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Locating the Country/City Dichotomy in the Plays of Martin Crimp

Transgression is a *modus vivendi* of the country/city dichotomy both in the sense of a more permanent “life-style” and as “temporary accommodation.” In *The Country and the City*, published in 1973 but still widely referenced and recognized as a seminal work, Raymond Williams says that “the common image of the country is ... the image of the past, and the image of the city an image of the future” (297). When taking into account a broader historical spectrum, this assertion is obviously subject to change. And thus Ardis Butterfield, who discusses the production of space in Geoffrey Chaucer’s London, indicates the mediaeval poet’s pastoral perspective from which the city emerges as a past-oriented construct (2006: 20). Whichever side of the said dichotomy comes under scrutiny, any inquiry into the country/city problematic seems to be presignified by their unstable but fundamental interdependence. The following discussion will focus on this complex conceptual nexus staged by a contemporary playwright, Martin Crimp, in two of his plays.

Though *The Country* (first production: 2000) and *The City* (first production: 2008) are separated by the distance of almost a decade, the country/city dichotomy, foregrounded in the titles, brings them together as companion plays almost automatically. According to Aleks Sierz, “*The Country*, ostensibly took a more traditional form” (2006: 56) and had “mixed reviews” ranging from Billington’s emphasis on the anti-Virginian to Taylor’s focus on betrayal and marriage (Sierz, 58). Indeed, written after the experimental *Attempts on Her Life* and, here perhaps more importantly, *The Treatment*, Crimp’s pastoral shatters the illusory belief that city problems, including the dissolution of essential identity (Williams, 241), dominant in the earlier plays, are solved on arrival in the country. The constructedness of Crimp’s pastoral is foregrounded not only in the straightforward theatrical advertisement, “This is not a city” (Crimp 2005: 297), and in Morry’s inquiry whether they miss it (2005: 302) – and thus in a vague reference to the mannerist *As You Like It* – but also in a pervasive emphasis on “purity” and “keeping clean” (2005:

347, 312), which triggers off a still further defamiliarisation of *countriness* via repetitive acts of water-drinking (2005: 294–295).¹ As a result, the play develops an open subversion of the “innocence” and “faith” indicated by Williams (240–241). The pastoral in Crimp’s play is heterotopic, both real and unreal, though the space of the garden remains marginal by giving way to a conflation, also suggested by Michel Foucault, of a heterotopia of crisis with that of deviation (1986: 24–25), so that Sierz’s conclusion that the play offers “a passing comment on a decaying health service” (58) is right, though it should be treated as a metaphor of human condition rather than the playwright’s sudden fit of engagement in topical social matters. Independently of the few landscape landmarks, the initially nondescript space of the play, when inhabited by Richard and Corinne, becomes a place of voluntary exile and self-imposed therapy.

The open intertextual involvement with Virgil’s *Georgics IV* (esp. *The Country*, 331) and the veiled invocation of *Eclogue IX* and *Eclogue I* recall earlier literary transformations of the dichotomy, significant for the eighteenth-century English literature where it is John Gay, apart from James Thomson or George Crabbe, who brings together the country and the city in a context analogous to Crimp’s. Gay recasts the pastoral in several texts but it is the *Rural Sports* (1713) and *Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716) that contain analogous material. Both Crimp and, much earlier, Gay revive Virgil by staging a Melibeian pastoral of exile where they share the experience of either return or passage to the country after innocence has been lost in the city. While Gay, according to Dianne Dugaw, refers to *Eclogue VI* (2001: 96), Crimp seems to borrow more extensively from *Eclogue I* where we find the strongly articulated motif of borders and frontiers as well as slavery located in the supposedly pastoral context. *Eclogue IX* furnishes Gay with the Epigraph, *Quo te Moeri pedes? An, quo via ducit, in Urbem?*, translated by C.D. Lewis as “Where are you footing it, Moeris? to town? This trackway leads there.”² In *Trivia* Moeris leaves the country to enter Gay’s City of London. Crimp has the character of Morry/Moeris roaming the borders of the country tracking down city things called by Corinne “human things,” i.e. the intrusions of the city (such as the watch). Further on, Crimp introduces Rebecca, another character, who enters Part IV with quotations from *Georgics IV* where, once again, the declaration of pastorality is questioned by the “song of husbandry” (Crimp 2005: 331) as well as by the echoes of Caesar’s campaign and signs of economic activity in the landscape.

