

JIM CRACE'S ARCADIA: A NEW VARIATION ON AN OLD TOPIC

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to shed light on an old-new topic in literature and culture in general, i.e., the urban and rural modes of living as reflected in literature. Since times immemorial, this has been an underlying issue, engaging the minds of philosophers, writers, critics, sociologists and artists. As such, this article is devoted to exploring two aspects of this multifarious topic. The first one is a general survey of how writers from different cultures and times have responded to this issue and their priorities. The second presents a reading of Jim Crace's Arcadia (1992) as a contemporary handling of the country-city problematics.

Keywords: rural, urban, continuity, ambivalent, cultural

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World literature abounds with different examples of how the city and its counterpart (countryside) have been represented. Indeed this hankering for the pastoral life and usual loathing and mistrust of the urban can be considered archetypal and timeless. Man's prelapsical joy is associated with the agrarian and pastoral life (paradise), while its aftermath, i.e., sin and the subsequent drudgery and strife, has something to do with the urbane mode of living. Hence this persistent craving for the pre-technological and natural world. The fact of the matter is that "Cain is the first city-founder; Romulus was also a fratricide founder and Theseus a parricide founder" (Pike, 5). Earthly sins, then, are associated with many damned and ill-fated cities such as Gomorrah, Sodom and Babylon.

Despite its immense facilities, entertainment, luxury for certain classes in society, better life standards and culture, the city has been almost unanimously condemned. It has stirred a wholesale condemnation and berating views. Philosophers, psychologists and writers could only see the negative impact the city leaves on rural life and man's intrinsic drives. Freud's treatise, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) encapsulates the whole image of the city as lying in "the tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, (what) is called by us the sense of guilt" (Pike, 21). As such, it is expected that philosophers and creative writers would adopt a very decisive attitude regarding the city and its spiritual impoverishment. In this respect, the name of the romantic philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau comes to mind, particularly his vigorous call for the return to nature and abandoning the city's debilitating impact. Such is his fascination with nature and the countryside that he prefers solitude rather than submitting to the distracting forces of urbanity. He has been aptly described as not being at home with society, "He must discover himself in solitude, far from salons and cities, musing in the forest, lost in reverie among the mountains or on the sea shore" (Priestley, 117).

American transcendentalists such as Ralph Emerson and David Henry Thoreau have based their poetic theories and practices on Rousseau's inspiration and guidance. Their poetry draws upon the images and thoughts generated by the intimacy with nature and shunning the din and noise of the cities. Indeed Thoreau's ambitious and unprecedented enterprise of virtually abandoning the city and living in the outskirts of "a forest for two years, two months and two days" (Goyal, 4) is the example he sets for those who are dissatisfied with the urban life but are too weak to take similar action. The outcome of this uncommon step is his great book, *Walden* (1845). Here he gives us a summary of his musings, speculations and intuitions, away from the

madding crowds of the city. In one of his statements, he sums up the pleasure and ecstasy of solitude, "the places where most congregate leave us most lonely" (Thearau, 132).

The British romantic writers are no less preoccupied and identified with nature and what blesses it can offer. William Wordsworth, to choose a famous name, sees that the natural world is not only a teacher but also a sort of balsam and therapy for the spiritual wounds and scars incurred by the city and its inhabitants. In his "Tintern Abbey," he celebrates the pleasures, mysteries and solace he finds in the company of such lonely and venerable places (utopia). Moreover, it is the recollection of such places that helps him in putting up with the intolerable life of the city and its mechanical life. The tone of the poem is that of ever-present nostalgia for such irreplaceable sites and joys.

These beauteous forms,
 Through a long absence, have not been to me
 As in a landscape to a blind man's eye;
 But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
 Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
 In hours of weariness, sensations sweet
 Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
 And passing even to my purer mind (Allison, 523).

In contrast, the images of the city whether in poetry or fiction sound intimidating and labyrinthine and mostly revolving around dystopia. It is the antithesis of the earlier arguments. Man appears in the city as being dwarfed by many uncontrollable and incompatible forces. The manifestations and symptoms of his ontological and ecological predicament are the anonymity of his character in the endless crowds and the dangers lurking everywhere. The Argentinean poet and story writer, Jorge Luis Borges, puts this horrid picture of the city in his properly-entitled poem "The Labyrinth."

Zeus, Zeus himself could not undo these nets
 Of stone encircling me. My mind forgets
 The person I have been along the way,
 The hated walls of monotonous walls,
 Which is my fate. The galleries seem straight
 But curve furtively forming secret circles
 At the terminus of years; and the parapets

Have been worn smooth by the passage of days.
 Here in the alabaster dust,
 Are tracks that frighten me (Giovanni, 241).

