

## “Siblings to the empty spaces in the heart”: Space, Place and Landscape in Jim Crace’s *Quarantine*

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Jim Crace’s writing is notable for its poetic, rhythmical style and idiosyncratic rendering of place and space. In terms of the latter, Crace labels himself a “landscape writer” as all his novels feature distinct environments that are both familiar and other, realistic and uncanny, which has led the critics to coin for them the term “Craceland.” *Quarantine* (1997) retells the story of Jesus Christ’s forty-day sojourn in the wilderness from the perspective of a contemporary agnostic/atheist. The crucial part of the story is set in a hilly scrubland in the Judean desert, and this heterogeneous and peripheral place and its landscape prove to be determining for the action and character development. Using an ego-centred variant of geocriticism and Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia as its theoretical points of departure, this paper attempts to demonstrate the various roles space, place and landscape assume in *Quarantine*, and argues that Crace’s approach transcends that of phenomenological spatial representation by making the environment a deciding agent within the narrative’s ethical framework.

Keywords: Jim Crace; phenomenological geocriticism; heterotopia; space; place; landscape

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## “Hermanos de los espacios vacíos del corazón”: Espacio, lugar y paisaje en *Quarantine*, de Jim Crace

Los textos de Jim Crace se caracterizan por su estilo poético y rítmico y por su representación idiosincrásica del lugar y del espacio. En cuanto a este último, Crace se define a sí mismo como un “escritor de paisajes”, ya que todas sus novelas presentan inconfundibles entornos

familiares y extraños, realistas y misteriosos, lo cual ha llevado a los críticos a acuñar el término “Craceland”. *Quarantine* (1997) recrea la historia de la estancia de cuarenta días de Jesucristo en el desierto desde la perspectiva de un agnóstico/ateo contemporáneo. La parte crucial de la historia se sitúa en un terreno de matorral montañoso del desierto de Judea. Un lugar tan heterogéneo y periférico como este y su paisaje son decisivos para la evolución de los personajes. Tomando como base teórica una variante egocéntrica de la geocrítica y el concepto de heterotopía de Michel Foucault, este artículo pretende demostrar los roles diversos que el espacio, el lugar y el paisaje tienen en *Quarantine* y argumenta que el enfoque de Crace trasciende el de la representación espacial fenomenológica mediante la conversión del entorno en factor determinante del marco ético de la narración.

Palabras clave: Jim Crace, geocrítica fenomenológica; heterotopía; espacio; lugar; paisaje

## I. INTRODUCTION – LANDSCAPE WRITER

In each of his novels, Jim Crace (b.1946) has been able to create a distinct milieu which, though wholly invented, has properties that allow the reader to perceive it as real. He denies being a realist, noting that he prefers “to dislocate the readers by taking them to invented places, where the realism is magic and disconcerting rather than familiar” (Crace 2011). These places and spaces feel both other and yet recognisable, distant yet close, timeless yet historically anchored, which is why critics and reviewers have used the term “Craceland” (Begley 2002, 2003) to refer to this idiosyncratic universe—“a world proportioned to reality, and yet largely a system within itself” (Tew 2006, 4), one that is, by means of parable, identifiable and palpable to the reader in spite of its otherness. Crace describes himself as a “landscape writer” (Crace 2013a) possessing what he calls a “landscape sensibility” (Crace 2014), ascribing this capacity to his life-long love of walking and amateur enthusiasm for natural history. The role of landscapes in his books is not only that of the setting, but simultaneously that of a narrative device, metaphor, theme and even stand-alone character,<sup>1</sup> through which they “create provocative and complicated parallels with our own world and inspire dynamic and problematizing questions that often remain unanswered at the conclusion of his narratives” (Shaw and Aughterson 2018, 4). Crace as narrator explores these surroundings at the same time as the reader does (Crace 2015), avoiding the conventional omniscience which maps them out from a bird’s eye view.

