There is a passage in Jim Crace's 2003 novel, *Six*, in which the narrating voice says of its protagonist, Felix Dern, 'If only he could call on chemistry and then biology, unsentimental disciplines, calculating, tidy, and precise' (*Six*, 2). The background to this wistfulness, as for the observation that 'Science has the answers every time' (*Six*, 1), is that Lix (as he is referred to) faces an unusual difficulty in life. It concerns, in fact, life itself. He is too fertile; he cannot help bringing life about: 'Every woman he dares to sleep with bears his child' (*Six*, 1). There are two important cues there for this chapter's rationale and argument, which centres on the representation of life's antithesis—death, and thence decomposition—as figured in Crace's earlier novel, *Being Dead* (1999). The first cue is the recourse to science, and this chapter proceeds on the basis of interdisciplinary investments in biology on the one hand and literary criticism on the other as it studies Crace's narrativisation of decomposition. The second is that life is, paradoxically, irrepressible in *Being Dead*: albeit a different kind of life, operating at the level of the microbiotic and the anthropod.
Being Dead's representation of the process of decomposition—scientifically irrefutable, forensically accurate, yet also lyrically true—deeply and profoundly appealing to the imagination, extends fiction's repertoires and also prefigures prevalent strains of contemporary art. Not least since the novel offers a revelatory insight into the complex dynamics of natural decomposition and the interactions between life and death, the poem and its aftermath would require this to be taken into account.

A factor that may constitute a strong criterion for life is entropy, a measure of the disorder of a system. The human organism is an ordered system, where the maintenance of order in structures and processes requires constant inputs of energy. When the processes that create order cease, then the system starts increasing in entropy, with a gradual erosion of the organism. The increase in entropy that accompanies the state of biological death of the organism does not imply death of the superorganism. In death, as in life, the host organism provides its attendant biota with nutrients, water, shelter, and habitat, sometimes for a considerable time after its own demise.

The complex of structures that are identified with the organism generally represent the visible framework of a more complex superorganism, in which the organism functions as habitat, substrate, and symbiont—symbionts being organisms from different species that engage in a mutually beneficial relationship. The human organism, identified as the group of structures encoded by human DNA, is, in both cellular and genetic terms, a minority player in the human superorganism. Only 10% of the cells and less than 1% of the genes in the human superorganism belong to the organism, the other cells and genes being mostly bacterial. This human system is moreover a habitat for bacteria, fungi and, depending on the circumstances, various invertebrate parasites, commensals, and amensals.

In fact, death of the organism and death of the superorganism are not synonymous. The human biomass, no longer functioning as a coherent system, functions instead as an organic substrate, sustaining a diverse heterotrophic food web. This food web, subject to the laws of thermodynamics, as in any food web, is a medium through which matter is recycled and
energy dissipates. Nonetheless, this superorganism, now deprived of the intrinsic regulation of entropy by the host organism, will persist for only as long as the scaffolding of the host organism persists. Erosion of the host organism starts from within, as the bacterial communities, no longer

[Text continues on the page]
punitive or rewarding modes. Myth and mythology provide, for instance, the story of Prometeus' gnawed liver regenerating daily, or the Ovidian metamorphoses of human beings turned into different organicities. There are possibly many fates worse than death. It is Edgar Allan Poe who arguably provides literature's most direct gaze upon decomposition in 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', Valdemar utters the impossible sentence, “I say to you that I am dead” (Poe, 103; emphasis in original) and the story is brought to a close with this report:

[H]is whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence. (Poe, 103; emphasis in original)

Beyond Poe and in current popular culture, zombie narratives (where putrescent human recovery automatizes if not life) as well as various television series featuring forensic pathologists working on decayed bodies—all depicted with lingering forensic faithfulness—suggest a continuing fascination with physically decaying bodies and death. Painting, with its range of anatomy lessons from Rembrandt to Francis Bacon, has covered a popular fascination with lingering looks upon the screen and the bodies of a middle-aged married couple, Joseph and Celice, both of whom, in a wicked irony, happen to be zoologists. What happens after their murder, which takes place in Baritone Bay, a fictional beach where earlier in their lives they first had sex, is described with a precision that they themselves might have personally endorsed. The epigraph to the novel sets the tone: purportedly from a text called ‘The Biologist’s Valediction to His Wife’, by one Sherwin Stephens, it reads:


Sherwin Stephens is Crace’s invention. The very insistence here on putrefaction and manure and on the regression from zoological to botanical capital contracts the scope for otherworldly sentiment. It prefigures the line taken by Celice, who in a lecture that the reader reads in flashback warned her students, in a further moment of dramatic irony:

‘[M]ake yourselves companionable with death if any of you want to flourish as zoologists.’ She meant that fear of death is fear of life, a cliché among scientists, and preachers too. […] Both want to give life meaning only because it clearly has none, other than to replicate and decompose. (Being Dead, 40)

Celice talks to her students on senescence and thanatology: ‘natural ageing’ and ‘the study of death’ (Being Dead, 40). Her lecture echoes the scientific discourses about the trajectory from optimally functioning organisms at one end and sub-optimally functioning organisms at the...
other: 'Senescence is the track on which most creatures run their lives. Including us' (Being Dead, 40). As Celice lies dead on Baritone Bay, her body seems to become a demonstration of her lesson. 'The bodies were discovered straight away. [...] A beetle first. 