If Borges expresses his amazement and sense of loss regarding the vertigo stirred by the urban world, the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca had an equally hostile attitude toward that awe-inspiring sort of life. Visiting New York for first time, the sensitive poet was vehemently shocked by its intimidating skyscrapers and crowded mode of living. Thus, he could only express his shock and inability to acclimatise himself to such an unfriendly environment. *Poet in New York* is the outcome of that visit, a book showing the degradation of urban life, the indifference to suffering, the materialistic corruption of religion and love. As such, it is not surprising that its editor Christopher Mauer describes Lorca's feat as "both a condemnation of modern urban New York—... a dark city of metaphysical loneliness" (1).

Such a relentless assault on the city and its dwellers is not new in western literature nor is it confined to a particular type of culture. There are many examples that run in the same vein. Dr. Johnson's 'London' (1738) predates Charles Dickens's flamboyant presentation of the vices and dangers of the Metropolitan. In the ostensible argument of the poem, the capital seems to be the centre of corruption and evil,

Though grief and fondness in my breast rebel,
 When injured Thales bids the town farewell,
 Yet still my calmer thoughts his choice commend.
 I praise the hermit, but regret the friend
 Resolved at length, from vice and London far,
 To breath in distant fields a purer air (lines 1–6).

Nearly three decades earlier, Jonathan Swift (1738) gave us his verdict of the Irish city and its filth through a myriad of disgusting and astounding images of what the city can be to the eyes of the sensitive viewer. In "A Description of a City Shower," what we notice is a nasty picture of the city's garbage and stench in a rainy day. Rain which is always associated with newness and fertility appears here to be the herald of all that is obnoxious and nasty. At the hands of the fully disillusioned writer, rain appears to take a terrible turn,

And in huge confluence joined at Snow Hill ridge,
Fall from the conduit prone to Holborn Bridge
Sweeping from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood
Downed puppies, striking sprats, all drenched in mud,
Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood (Allison, 393).

The Greek poet Cavafy finds in Alexandria of the twenties and thirties nothing but misery, backwardness and loss of identity:

There's no new land, my friend, no
New sun; for the city will follow you,
In the same streets you'll wander endlessly;
The same material suburbs slip from youth to age.
The city is a cage.
No other places, always this
Your earthly landfall, and no ship exists
To take you from yourself (Durrell, 201).

Cavafy's case is only one example of the countless writings in the twentieth century where the paramount emphasis is laid on the negative and dystopian aspects of the city life. The American arch-modernist, Ezra Pound, portrays the situation of people in the city metro as "apparitions," unidentifiable people who have nothing distinguishable about them. "In a Station of the Metro" (1916), he has the following image to state about the urban world:

The apparitions of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

What is most characteristic here is "the black bough" with its unmistakable connotation of a ghastly world and lifelessness.

Pound's disciple, T. S. Eliot, will magnify this picture in his masterpiece, "The Waste Land" (1922) whose epigraph not only recalls the images of absurd and meaningless life in the modern city but also Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, in particular the *Inferno*. In other words, the initial citations prepare the reader for the scenes of rape, infidelity, pollution, futile waiting and absence of moral and religious faith. The city is emblematic of all sorts of evil and destruction.

The Syrian poet Adonis (shortlisted more than once for the Nobel Prize) substantiates this sinister imagery of the city and its denizens. In one of his poems, he gives his verdict of the city's gloomy world:

The candles get extinguished on my forehead,
 The candles get lit above the city,
 The city is a man whose forehead knew no light,
 The city is a remote stone and the debris of a ship (474).

If we leave aside the poetic representation of the city and its imprisonment, prose poses itself as an equally cogent means of enhancing this strikingly negative picture. Charles Dickens is, of course, indispensable here due to his matchless success in evoking the bleak and even brutal life and practices in the Victorian big cities. Here, it is sufficient to mention the *Sketches of Boz*, *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist*. The streets in such works appear dreary, bleak and crowded. The dark places are dens of delinquency, poverty, misery, crime and treachery. Such situations can be considered as the author's indictment of such a society that has accumulated all these evils.

Thomas Hardy's fiction gives the impression that he is quite aware of the notion of evanescence of all grand and beautiful things—especially in the field of architecture and agriculture. What is natural and spontaneous gives way to the artificial and far-fetched. His graphic representation of the countryside is indicative of the writer's painful realisation of the inevitability of the gradual subversion by the city and its different agents:

This futile and sheltered tract of country, in which the fields are never brown and the springs never dry, is bounded on the south by the bold chalky ridge that embraces the provinces of Hambledon... Here in the valley the world seems to be constructed upon a smaller and more delicate scale; the fields are mere paddocks, so reduced that from this height their hedgerows appear a network of dark green threads overspreading the pale green of the grass (Hardy, 48).