Whether in palimpsest or in heterotopic terms, Crimp’s construction of landscape brings together *country* and *countryside*, so that the innocent scene of cutting out pictures “to go round the cot” (2005: 291) turns out to be underwritten by the competitive game of Rock, Paper and Scissors with its non-pastoral connotations of

¹ The obsessive desire for water, unrelated to common thirst, is almost Lacanian and thus points to the absence of what its drinking supposedly guarantees.

² Translation quoted from “Notes to the Poem.” In: *Walking the Streets of Eighteenth-Century London*, edited by Clare Brant *et al.*

force, law and power-based negotiations which ultimately pervade the whole play. The only figure truly immersed in the ideal landscape is Sophie whose association with children (2005: 357, though significantly always off-stage) and life beyond any sense of economy – money terrifies her (2005: 356, 299) – makes her a genuine and unquestionable inhabitant of the traditionally conceived place. Corinne (Corinna)³, on the other hand, declares the place to be her “home” (2005: 301) but trying to admire the landscape from an outsider’s position, or a position of ownership, she is unable to name either its details or the genre she might belong to:

- I took one of these old chairs and I sat under a tree...
- It was lovely. (*Pause*)
- Which tree was that?
- The one by the stream.
- The alder.
- The one by the stream/is, yes.
- Well whichever it is, I sat under it. Sat under it for so long in fact that the back legs sank into the moss. And I just looked at the land. I sat there and I just looked out at the land. (*Pause*)...
- It was lovely. The land was lovely. All the hills were rolling and all the clouds were unravelling, like in a fairy tale. I felt like that girl in the fairy tale. Who’s that girl in the fairy tale?
- A goat girl.
- A goat girl or something. I felt – that’s right – just like a goat girl, only without the goats thankfully.

(Crimp 2005: 300–301)

The minimalist, almost Beckettian, topography featuring a stream and a tree has no proper boundary except for the imaginary Wall, whose shape and significance remain obscure while the supposed centre is occupied by a “country house,” the new home of Richard and Corinne. Both landmarks appear to be corrosive for the country image. Unaware of the topographic details, Corinne and Richard need a map to locate the Wall which turns out to be a place they could visit (Crimp 2005: 359), experience (360) or walk along. In their dialogue Wall walking merges into Fell walking, an activity that belongs to the *countryside* rather than to the *country*. Their desire to find/establish the Wall is fuelled by a feeling of insecurity resulting from the absence of any clear borders, a condition analogous to the concept of a city without walls, a collapsed system of signification George Crabbe investigated asking whether “modern poets” should still “court the Mantuan muse.”⁴ Traditionally, walls separate the city from the country and feature either positively or negatively. In *Trivia* to keep, to maintain or to assert the wall while walking in the city becomes a guarantee of safety.⁵ It seems that

³ A conventionally pastoral name. Also, one of the characters in Christopher Marlowe’s “Hero and Leander,” as well as a character in Ovid’s erotic poetry.

⁴ George Crabbe, *The Village* – a version preceding Samuel Johnson’s amendment. Quoted in Williams, p. 13.

⁵ Safety, in the context of city walls and the walls of the street, is frequent in utopian concepts, for instance in Thomas Moore’s *Utopia*: “The town is compassed by a high and thick wall, in which there are many towers and forts; there is also a broad and deep ditch, set thick with thorns ... and

the contemporary Corinne is not a “goat girl” but a city girl who “failed to dress for the country” (Crimp 205: 363) and having found the “track” in the middle of nowhere desperately clings to it looking out for “human things,” i.e. city things like “a piece of wire or a spent cartridge,” “a plastic bag” or “a needle” (364). On the same track, she runs into the Latin speaking Morry/Moeris who, like the Shakespearean Jacques, appears with a real trophy: Rebecca’s beautiful wrist watch dangling “from its gold strap” (Crimp 2005: 365).