Claudinus maximi. A male' (Being Dead, 36). It is a point of view that the novel puts in the frame strikingly:

It's only those who glimpse the awful, endless corridor of death, too gross to contemplate, that need to lose themselves in love or art. His species had no poets. [...] He had not spent, like us, his lifetime concocting systems to deny mortality. Nor had he passed his days in melancholic fear of death, the hollow and the avalanche. Nor was he burdened with the compensating marvels of human, mortal life. He had no schemes, no memories, no guilt or aspirations, no appetite for love, and no delusions. The woman had destroyed his light. He wanted to escape her, and to feed. This was his long-term plan, and his hereafter. (Being Dead, 87)

Here, death and decomposition are scouted and scuttled over by one of its agents, and the scope and reach of anything larger is denied. The dispassionately recounted passing of her husband shares the foreground: 'Joseph was being gathered in by death, cell by cell by cell. He came to be half of himself, and then a quarter of himself, and then a fraction of himself, which was too slow to measure' (Being Dead, 10). Celice's more instantaneous death is rendered thus:

There were still battles to be fought but these would be post mortem, the soundless, inert wars of chemicals contesting for her trenches and her bastions amid the debris of exploded cells. Calcium and water usurped the functions of blood and oxygen so that her defunct brain, almost at once, began to swell and tear its canopies, spilling all its saps and liquors, all its stored immersions of passion, memory and will, on to her scarf, her jacket and her grass. (Being Dead, 7)

As the narrator later remarks, 'This was not death as it was advertised; a fine translation to a better place' (Being Dead, 67). Instead it's the world as it had always been, plus something less which was once doctors of anatomy' (Being Dead, 68). Or, as indicated towards the close of the novel:

Joseph and Celice would have turned to landscape, given time. Their bodies would have been just something extra dead in a landscape already sculpted out of death. They would become nothing special. [...] Even stars must decompose, disrupt and blister on the sky. Everything was born to go. The universe has learned to cope with death. (Being Dead, 207-208)

In a novel about decomposition, closure was always going to be problematic. Yet Being Dead’s resolution seems apt:

And still, today and every day, the dunes are lifted, stacked and undermined. Their crests migrate and reassemble with the wind. They do their best to raise their backs against the weather and the sea and block the wind-borne sorrows of the world. All along the shores of Baritone Bay and all the coast beyond, tide after tide, time after time, the corpses and the broken, thinned remains of fish and birds, of 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. (Being Dead, 210)

The excision of the initial n from what would have been the word never-ending effectively conveys the circuit of life at risk, or senescence as Celice calls it in her lecture, where superorganisms transmogrify to physiological islands. The biological gaze can look on, confirmed in the view that life, in theory, in practice, is everending. What, however, of the poetic gaze?

THE POETIC GAZE IN JIM CRACE’S BEING DEAD

Being Dead goes as far as a novel might in rendering the biological gaze. Yet it remains a novel, not a field report. It bears dispassionate and clinical prose about dying, death, and decomposition. Yet it seems compelled by viscerality. The passages quoted are stark in content, yet the prose is lyrical. There is song in Crace’s lines on death, on decomposition. The novelist’s gaze can have a naturalist’s curiosity, and across the text the reader’s cued gaze absorbs the negative connotations of ‘rotting’, ‘putrefaction’, ‘corrupt’, and ‘decomposition’ (Being Dead, 67; 107; 108; 166). Being Dead thereby tests the nerve of critical idioms invoking non-anthropocentrism. Here, it says, if it’s what you really want, is a hard look at that: up close and impersonal.

While the novel does not flinch from observing ‘the by-products of decomposition—methane and ethium’ (Being Dead, 166) and their effect upon the superorganism, cast in phrases like ‘leaking lymph’ (Being Dead, 166), its prose retains poetic charge. The effect of the novel’s final line is
oddly affirmative. The end of Joseph and Celice may be ‘unconscious’, but
the novel cannot check the intrusion of that word, loving, or the pointed
ambivalence in that phrase, ‘beyond experience’, connotative of both the
insensible and the unsensed and of the sublime and the ineffable.
Consequently it does not open itself to Wordsworth’s rebuke at the philo-
osopher who ‘would peep and botanise/Upon his mother’s grave’ (Wordsworth
2000, 151). Being Dead interposes chapters on the process
of decomposition with chapters on the recollected life of Joseph and
Celice. Commemoration proceeds; in the mind of their daughter, Syl,
their memory is not done yet. Asked by the police to identify them, in ‘the
solace of world’s worst
They’d not yet
Forty
do not live for more than thirty days, nor to be conscious for more than
thirty days—but are subordinated’ (Kristeva 1989, 109), such that the Dead
Christ seems far from any possibility of transmogrification, Crace’s figure of ‘the Galilean’
in Quarantine (1997) is more abject still. If decomposition as it is repre-
sented in Being Dead is an example of life in death, in Quarantine what is
put in the frame is a death in life. This is because the progressive emaciating
of ‘Jesus’ or ‘the Gally’—the names by which the novel’s very human
protagonist is known—is traced with an authenticity respectful of the
faming epigraph to the novel:

An ordinary man of average weight and fitness embarking on a total fast—
that is, a fast in which he refuses both his food and drink—could not expect
to live for more than thirty days, nor to be conscious for more than twenty-
five. For him, the forty days of fasting described in religious texts would not
be achievable—except with divine help, of course. History, however, does
not record an intervention of that kind, and medicine opposes it.
(Quarantine, prefatory page)

These diverse texts and works of art hold decomposition in check. Art—
in, say, preserving a shark body—stills the mobile materialities, shiftings,
swarmings, and swarmings of death’s processes. Being Dead participates in
this contemporary realisation. Being Dead, this fin-de-siècle novel,
thereby offers the contemporary reader a danse macabre for the twenty-
first century. Through the danse, does decomposition undergo some kind
of transformation when it becomes the object of the artistic gaze? There is
transformation, though an all too material one, in decomposition. Death
reduces: someone becomes something, some things, else. As death is, and
continues to be, someone becomes some being else, some beings else,
and the memory of the death becomes no more. That becoming is the
being of death. It makes up the ‘everlasting days of being dead’. But does poetic
representation change anything about decomposition?

In a recent interview in The Guardian, asked what book he’d most like to
be remembered for, Crace stated, ‘You mean, after I’m dead? I’m not
t really bothered’ (Crace 2018a). Memory, in its conventional sense, per-
ists throughout the life of the individual. It is often selective and not
always accurate; yet it permits learning, survival, and self-awareness. It is

Life and Decomposition in Jim Crace’s
Being Dead

A standard point of reference for discussions on the abjection that death
imposes remains Julia Kristeva’s discussion in Black Sun (1987) of Hans
Holbein the Younger’s painting, The Body of the Dead Christ in Life.
these memories that enable the human perception of death and the fear—or acceptance—of its inevitability. And the fact is that upon organismal death, the electrical energy that is interpreted by the brain as memory dissipates. The brain ceases to function and starts tending towards a state of higher entropy. The ordering principle of the brain, the electrical energy, is thermodynamic noise that is converted to high-entropy heat which escapes into the non-organismal exterior. In the natural world, biological death is part of a continuum. A living organism may be perceived as a collection of molecules and interactions that form the individual. The death of that individual is merely a larger-scale expression of a process that occurs continuously. It is there in apoptosis, before and amid necrosis. So, if the physical components that make up the organism are replaced throughout the course of life, then what preserves identity, the sense of self?

Being Dead and The Road dramatise and narrativise the growing immanence in culture and discourse of the pertinence of that paradoxical oxymoron: non-anthropocentric thought. Ed Yong's I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes within Us and a Grander View of Life (2016) suggest we have moved beyond the Anthropocene already: "You could equally argue that we are still living in the Microbiocene: a period that started at the dawn of life itself and will continue to its very end" (Yong 2016, 8). Before that atavistic, immemorial, 'everending' and timeless wilderness, being human, then being dead, finds dimension. The microbiome, populated by the bacteria that are 'virtuosos of biochemistry' (Yong 2016, 11), is the necessary wilderness inside us. Quentin Meillassoux's After finitude speculate: 'The gods themselves are decomposable', and 'we can think ourselves no longer being' (2009, 36–37, 56, emphasis in the original). Donna Haraway's talk about 'companion species' (Haraway 2003, title) and the subtitle of Morton's Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People (2017) evoke and name a world where the human, natural, and animal worlds are non-hierarchical and co-dependent. Morton asks 'Where is the ecological pronoun?' (Morton 2017, 3). In other words, can there be a subjectivity of the ecology of [human] death—of decomposition, and if so where might it lie?

Being Dead is a prescient novel that addresses these questions a prefigurative drama and narrative. Despite its title, it is a truly vital fiction for our times, which are haunted by the spectropoetics of all kinds of decomposition. Being Dead's textual presence, its material form, its poetry and lyricism, make it tempting to think that this life, this not being dead, will always have been about more than 'Little more than natural history', to quote Crace's ninth recent novel (The Melody, 17). This is the undying human temptation to think that poety can touch the wilderness, even if only to affirm that chemistry, and beyond.

Notes

1. See Clausius (1867), for a nineteenth-century pioneering perspective, first published in 1865.
2. See also Quiroga (2012), on the cognition arguments vis-à-vis materiality.
3. See, for instance, Zylinska (2014), and Cohen et al. (2016).

Works Cited