D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915) is in line with the ruminations already felt in Hardy's fiction. However, Lawrence is more outspoken and adamant in his opposition to whatever is artificial and man-made. His heroine virtually becomes his mouthpiece in articulating this disruption of what is

spontaneous and natural; "She saw the rainbow, the earth's new architecture, the old brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching hews" (460).

James Joyce's Dublin engages a special position in the city-country controversy. His equivocal, if not titillating, presentation of his city (Dublin) is a blatant image of the love-hate relationship tying him to his "dear, dirty Dublin." Such a phrase encapsulates his paradoxical sentiments about his birthplace. Arguments and speculations revolve around this uncommon attitude to his city and its people. One of these views sees that Joyce's odyssey shows only "Dublin's smoky air, clouded skies, decaying neighborhoods" (Delaney, 5).

However, this is not the whole story as there are those works of fiction that stress the good sides of the urban experience. Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950), for instance, has a totally different perception of the city. The heroine in this novel, Mary Turner, seems to be pining to live in the city, away from the monotonous agrarian life. It was during those two hours of half consciousness that she allowed herself to dream about the beautiful lost time when she worked in an office and lived as she pleased before "they made her get married" (107).

Actually there are some voices here and there that eulogise the invigorating role of urban life and its direct corollary: industry and technology. The poet, La Berra, in his "Song to Fraternity" brings home this theme of taking pride in anything related to man-made environment:

I am the driving force of progress
 And guarantee union and peace in the world
 The anvil is my throne
 The forge is my altar
 My law, labor
 My kingdom, earth, air and sea (Nunn, 365).

In drama, the same line followed by novelists in their distinctive attitudes pertaining to urban life is felt in the works of August Strindberg, George Bernard Shaw, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, John Osborne...etc. Most of these have pointed out the great impact the artificial environment leaves on the individual and his psychological life in the city's suffocating worlds. In contrast, the dramatists of the Restoration in Britain seized the moral and cultural decadence prevalent in the city to create dramas centering on

betrayal and moral corruption. A passing view at the works of William Congreve, Sheridan, Moliere and Wycherley easily verifies that. Although writing from a totally different perspective, Oliver Goldsmith allows one of his significant characters in *She Stoops to Conquer* to celebrate the city's offerings for a while, although the final outcome is the success of the countryside representative to outwit the Londoner. Mrs. Hardcastle tells her husband "I vow, Mr. Hardcastle, you be very particular. Is there a creature in the whole country but ourselves, that does not take a trip to town now and then to rub off the rust a little?" (Macmillan, 771).

However, if in drama, and perhaps driven to such statements by the exigencies of the artistic work, the writer of poetry is more at ease in reflecting his/her ideas about the priorities given to the country or the city. There are few voices in poetry that stress the positive sides of the urban experience. Ironically enough, Goldsmith who talks about the advantages of the town life in his play can give us one of the most moving pieces of poetry about the village and what it can offer. In "The Deserted Village," Goldsmith evokes those sweet recollections which he cherishes most:

Sweet Auburn! Loveliest village of the plain,
Where health and plenty cheer'd the laboring swain,
Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,
Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,
Seats of my youth, when every sport could please.

The conclusion is apt, since it is relevant to the purposes of the current study: in the country the material gain is replaced by the peace of mind and intimate relations with both the animate and inanimate:

Teach erring man to spurn the rage of time again,
Teach him those states of native strength possest,
Though very poor, may still be very blest (Allison, 472–473).

Before embarking on the process of giving the present reading of Crace's *Arcadia*, there is a need to give a brief account of the biography of Jim Crace's achievements, so that his novel can be properly contextualised. As a journalist Jim Crace (1946–) has a vast experience in many countries in Africa, America and Europe. He enjoys the privilege of writing from a cosmopolitan viewpoint. The themes of his novels tend to transcend the merely local or temporal. For example, he presents the transition from the Stone Age to the bronze in his *Gift of Stone* (1988). *Signals of Distress* (1994) tackles the shift in a family's business that no longer needs the kelp ash. *Being Dead* (1999) raises one of the most controversial issues in man's existence: the state of the individual after death and all the theological and metaphysical arguments emanating from it. So far Crace has received a number of awards such as the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, the E. M. Forster Award by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Another relevant point has to be stressed beforehand: it is the critical appraisal of his fiction. For more than two decades, Jim Crace has stirred a host of critical reviews and assessments, reflecting their own writers' different intellectual backgrounds and orientations. On the whole, the political, philosophical and apocalyptic have been prioritised. Out of the great amount of critical reviews and different interviews held with Crace, it transpires that there is much emphasis on the political, economic and visionary or apocalyptic in his works. Peter Stanford, for example, highlights Crace's acknowledgement of the political as the cornerstone of his fiction, "I was brought up in a very political background on an estate in northern London. Part of me has been aware for a long time that my radical 17-year old self could have despised the bourgeois literature that I have ended up writing" (Stanford 2010).