Crace admits that his novels are often variations on other stories, and their aim is to reinvent the original narrations. *Quarantine* (1997) imagines Jesus Christ’s forty-day sojourn in the desert, as described in *The New Testament*. It does so in accordance with Magdalena Mączyńska’s claim that rather than destroying iconic literary texts, “contemporary iconoclasts appropriate and transform them” (2015, 1), which in the case of scriptural material results in “an ambivalent but productive relationship between sacred originals, now wholly or partially emptied of their traditional authority, and their novelistic correctives” (2015, 3). The atheist<sup>2</sup> Crace notes that he merely proposed a new story instead of the old one through the “retelling of a narrative [he] thought was harmful, and replac[ing] it with a version which [he] thought was more relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Crace n.p.),<sup>3</sup> his intention being to offer an unorthodox

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode (1998) observes that due to this intense focusing on a particular environment, rather than distinct thematic continuity, Crace’s novels share “variously obsessed landscapes and cultures.”

<sup>2</sup> Although an atheist, he acknowledges the human impulse for consolatory “narrative[s] of recovery” (Lane 2003, 37). This need for stories of consolation is where he sees himself and religious belief to be related since, as he notes, “we both embrace the power of narrative” (Crace 2000).

<sup>3</sup> This approach accords with Mączyńska’s delineation of post-secular fiction as texts that “openly question or destabilize the religious/secular dichotomy on the mimetic, formal, or metafictional levels by juxtaposing religious and secular discourses within the economy of the fictional construct,” through which they “engage the reader in an open, often irreverent, reevaluation of the very concepts of the secular and the religious” (2009, 76).

revision from the perspective of a contemporary agnostic or unbeliever.<sup>4</sup> And so, Crace's Jesus is an untutored yet pious Galilean boy who is neither of divine origin nor seems to possess any exceptional capacities. The devilish role of the tempter is assigned to Musa, an ordinary human being, and the story's Jesus dies of starvation and dehydration after thirty days.<sup>5</sup>

As Crace believes ambiguity to be the "lifeblood of fiction" (Crace 2000), *Quarantine's* conception of spirituality to a large extent counters that of the Bible,<sup>6</sup> and the story features a number of paradoxical and ironic events and twists of fate which blur the boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong: Jesus inadvertently cures Musa, in consequence of which this cynical self-seeker recovers, while the Galilean devotee dies helpless, without receiving any celestial solace. Musa exploits and bullies everyone around him, yet the unused hole his wife Miri digs for his corpse fills with water overnight to become a life-saving cistern. Moreover, it eventually becomes the grave where Jesus is buried prior to his resurrection, an act fitting into the symbolic cycle of extinction and regeneration. Musa brutally rapes Marta, who has opted for her quarantine in order to beget a child, while, unknowingly, "curing" her by making her pregnant, which gives her and Miri the courage to flee his control. And, when the spiritual body of Jesus comes back to life, the first person to benefit from the miracle is Musa, who immediately makes it into "his merchandise" (Crace 1998, 242).<sup>7</sup>

A determining factor behind all these incidents is the environment in which they take place. Deborah Lilley demonstrates how Crace experiments with pastoral settings in his novels "to represent and reflect critically upon the relationship between people and place, highlighting the blind spots in their characters' visions, and the imperative to account for what lies beyond their fields of view" (2018, 36). His employment of wilderness in *Quarantine* is analogous to this. The scrubland is depicted with the utmost precision and the sense of minute detail of a natural historian: Crace presents the geological profile of the region, paying attention to its rocks, sediments and minerals with their shades, shapes and crevices, examines the rare desert vegetation, and is observant of its natural inhabitants in terms of their appearance, behaviour and instincts. Yet this rock-bound area in the Judean desert assumes further, and more meaning-making, functions with regard to the plot and character development, which are only amplified by the absence of scriptural spiritual authority. Referring to selected

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<sup>4</sup> Crace claims that the immediate impulse for the story came not from Scripture, but from his visit to a care-in-the-community hostel near his Moseley home (Crace 2013b).