The country house in neo-pastoral poetry no longer sponsors the ideal construct. Instead, as Williams observes, the house becomes part of city economy (1985: 47) and, later, a stage for metropolitan social drama (248). At first Crimp’s country house seems to shelter the invisible children. Cleanliness and purity are practised there almost as rituals, but it soon turns out to be a place advocating high rate consumption and a belief in exchange value, and thus the country house becomes a site of instability rather than quiet meditation. For Corinne, at least on arrival, the new house means *home* and from the city perspective it is a rural ideal: “harmonious ... of the order of things, of the orderly cultivation of things. Of the tasks appropriate to winter and spring, summer and fall, the vines, the willow-beds” (Crimp 2005: 324–325). The quotation alludes openly to William Cowper’s “The Task,” where the chief assignment, a guarantee of a relationship between the speaker and the earth, consists in writing a spiritual autobiography Corinne also targets as the writing of promising (*via* its therapeutic quality) a new, happier life. However, the idealized house disappoints its subsequent female visitors as it reveals its mercantile past: it used to be a granary (Crimp, 335), a storehouse sharing in the city economy. Hence Rebecca’s somewhat unexpected arrival and declaration that she comes to study history (Crimp, 322–323) refer both to her individual past (she is another case of therapeutic autobiographical involvement) and to that of the location she carefully inspects. Her intrusion is that of a city girl (324), a *walker* who arrives with a backpack full of city desires and *things* including cigarettes and drugs. She is, in accordance with her role of a walker, “unclean” (320–321) and incoherent (293), but the confusion she causes turns out catalytic. Uncomfortable in their pastoral roles, Corinne and Richard shift from the *country* towards the *countryside* concept, with the latter admitting he is not a writer (346), not a poet-shepherd. With the “heart gone” (366), Corinne supplants the seemingly genuine *pastoral* feelings with perfect simulation, an indispensable adjustment to the changing conditions. Since neither Richard nor Corinne has stories to tell, following Fredric Jameson, the reality presentable in terms of stories (as an

the river is instead of a ditch on the fourth side. The streets are very convenient for all carriage, and are well sheltered from the winds. Their buildings are good, and are so uniform that a whole side of a street looks like one house. The streets are twenty feet broad; there lie gardens behind all their houses. These are large, but enclosed with buildings, that on all hands face the streets, so that every house has both a door to the street and a back door to the garden.” Quoted from “Of Their Towns. Particularly of Amaurot,” *Utopia*.

epistemological category) remains impenetrable to their alienated beings. The only story-teller left is Rebecca who replaces the truly pastoral Sophie. The strange story the walker tells assumes the form of both fairy tale and confessional autobiography. As in the earlier plays, it is a story of disease and peculiar treatment. In the course of the cure/story-telling, the girl's body, we can assume it is Rebecca, "became the city ... [t]he doctor learned how to unfold ... like a map" (Crimp, 342). The story ends with the "bright girl" terminating the treatment and leaving for the country (342). The motif of an inscribed body of a city dweller is not new as it was used not only by Sarah Kane in *Skin* but also by Crimp in *Treatment*. Julian Wolfreys suggests that the "act of writing on the body" can be perceived as a "gift of the city" rather than a harmful act, a "process of being translated/transformed by the city; so that, as beings, our being-in-the-city serves as a singular map, a decentred guide that gives access ... to any future writing of the city" (2004: 8). Interestingly, the future writing/telling is reduced to the individual female voice of the city walker who shares her experience/becomes a city guide in the transformed country.

Indeed, putting on her new shoes Corinne looks "transformed," like another Cinderella – an interpretation the text hints at (Crimp 2005: 353) but refuses to elaborate on. Emigration/passage from the country, a place transformed by intrusions of *citiness*, to the city itself is no longer presignified as there is no conceptual wall and no traditional gate. The familiar regulative concepts present in the urban discourse, such as achievement, learning, light and ambition, city as place of rhetorical contrast (Wilson 1992: 8), mechanism or organism (beehive) – to name but a few – represented symbolically (Wilson, 235), metaphorically, metonymically, as synecdoche or as parody (Parker 2004: 150 ff) cease to apply once the narratives they used to be anchored in are lost. The dissolution of the city/country dichotomy drains both concepts of meaning and results in a weakening of barriers typical for sprawling. Diagnosing the situation, Wilson speaks about a "nowhere city," a centre-less urbanity "eaten up" by non-places (153), while Parker goes back to the inclusive heterotopia (147). Still, this wall-less (Lehan 1998: 144) undefined present (Tygstrup 2005: 229) facilitates, Wilson claims, a desirable transformation of hitherto gender relations and predefined roles (8). Hence, as she suggests, the city may become "a place of growing threat and paranoia for men" but "a liberation place for women" (7).