Apart from this explicitly political side of Crace's fiction which the writer himself encourages, there is the equally predominant side in his novels and stories: his metaphysical and apocalyptic perceptions. No doubt this forms the hub of Minna Proctor's argument. It asserts that Crace remains essentially "the secular grand inquisitor of the metaphysical questions" (Proctor, 70). One of Crace's influential novels, *Pesthouse*, reinforces the visionary and apocalyptic in his fiction. Setting this aptly-entitled novel in a bleak future, the author explores the bleak prospects of American modern life. All the technology and industrial development reach a standstill, and the reader gets the impression that America is simply a country living in pre-industrial age, Medieval and feudal. Gone are the days of the superpower. Here, Crace puts into practice what he often reiterates about one of the pillars of his art: it is the

attempt to transcend what is factual and unleash what is intuitive or in his case, wishful. As he puts it, "I don't try to place my readers in the real world. I try to place them in an unreal world and see what happens" (Murphy 2001). The heated controversy stirred by *Pesthouse* centers on the novel's main postulate about modern technology, sciences, sophisticated modes of life and the destiny of man in this insoluble labyrinth. Such sophisticated progress is doomed to dwindle and eventually vanish altogether. The images emanating from this novel and its sinister setting are so disquieting that even the common practices of modern life become question-begging," America as a nation no longer exists," argues one of the novel's reviewers, "the population are ignorant of all science, lacking any but the crudest technology, hounded by poverty, disease and lawlessness" (Begley 2007).

This cultural side of Crace's fiction will be stressed in the current study of *Arcadia*, as the novel does illuminate the cultural, moral and social factors affecting the attitudes and reactions of his characters. The inevitable and uncontrollable transmutations and transience in the western man's life engage the forefront in Crace's fiction such as *The Gift of Stones* (1988), *Arcadia* (1990) or *Pesthouse* (2007). As an observer of such phenomena, Crace can only express his sense of discontent. In his *Signals of Distress* (1994), he refers to such developments and their unsettling impact. This point drives one of his critics to categorise this type of fiction as representing "parables of distress" (Tew, 75).

Part of this imperceptible but uncontrollable transformation in terms of society or culture has something to do with the mode of living currently followed in both east and west. Crace's own testimony in this regard is indispensable as he more than once undertakes the task of expounding his central themes in *Arcadia* and other parables. As he points out, the prevalence of the modern technological prisonhouse is a cause of much unhappiness and worry. By implication, there is a tacit longing for a lost natural and simple mode of living that has vanished once and for all. The reviewer quotes him to be saying that "I've come to hate the way modern buildings try to put the outside inside, so that you don't know if it's winter or summer, day or night" (Signmaster 2000). He elaborates further on this phenomenon and expresses his profound grief about human inability to cope with such a situation geared only to matters of profit and utility "I'm sad that architecture and planning are controlled by rent values."

What has been mentioned so far indicates one unmistakable aspect of Crace's fiction: it is a work essentially devoted to showing the author's

perceptions and views about his society and culture. *Arcadia* highlights the author's conception of his society and the city in particular and how the two leave indelible scars on the individual. As such, the present study will concentrate in the following pages on how the individual copes with these pressures and entanglements. Another relevant point has to do with the psychological effects public life exerts on the individual. In other words, the two planes of the book, i.e., the private and public, go hand in hand. In addition, there is the interesting issue of the author's success in handling the symptoms and manifestations of the problem of geriatric stage as seen in the reactions and preferences of the main character in the book, Victor. Such levels of study endow the book with multifariousness and richness. However, this study will make do with exploring the cultural and social dimensions of this novel and how they echo and refer to further and wider levels of experience deftly woven in this contemporary arcadia.

After the above-mentioned exploration of the dynamics of the city-country relation and the question that poses itself here is: what is most distinguishable about Jim Crace's *Arcadia*? Is it in line with the main stream of the black- and -white views and judgments already shown? In fact Crace's main premise in this novel and in many others has already been made manifest in different interviews held with him. In one of these, *The Paris Review*, he puts forth his conviction that the city, for all its pitfalls, challenges and risks, remains the titillating and irresistible place for satisfying man's curiosity and ambition:

I am addicted to the imperfections of city life. If you look at what is wrong with the U.K.—racism, dirt, unemployment—you're going to find it best exemplified in the city and not in the countryside. But for me there's something immensely exciting and productive about urban vice and something putting me off about a rural virtue (Crace 2003).