<sup>5</sup> David Jasper, however, labels Crace as a "religious writer" whose stories have much in common with certain aspects of the ancient spiritual tradition of writing where "the sacred is found and felt everywhere in rocks and landscape, and especially when 'religion' itself is either abandoned or else, and more often, it abandons us" (2018, 167).

<sup>6</sup> The story, however, contains uncanny elements that strongly echo those of the Gospels, particularly Jesus's resurrection. *Quarantine's* ambiguous and ambivalent blending of the natural and the supernatural is discussed at length in Graham Holderness's article "Jim Crace, *Quarantine*, and the Dawkins Delusion."

<sup>7</sup> In references, the novel will be henceforward abbreviated as *Q*.

theoretical conceptions of space and its representation, the aim of this paper is to discuss and analyse the diverse ways in which Crace uses the landscape of the novel to generate and exemplify meanings, reaching beyond its physical presence and placing particular emphasis on its ethical role as a superior principle controlling its occupants' fates.

## 2. CONCEPTUALISING SPATIAL HETEROGENEITY

First of all, it is necessary to clarify the terms space, place and landscape. While space is a general and indeterminate notion which refers to the larger milieu which one inhabits or finds oneself in, place is a specified, localised and personalised segment of space, one to which individuals ascribe meanings through their own experience and (self-)projections. Place is an element of space to which its dwellers are "emotionally and culturally attached" (Altman and Low 1992, 5), which is defined not only geographically, but also by a particular set of social relations associated with it. Space becomes place "by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population" (Carter *et al.* 1993, xii), and thus proves more determining for the formation of one's identity than space. Moreover, since one place can be variously meaningful to different people, it can assume a "contestatory or dialogical dimension" (Prieto 2012, 14) which has the capacity to produce a profusion of meanings and perspectives. Landscape, then, operates as an interlink between these two notions, one which mediates between the indeterminacy of the first and the distinctness of the latter. It "typically consists of several places, and yet it is linked to an area, a region, in a way space is not" (de Lange *et al.* 2008, xv-xvi). Therefore, though both physically and semantically larger, it is still focalised enough to retain the potential of place to the geographic and the social/human.

The most useful methodology for the examination of Crace's treatment of space is geocriticism. As devised by Bertrand Westphal at the beginning of the millennium, it is a set of critical practices that explore the ways in which literary representations of space interact with the geographic reality of the world. Westphal's approach is predominantly geo-centred and seeks to understand actual spaces by exploring their fictionality in the form of imaginative textual representations. His aim is to grasp a given space better through its diverse textual renderings rather than to perform a systematic study of these representations.

Westphal's concept rests on three major theoretical principles: Spatiotemporality denotes the spatialising of time by the relative laws of space-time, whose paramount consequence is a heterogeneity of spaces. The result of this turbulence is entropic nonequilibrium which offers a complexity of stories corresponding to its disarrayed lines and separate points of instability (Westphal 2011, 18-19). Transgressivity refers to the capacity of contemporary space for movement and mobility, the perpetual operation of peripheral and destabilising processes. This heterogeneous, or smooth—to use the term of Deleuze and Guattari (2005, 474-500)—space is in fact always subject to homogenising, or striating (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 474-500), forces

through which the state apparatus imposes boundaries on it. Spatial representation of such a territory is, then, inevitably palimpsestic in order to capture all the successive changeovers (Westphal 2011, 52-60). And, finally, referentiality claims that the relations between real and textual spaces also evince constant movement and oscillation. Textual representation of space never reproduces the referent but constitutes a discourse which establishes it, thus providing an experience of the real, and human spaces exist only in the modes of this experience (Westphal 2011, 80-85). Given all this, Westphal's geocriticism operates somewhere between the geography of the real and that of the imaginary, including what Edward W. Soja (1996) has termed "real-and-imagined" spaces. Moreover, its defining principles allow alternately focused geocritical approaches.