The City staged by Crimp seems to be presignified in its companion play and therefore to suffer from the symptoms of an "alienated city," defined as such by Kevin Lynch (1960: 43 ff, 51–52) and Fredric Jameson (2003: 51), whose source in Crimp's version is the *alienated country*. There is no sense of a synecdochic relation with the past concepts of the dichotomy. Even though access is granted to "bits"⁶ – such as glimpses of freezers in a supermarket, city lights, a taxi rank, and a station concourse – as a totality or whole the city no longer

⁶ See Mitchell's *City of Bits*, 52 ff.

exists. The presence of a garden within its unclear premises introduces the heterotopic but its significance is obscure in traditional terms: neither a relic of the Paradise nor the four-cornered denatured world. The garden is an irritating source of noise made by children. On the other hand, it is functional and indicative of a mnemonic mechanism which brings memories and/or underground mundus-like visions to Jenny, one of the characters. It is for the women, Jenny in particular, that the garden located “in the middle of the city” (Crimp 2008: 18) is beautiful and “genuinely ... unique” (19) while for the male figure, Chris, who sounds like Corinne from the companion play, it is “like all other gardens” the city has: “a patch of grass – a few plants round the edge we typically don’t know the names of” (18). Chris, like Corinne from *The Country*, fails to see things in the urban landscape of nature and is unable to name them. The obviously noticeable unreal counter-site within the garden is the blackbird building a nest in October (Crimp 2008: 42–43) and spotted by the playing children. Like all other gardens, the garden provides one of the entrances to the imaginary city, a gate which leads also to its labyrinthine underground world, an inverted Babel tower, from which Jenny’s narratives emerge: they make up the city of her mind filled with her husband’s traumatic experience, though the memories are triggered off by her own experience and Claire’s children playing in the garden, especially by the noise they produce:

In the secret war ... they are attacking a city – pulverising it, in fact ... turning this city – the squares, the shops, the parks, the leisure centres and the schools ... into fine grey dust ... everybody in that city has to be killed ... it’s amazing how people can cling on to life – I’m a nurse – I see it every day – I see people cling on to life almost every day – and it’s the same – according to my husband – in this city: people in all sorts of unexpected places, clinging on to life ... say you are one of the boys [Jenny turns to Chris] – and you are patrolling a street and you notice an open hatch – and the hatch leads to a drain – so you look into the drain – you go into the drain because you think: hmmm – perhaps there’s life in this drain ... down there deep under the city.

(Crimp 2008: 22–23) [my comment]

Jenny’s mindscape condones what Wilson dubs a masculine city of rebel gangs, warriors and fugitives (Crimp 2008: 14) transcending all dualities. The heterotopic garden she refuses to set against the city, becomes, instead, the city’s grave and Jenny’s private mindscape whose monologic eruption is a true soliloquy (She tells Chris who imagines himself its addressee to “Keep out of it,” Crimp 2008: 24). The city as a “psychical entity” whose rich past has been fully preserved was put forward by Sigmund Freud as an example though, the concept of heterotopia introduced later, Freud did not imagine a juxtaposition of different contents within “the same space” (1961: 17–18). What is significant in Freud’s proposition for Crimp’s play is the idea that the city is constructed from what is preserved/buried in the “layers” of an individual mind and triggered off by urban stimuli, here the cries of Claire’s children. And thus, the city emerges as always plural. Richard Lehan goes further, beyond the concept of the city of the mind, suggesting that the city, being inseparable from discourse, exists as “consciousness collapsed into culture” and for

that reason ceases to be personal. Instead, “it thinks us” (Lehan 1998: 267). Sharp and Wallock urge our attention to the fact that “perceptions of urban landscape are inseparable from the words we use to describe them and from the activities of reading, naming, and metaphORIZING that make all our formulations possible” (1987: 1). Therefore, to read a city is to read an urbanized self – hence the importance of autobiographical narratives Crimp also recognizes. Such a transformation leads from the nineteenth-century narrated/rendered cities via cities of the mind to constructed city narratives where urban experience is incorporated, as Tygstrup argues, directly into the technique of representation (2005: 228).