By implication, Crace tells us that he is not the idealist or romanticist who wants to exaggerate the merits of the countryside. Even without referring to his ideological and intellectual background (Crace being a socialist), it is evident that his judgments and perceptions are pragmatic and down-to-earth. Leaving aside all the myths and fantasies about the intrinsically good and idyllic worlds of the countryside, most of us share Crace his conviction that the city is the proper site for actualising man's dreams and innermost wishes.

Having said that, one is apt to recall that this prioritisation of the urban does not rule out the continuity that has to be preserved between these two modes of living as the novel argues. As one of his critics rightly puts it, the book attempts to "inscribe pastoral images within an idealized cityscape" (Head, 210). This reconciliation or synthesis is the underlying principle informing the whole structure of the novel and perhaps its outstanding merit.

Technically speaking, Crace shows great interest in the unspecified allegories or tales that eventually render his work universal rather than local and temporal. Actually, reading his *Arcadia*, one is reminded of the practices of writers like Italo Calvino, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, William Golding and Jorge Luis Borges. However, this does not mean that he has abandoned showing the bitter realities of life found in the typically naturalistic fiction. As will be shown in the following pages, *Arcadia* as well as his other novels can be considered a relentless critique of the practices in modern civilisation. Crace, as we know, is a writer who rejects all types of "metanarratives" (Storey, 59). Already Raymond Williams, a critic with whom Crace has much to share, warns against the discontinuity between the city and the countryside when he states "the contrast of the country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience of the crises of our society" (Williams, 289).

Below these general lines of thought, the novel strives to show the ineradicable effects of the countryside on what goes on in the city. Crace's cultural interests represent the cornerstone of his fiction whether in the present novel or any other. Indeed, in one of his interviews, he spells out his stand, "I write like a traditional story-teller about the fate and prospect of communities rather than individual" (Crace 2010). In other words, Victor's life which underwent all types of fluctuations due to his father's premature death and his mother's widowing, will always be a state of oscillation between the present and the past, wishful thinking and grim reality, memory and actuality. Indeed the details of Victor's life in his compulsory shift from the country to the city or to be more exact, to the Soap Market (a link between the country and the city) indicate that the city can be an ambivalent site: it offers much, sometimes too much, but it strips one of so many good things as seen in the manifestations of the main character's psychological state.

In its essential lines, the story of *Arcadia* is a sort of make-believe that throws overboard all types of verisimilitude or plausibility. It is in the line of the rags-to-riches saga where the reader is asked to suspend all types of disbelief, if he/she is to enjoy the book's intellectual and aesthetic message.

Victor's very presence in the first pages of the book before the author shifts the reader to a long process of retrospect, typifies the terrible repercussions of the city-country dialectics: extremely rich in terms of money and authority and impoverished in genuine and warm feelings and human sense. He appears to be obsessed by one project: erecting a grand mall to replace the Soap Market of his miserable childhood. It will be a living emblem of the hegemony of the city and its dwarfing of anything else. Stemming from a purely egotistic concern, such a project indicates his total isolation from people whose living consists entirely in the presence of the Soap Market. The city represented by the gigantic shopping centre, will overshadow the remnants of what is green and semi-rural. Though done with good intention, i.e., serving the district and modernising it, his "Arcadia" remains isolated and far away from the common people, just like the life of its owner. Here one has to refer to the fact that the characters in the novel, both rich and poor, are typical "urban people who seem to be blank islands. They all live secluded lives as if cut off from other people" (Stemporowski, 11).

In terms of technique in dealing with the temporal and spatial dimensions of the book, Crace follows a characteristic way in evoking the past through showing the current situation of the characters in question. As a typical postmodernistic piece of fiction, the actual time dimension of the novel is compressed. The writer is content with crystallising the present urban life and by means of flashback the past is shown through its indelible impact on the individuals. His narrator evokes a long series of recollections regarding the main character's painful past along with his mothers'. The sense of place follows the same strategy in that the reader is given the chance of perceiving only the city and its current challenges but the countryside cohabits the main character's consciousness as seen in Victor's preferences and innermost interests.

The novel shows the drastic impact of the new on the traditional modes of living. The Soap Market will receive a terrible blow with the erection of this shopping centre and thus many people will lose their jobs and their former facilities. The artificiality of the city will replace the spontaneity and openness of the countryside represented by the Soap Market. Hence the fierce resistance of the soapies of such modernistic devices and plans. However, the book suggests that this dream of preserving the old by means of mingling the rural with the urban by means of this gigantic mall is not entirely successful as the city appears in the final analysis an intimidating and insurmountable fierce. If "the destruction of the past is one of the most characteristic and eerie

phenomena of the late twentieth century" as Eric Hobsbaum puts it (Krips, 1). Victor does his best to keep it alive through subjecting the tradition to different and sophisticated devices. Part of the interest of this book, then, is this deep probing of the city-country competition and the destinies of those involved in this unequal struggle. The novel's epigraph is expressive of one of Crace's major themes: the transition from one state to another and its concomitant effects. In this novel, it is the transition from the rural to the urban or rather the replacement of the former by the agents of the latter. Emile Dell'Ova's *Truisms* (1774) highlights once again how the individual-community relation is disrupted (a point explored again on page 366) by the individual's self-interest:

The tallest buildings throw the longest Shadows
(thus Great men make their mark by blocking out the Sun,
And, seeking warmth themselves, cast Cold upon the rest).

