticipated demise of ancient gleaning, leaving the master’s doves ‘searching for the gleaning fields, but there are none’, we are elsewhere tersely reminded of the tense villager-master inequalities the soon-to-be-lost tradition encodes: ‘they take our grain; he takes our eggs; we see no benefit’.²⁸ Crace’s pre-enclosure commons can be stressful environments: ‘The countryside is argumentative. It wants to pick a fight with you’.²⁹

Working the land is a source of anxiety. Pre-enclosure fields are not idyllic spaces and many of the elaborate and superstitious customs associated with crop yield are shown to be forms of anxiety-management: ‘We watched the barley with anxiety [...] That is our custom. We are daily nervous for the

crop'.³⁰ This is not a world free from care: pre-enclosure labour contains affective qualities quite other than pastoral ease. The pastoral tradition associates the land with an attitude of leisurely abnegation – how can a human do anything about the whims of the heavens, the vagaries of wind and rain? Yet it is this powerlessness that causes concern in *Harvest*. The promise of the sheep and wool that come with enclosed fields is supposed to bring an end to this sense of precarity. 'Wool is more predictable', Master Kent tells the assembled community after their final end of harvest feast; his imagined pastoral idyll supplants the uncertainties presented by the pre-enclosure commons.³¹

This fraught world is also far from idealised in its treatment of outsiders. When three strangers, a 'Mistress Beldam' and two men encamp on its bounds, refugees of enclosure elsewhere, the villagers respond with hostility, scapegoating them for burning Master Kent's dovecote, a piece of magic mushroom-inspired mischief with ultimately fatal consequences. The new arrivals are in a precarious situation. Their 'dwelling' – it is not dignified with 'house', being at once more primal and more temporary – is 'a poor affair [...] a square of fences better suited to restrict a pair of pigs than to house a family'.³² The villagers do not extend their hospitality, despite the many vacant homes. The three strangers serve as types of late-eighteenth-century vagrant, enacting the traumatic demographic effects of war and enclosure on the populace. Indeed, 'wild' outsider Mistress Beldam, a syllable's slip from 'Bedlam' and a kind of malignant counterweight to the Gleaning Queen, would not be out of place as 'The Female Vagrant' found in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).³³

But the vagrants and the villagers will prove to have much in common. In time, their predicament will be shared: 'They are fugitives from sheep, exiles from their own commons, six or seven days away on foot. They have come to us because their ancient livelihoods have been hedged and fenced against their needs'.³⁴ In this way *Harvest* implies a wider, national context of enclosure, displacement and the loss of 'ancient' customary rights such as gleaning. The exile of Mistress Beldam and her company from their community took place earlier and elsewhere, but otherwise is of the same category of experience; their arrival presages the unravelling of another community and the emptying of the village.

'The gleaning field is already empty', Walter reflects, 'Today it is difficult for me not to see heavy meaning in its emptiness'.³⁵ The meaning of gleaning in *Harvest* would be too heavy, leaving the lean prose as 'double-bent' as the gleaners themselves under the weight of pathos, had not Crace estranged the term.³⁶ Alone in the deserted village, Walter devours hallucinogenic mushrooms. In his mesmerized narrative

The fairy caps were keen to keep me on the ground. They would prefer it if I sank into the grass, if I became as rooted to the soil as them [...] I had a twin, a standing twin, who came to rescue me. This other one who had my face, who looked like me and smelt like me and sounded like me, had got me by my shoulders and I was being pulled. I was being gleaned by him. My head came up and back. My bones solidified at last.³⁷

The divided narrator imagines himself gleaned from his supine delirium into uprightness: rescued by his own likeness and given backbone. As he is restored, united with his twin, he is also uprooted. Here, as in the novel as a whole, Crace articulates the complexity of an attachment to the soil at a time when such stabilities were being thrown into doubt. Walter's rootedness within his

world is hallucinatory; his hold on the soil of the village is tenuous. Nothing is 'bound to keep its shape'.³⁸

The episode echoes earlier social divisions in the gleaning field. Walter revels in the 'noisy rush of gleaners, their concentrated, thorough scampering', but 'stands back': 'I am the master's man before I am a villager [...] I did not even join the gleaning'.³⁹ Here, his 'standing twin' looms above, as 'unnerving' and 'shape-shifting' as the enclosure cartography that engrosses him at gleaning time.⁴⁰ 'Being gleaned' by the twin is both a violent departure from roots and a rescuing return, a coming back. Walter no longer stands apart at the threshold of the gleaning field, but is gleanable: he lacks cohesion. Crace extends the meaning of 'gleaned'. The gestures of Walter's twin are familiar from the novel's fields, but the object of gleaning is neither grain nor information, as in its more common agricultural and metaphorical senses. In this uncommon usage of a practice familiar in the pre-enclosure commons, Walter gleanes himself.

Crace's account of gleaning and of village life before enclosure complicates Leith's reading of the novel as a fall from Eden alone. It is Master Jordan's speech, not the text as a whole that simply juxtaposes 'Enough' and 'More': the influence of the unstable mapmaker 'Mr Quill' does not so much upset a balanced community, or create a post-lapsarian rupture, but extends the existing precarity of life in the pre-enclosed field. If 'politics and economics don't enter' Crace's text, it is because they are present throughout and permeate its world.⁴¹

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Notes

- 1 Jim Crace, *Harvest* (London: Picador, 2013), p. 2. I am grateful to Robert Macfarlane for kindly alerting me to the exploration of gleaning in the novel and to Edwin Evans-Thirlwell for comments on an earlier version of this article. (NJ)
- 2 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 9, 18, 10.
- 3 Jim Crace, *Continent* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 127.
- 4 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 3, 2.
- 5 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 195, 99; cf. p. 5.
- 6 Crace in Jim Crace & Kate Harvey, 'Picador Podcast: Jim Crace', *Picador.com*, 11 February 2013, <http://www.picador.com/blog/february-2013/picador-podcast-jim-crace> [accessed 28 September 2013].
- 7 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 100.
- 8 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 41.
- 9 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 41.
- 10 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 41.
- 11 Sam Leith, 'Jim Crace's Closed Communities', *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 February 2013, p. 20.
- 12 J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2.
- 13 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 7.
- 14 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 10, 9.
- 15 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 9.
- 16 David Harvey argues this in his recent *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 68–71.
- 17 Neeson, *Commoners*, p. 3.
- 18 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 10.
- 19 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 10.
- 20 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 186.
- 21 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 65.
- 22 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 64.

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- 23 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 201.
24 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 71, 133, 76.
25 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 204, 64. For comparable formulations in Wordsworth see, for example, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798', lines 94 - 103, or the rather bleaker affirmation of a similarly pantheistic connectivity made by the Peddler in 'The Ruined Cottage', lines 66 - 92.
26 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 94.
27 Leith, 'Jim Crace's Closed Communities', p. 20
28 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 46, 77.
29 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 63. Also cf. p.75.
30 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 62.
31 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 41.
32 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 22.
33 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 29. For connections between Mistress Beldam and the Gleaning Queen cf. pp. 46 and 67.
34 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 148.
35 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 80.
36 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 69.
37 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 248-50.
38 Crace, *Harvest*, p. 10.
39 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 69, 142.
40 Crace, *Harvest*, pp. 135, 108.
41 Leith, 'Jim Crace's Closed Communities', p. 20.