Crimp’s *The City* opens with Claire and Chris coming home and discussing their day in the city. In his review, following the premiere, Robert Hewison calls this scene “classical ordinairiness” (2008). The couple talk past each other but their commonplace dialogue splits and, unexpectedly, develops into two city narratives revealing two distinct urbanized selves. Chris tells or “is told” in a story of coercion where he becomes a victim of restructuring and remains barred from entering the building of his former office. Ironically, Chris appears on the stage still wearing his uniform, the suit, and the further attributes of loyalty and belonging, i.e. a case and an inscription labelling him as company property – “a security pass hanging from his neck” (Crimp 2008: 7). The re-installation of walls in Crimp’s postmodern city excludes Chris from its premises and announces a different understanding of security in which the city guards itself against its inhabitant. Chris is incorporated into Bobby’s, his more fortunate colleague’s, storytelling where Bobby wants to see Chris squirm (Crimp, 12). Both of them, in turn, are absorbed into Jeanette’s larger narrative as she is known for her ability to “print ... herself on people’s minds” (Crimp, 13). To find his own narrative/memories, Chris must go back to school times and, later, to the nursery room rhymes that Jenny wishes so desperately to lock out in the playroom. The mnemonic mechanism triggered off by the cries of Claire’s children, the haunting call of the city, makes it difficult for her “to sleep in the daytime with all this on [her] mind” (Crimp, 24).

Claire enters the stage holding a “flat object in her paper bag” (Crimp, 7): a diary. Soon her narrative commences with a city scene located at Waterloo Station and at an adjacent taxi rank. Unaware, as it seems, the woman enters the city through the nineteenth-century city gates: the railway station, which indicates Claire’s mobility as walker and observer. As if in a Chinese box system the man she meets, Mohamed, turns out to be a writer who opens his heart to her also as a storyteller (Crimp, 11) embarking on another confessional autobiography though, as he admits, he does not normally give interviews (10). We hear the story of another diary: one he wanted to buy for his daughter. Claire modestly insists on her position as translator rather than a fully fledged writer and in Part III travels to a translation conference where she has a paper whose subject is not revealed. Indeed, the city can also be envisaged as “site for translation, for putting in place a transformative textual practice,” says Wolfreys, to rethink the relation between “the sign and the

material” (2004: 7). It seems that practicing translation Claire, like Rebecca, not only translates but is gradually transformed/translated by the city thus giving access to a *future* writing of the city as the written. She comes from Lisbon (translation conference) transformed: “like it says in a book – ‘unexpectedly’” (Crimp 2008: 46). Part V reveals Claire’s crucial discovery of the city inside of her, so that translation is identified as temporary “refuge” (60) of an addict:

... ‘a city
inside of me – a huge and varied city full of green
squares, shops and churches, secret streets, and hidden
doors leading to the staircases that climbed to rooms full of
light where there would be drops of rain on the windows,
and where in each small drop the whole city would be
seen, upside down. There would be industrial zones...

And I was convinced that

In this city of mine I would find an inex...
‘an inexhaustible source of characters and
stories for my writing. I was convinced that in order to
be a writer I’d simply have to travel to this city – the one
inside of me – and write down what I discovered there.

(Crimp 2008: 61)

Claire’s diary/journey into the distant city suddenly merges with Jenny’s underground visions:

...But when I reached it I found it had been destroyed.
The houses had been destroyed, and so had the shops...
There were no children in the playgrounds, only coloured
lines. I looked for the inhabitants to write about, but there
were no inhabitants, just dust. I looked for the people still
clinging to life... but even there... in the underground railway system –
there was nothing.

(Crimp 2008: 62)

From the “dust” of these broken images, from the “ash from a cigarette,” Claire starts inventing her own characters, the characters and stories we have watched and listened to so far. Thus, the city seems located in mnemonic constellations and not in external objects. It is apprehended through traces, like the cigarette ash, marks of memory shared by city people, as Wolfreys says, “open to the oscillations of involuntary and impersonal memory” (Crimp 2008: 9). The picture of the city, offering itself to the mind’s eye, remains undecidable so that the city appears in haunting recollections disrupting the undefined present and channelled by “writers,” such as Claire or Jenny to whose lives the marks of memory also belong. Hence Claire’s imminent discovery of her own “emptiness” sharing in the desolate urban landscape.

The dichotomy of city and country is briefly restored and staged by Crimp’s companion plays only to be dismantled by a reduction to a common mental landscape or to a landscape of impersonal memory in an effort to locate the

interpenetration, so that *citiness* in the country and *countriness* in a city landscape seem no longer paradoxical. The successful writers, translators, guides and pianists in this landscape of undecidability and crumbling barriers are women.

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