The topic of narcissistic spirit and its subversive impact on others is self-evident which the novel will expound throughout its many chapters.

In the first sentences of this ostensible memoir or biography, the reader learns that the whole struggle of the main character, Victor, is over. The journalist's task is the customary one: rich and influential people always are accompanied by apologists to write about them, "There's always someone in a city with a tale to tell, and there are Burghers to dress it up and publish it" (330).

In these earlier sentences, Victor shows his adherences to the countryside although he has spent all his life in the city. This is partly due to the endless tales and anecdotes his mother used to fill his impressionable mind with. It is not surprising that his memorable birthday party should be confined to the purely rural and natural alone,

On the day he was eighty, Victor dined on fish. He loved fish best. As he scaled and silvered with old age, so his taste for fish had grown. Ten live perch from his own stockpool arrived that morning at the station and were driven by a cab in a plastic travel-tank to his offices (3).

Thus the details of his eightieth birthday party betray his deep and even unconscious sticking to anything suggestive of the countryside. The fish in this context acquires a further signification if seen within this context. Victor's saga is over, although its scars and recollections remain rooted in his mind and mood "No wonder Victor never fell in love. A childhood like the one he had

could make ice cubes of us all. He lived on mother's milk till he was six, and then thrived on charity and trade" (3). Between the age of six and the present one (eighty), this fairly long time span has been a drama of its own where the urban-rural dialectics serves as the background. It is the gigantic struggle of healing the injuries and humiliations inflicted by urban life in the Soap Market. This is a novel whose events are minimised while the recollections and speculations are given the greatest space and momentum. It is this particular side of the book that drives Frank Kermode to align Crace's fiction with that of Iris Murdoch since it has "a crystalline construction, and that it becomes most like a poem , most turned in on itself, most clearly wrought for the sake of art and internal cohesion" (Lane, 28).

The novel belongs to those works where the things recaptured are prioritised. In retrospect, the book gradually shows the reasons behind Victor's aloofness and self-imposed isolation. It is his blighted childhood and miserable past that are to blame for his current attitudes. Out of these terrible experiences that could descend to the level or the brink of the degradation of a beggar's life, Victor comes out as the great patriarch whose character is enveloped with awe and solemnity. Everybody does his best to satisfy and titillate the whims and innermost desires of the tycoon and authority of the city.

If Victor is keen to make his birthday party have the flavor of the countryside, the logical question is: What makes him relive this painful past? As already suggested, the mother's role here is vital as she has instilled in his mind all this love for a time past. It is the mother, Em, who has kept telling him tales about the bright sides of the countryside already shown in the first section of this study. She taught him to believe in the dictum "you tend your tree. I, Victor, was born a countryman—and country people always reinvest their seeds" (176). However, there is another side in Victor's character that needs to be shown. He spent all his time in the city and therefore he knew the city's rewards and buffets, victories and fiascos. As a self-made man, Victor is keen to exhibit the fruits of his lifelong struggle by building a skyscraper "Big Vic" as the headquarter of his commercial activities. This fairly static world of *Arcadia* is animated when the tycoon (Victor) takes his decision of gutting the old Soap Market and erecting his Arcadia, the shopping centre. It is at this moment that book is given a new impetus. The soapies and many staff members of his office find themselves in opposition to such plans endangering the lives and livings of many people. Even Rook, who was once Victor's confidante, sides with such legitimate claims of poor people. Although originally, soapie, Rook has remained for a long time working for the great

tycoon, simply because of the financial benefits he receives from his master. The tone of the book is unequivocal here; he betrayed the soapies "for pay and privilege at Victor's feet, as if fine sentiments were not as fine as cash" (25). The book shows that if Victor stands for the powerful people that can impose their wills, other people suffering from such decisions could subvert his plans as seen in Rook's attempts to impede them when he was fired. This contesting of wills is at the centre of the conflict in the novel "the striking soapies had given Rook the mandate to negotiate. They'd trusted him" (247). Rook sees himself a sort of savior in this struggle between the employer and employees, "He'd save the Soap Market people. He'd be the champion of marketers. He'd climb up on the platform once again and represent their principles, their fears" (248). What matters in this struggle is not values but interests and benefits.

Rook, then, is a good example of the urban man, albeit in his own way. Victor is also the by-product of the city, but his bitter experiences have left scars that are not easy to erase by the passing of time. As a bachelor, and in sharp contrast to Victor, Rook indulges in purely physical and even mechanical relation with his office mate, Anna, Victor's secretary. This relation reminds us of what goes on between the bored typist and her 'carbuncular' colleague in Eliot's masterpiece, "The Waste Land" (1922). Such a mechanical relation could only arouse boredom and she heaves a sigh of relief at the moment of his departure "Well now that's done, and I'm glad it's over" (line 252). Indeed the situation in both urban scenes is essentially similar in that both couples are driven to a physical and meaningless relation that does not move beyond the purely sensual. The presence of such affairs is suggestive of the meaninglessness and vicious sides of the urban world. Indeed Rook and Anna have the guts to make love even in the working hours in Victor's offices. Such a scene echoes the behavior of the secretary, Shirley, in David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1989) where she practices love in her working time. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Victor has very a strict set of norms and rules deplorably missing in the factory of Lodge's work. Here the tone is solemn and tough. "They have no place in an organization such as mine where relationships between all members of the office staff, producers, clients, and customers, should be based on propriety and honesty" (198). The "honesty" Victor has in mind has no correspondence in the urban bogus world and utilitarian means.

If we leave aside this ignoble point of urban life, i.e., self-interest, promiscuousness, spiritual void, the city in Crace's novel is rife with all types of humiliation, starving and absence of human warmth. In the first days of the

arrival of Em and her infant son, they had the first night in a stable (89). This is typically Dickensian in import and treatment. She had to work as a beggar, using Victor as a means of arousing the sympathy of people. The physical description of the city appears callous and intimidating as viewed by the helpless country woman:

They left the fields behind. They reached metalled roads, and rows of houses with lawns and carriage drives. They came through high woods and found a measured townscape spreading out in greys and reds and browns, with a shimmering mirage of smoke which made it seem as if the hills beyond were chimney products of the city walls and that the sky was spread with liquid slate (84).

In her ruminations about the desperate situation she is in, her mind turns to the idea of selling her son (90), or even worse by throwing herself "beneath a tram. Or try her luck beneath the hooves and wheels of some fast track" (90). This Anna Karenina's embittered step does not fit within the intellectual and artistic framework of Crace's art. Instead, the author gives the reader the solution to this ordeal by providing the magic realism solution in enabling the son to become the most influential personality in the city, even though the mother is deprived of seeing the fruit of her struggle. The individual-environment struggle certainly constitutes the leitmotif of this novel and its people.

The impression this leaves on the reader is that the world of the city is that of fierce competition and alienation. It is a world of brutality where the weak and timid have no place. It is a Darwinian jungle whose agents devour and mutilate each other. Em and her son represent the terrible ravages inflicted by the city and its suffocating milieu. At least this was so in the early years of Victor's struggle:

She lost her looks. Her hair was lifeless as the leaf tuft on a pulled beetroot. Her clothes sat on her like a saddle on a goat's back. She'd lost her youth, as well. Five years and more of city life could take the paint off carvings or stunt a country oak, make flowers grey, drain country faces of their rosy brightness, and etch in lines as ploughs put furrows in a field (127).

Even Em's death seems as gratuitous as her very existence. As there is no place to accommodate her and her child, she resorts to the homeless dwelling ironically named "The Princess." This is a place for "beggars, hawkers, prostitutes, the unemployed, the young, the criminals" (144). Before it sets on fire and Em loses her life, the authorities show a latent desire that the place be set on fire because of the bad name of its dwellers "the best prospect for the city was far all the tenements to be consumed flames, for all the lawless poor to be dispersed by heat like rodents in a forest" (142).

What can be added to this painful description of the city's victims is that other parts of the world have already produced their own versions of this urban world and its victims. The novelist Mohamad Choukri (1935–2003) of Morocco wrote in 1973 his masterpiece, *For Bread Alone*, where one comes across all types of drudgery, dehumanisation and injuries. Tangier appears here similar to Crace's unidentified city, although the latter is European in essence or Birmingham, to be more specific.

In contrast to the lifeless urban existence, the country appears in a flashback as a lost Eden, a place that stands as the opposite of what is there in the city:

Em told Victor what fun they had—would have in fields, at harvest time, with all the fattest rabbits, the lizards, and the snakes trapped in the last stands of the corn, her captured rabbits could be skinned and salted for the pot... (129).

Thus the two lines of the book are juxtaposed in such a way as to highlight this ever-present chasm separating the two worlds, although the book endeavors to bring them together in a convenient resolution for this perennial dilemma.

The country represented by the Soap Market and its stallholders appears keen to kick back against the encroachments of the city and its jurisdiction. The people of the Soap Market resist the notion of erecting Victor's *Arcadia*. As already suggested, it is Rook who leads the campaign for selfish reasons besides the interests of the soapers. He eventually convinces his colleague Anna to steal the plans prepared by the engineer Signor Busi (258–259) so that the whole enterprise may be subverted. However, such attempts are doomed to fail, as Victor's decision to install this mall is firm. There are acts of riot and violence and subsequent fire (308–309). The irony is that Rook is murdered in this pell-mell and Victor's success is ensured. The end of the book is in line

with what Crace pointed about his preference of the city life, for all its demerits and distress. This last point is made evident through the author's account of Arcadia, as a mini picture of the country within the city. It is indicative that all riches can not bring back the natural and rural, I am besieged by colour and smell. There is no wind or cold, and any sun that filters through is bounded by angles, shed by glass, spread by glossy walls as if it were the bogus light of theaters. The music and smells are piped...I can not hear the birds. Even the humidifiers—roaring in the heavens of the building's carapace are silent at ground level (364).

What is missing in this great achievement is contrasted with the exuberant and life-sustaining modes of living in the Soap Market, which is a glaring metaphor for the country:

towers of potatoes, conifers of oranges, trembling with every passer-by. The makeshift market flourishes on noise and filth and rain. It would even flourish –and it does- on poetry. 'All life is here,' according to the market chauvinists, a claim no one would make for Arcadia, with its policed doors, its creed of safety from the streets... (372).

One can add that the Soap Market does not vanish entirely despite the erection of the concrete mall. It keeps on its activities and certainly poses the contrast the reader needs to come across for perceiving the glaring differences between these two modes of living.

Given all these details, it becomes evident that the title is full of irony. Modern Arcadia, unlike its classical counterparts, has nothing to do with the content and complacency it is often associated with. Here, it is a sort of self-enclosed world whose clients have to follow a strictly observed discipline and a long list of proscriptions and prescriptions. This is a place exclusively made for the elite and rich and is dismissive of the class Victor himself once belonged to. Richness has not only alienated him from people but also has precluded his natural abilities. All the flatteries and compliments he continuously hears are no moré than lip-service which is part of this highly artificial world. Words and actions here are fake. It is in this particular point that one finds a justification for Crace's claim that his work is essentially 'moral,' "I wrote those deeply moral books in a country which would prefer irony to anything with a moral tone" (Crace 2003, 1). In one of the interesting phrases in the book, Crace informs the reader that "the bread won't rise without the yeast" (255). Indeed

Victor's distinction would not have come into being had he not drunk the cup of misery to the full and had he not witnessed the great sacrifices of his mother. Indeed this is the gist of the moral side of the book closely linked to the world of the city and its gifts and abuses. Needless to add, Crace's book is a concretization of what Gaston Bachelard has stressed about the aesthetics of the place and its formidable impact on the individual perspective of things and reactions regarding the outside world. All the characters of this book betray a dialectical relation with the city and its formidable shaping force as well as the exceptional ability of the characters in question to respond in accordance with the requirements of an unpredictable and oppressive milieu.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has sought to explore the different dimensions and manifestations of the city-countryside relation, a topic that preoccupied writers, philosophers, artists and mystics all the time and in different cultures. Seen in its entirety, there is almost a unanimous consent among writers, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, that the city is an inevitable evil. The country, in contrast, remains in these writings as a safe haven to which all their aspirations are directed. Crace's *Arcadia* is not completely new. By means of its events, situations, and the recurrent authorial intrusions, the main postulate of the book becomes evident: there is a sort of interrelation or continuity between these two modes of living. Each has its own good and bad sides as seen in the striking drama of Em and her son Victor.

Thus Crace's novel presents a synthesis of polar opposites: it is a Dantesque inferno whose dwellers are doomed to an endless struggle. However, it is also the only place where some can achieve fabulous fortunes provided the individuals have the guts and resolve in addition to the convenient opportunities. In the countryside such differences in terms of social distinction and money barely exist. The book's message is clear enough: the city entails great efforts and stamina and sometimes bestows much. By implication, the city seems like the fatal femme that only lends itself to the brave and stoic. If Victor is lucky enough to evade its meshes and challenges, there are many who are not so. Of these, the soapies are good examples who could not put up with the changes suggested by Victor. Seen from another angle, Crace's novel shows that the female characters (Victor's mother, aunt and Anna) are far from happy.

The bitter sense of loss always besets them. Woman's role here is that of the yeast whose fruits are reaped by lucky men. Usually there are few.

Crace's *Arcadia* has successfully dovetailed the individual with the societal, ecological and aesthetic, technological and natural in a way that provides intellectual joy and tremendous entertainment. Is not this the primary task of the serious fiction ever since man has uttered the first expressive words "Once upon a time?"

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