One such possibility is represented by Robert T. Tally, whose geocritical approach differs from Westphal's in its markedly ego-centred focus. It includes as its subject of interest not only the spaces which we experience through texts, but "also the experience of space and place within ourselves" (Tally 2011, 3). He examines how narratives are linked with the spatiotemporal and transgressive character of spaces, and pays attention to "the experience of place and displacement, while exploring the interrelations between lived experience and a more abstract or unrepresentable spatial network that subtly or directly shapes it" (Tally 2014, x). Tally's project of literary cartography studies so-called "mapping narratives" based on a two-way productive process of something that maps the spaces of human experience, and, at the same time, something that can be mapped through the readers' application of their interpretive frameworks and, by its being situated into a spatiotemporal context, that readers find meaningful. Its assumption is that the narrative "not only represents the places depicted in it, but also shapes them" (Tally 2016, 26).

Even more strictly ego-centred is Eric Prieto's phenomenological approach, which examines the diverse impacts an environment and/or its textual representations can have on our psyche by focusing "on place as a manifestation of the dynamic interpretation of consciousness and world" (Prieto 2011, 25). Central to his position are the *entre-deux*, or in-between places, those where the entropic, transitional and transgressive momentum is most palpable, which is why they deviate from the established norms of "proper" places. Prieto argues for the overlooked dynamic potential of these interstitial "non-places," such as borderlands, edges, peripheral areas, as well as the need to "examine the ways in which literary representations help us to understand the often misunderstood properties of emergent forms of place" (2012, 1-2). As creative literature has always been drawn to the unfathomable, the transmutable and the liminal, a systematic study of its spatial representations can play a vital role in our attempts to conceptualise the in-between places, thereby complementing similarly focused endeavours of geographers, urban planners, social anthropologists, environmentalists, and philosophers.

The concept of Michel Foucault's heterotopia (1986, 24-27) is equally relevant for our analysis. Heterotopias are counter-sites, absolutely different from other sites within a culture, which have the property of reflecting all other spaces and being linked with

them, yet simultaneously contradicting them and challenging the set of relations they happen to mirror. Heterotopias have six defining principles. They exist in all cultures and take varied forms. Although each heterotopia has its precisely given function, it can assume, due to the evolution of the society, other functions. Heterotopias can juxtapose within themselves several other places, even if these are incompatible between themselves. They are heterochronous since they are linked to slices of time and function best when set free from traditional temporality. They also presuppose a system of openings and closings which isolates them and makes them inaccessible; in order to get in, either one must undergo some ritual, make a gesture, receive permission, or else entry is compulsory only for select individuals. And, finally, heterotopias have a function in relation to all other places.

Foucault distinguishes several types of heterotopia, namely crisis heterotopia (special places reserved for individuals who are, by the standards of their culture, in a state of crisis), heterotopias of deviation (for individuals whose behaviour is not compatible with the required norms), heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time (immobile places in which different time periods are perpetually accumulated), heterotopias of fleeting, transitory temporality (provisional sites which are, through cyclical recurrence, oriented towards the eternal), heterotopias of illusion (illusory places that expose the real places outside as even more illusory) and heterotopias of compensation (sites that are supposed to be orderly so as to compensate for others that seem chaotic and ill-conceived). Heterotopias are essential for every culture, especially because they represent “the greatest reserve of the imagination” (1986, 27), which propels the freedom of dreams, and, as such, they help to defy the potential authoritarian and repressive tendencies of state apparatus.

### 3. THE HAGGARD, INCAUTIOUS AND REWARDING LAND OF *QUARANTINE*

*Quarantine*'s spatial representation is based on the space-landscape-place triad defined above. The fictional space of the novel is that of the Judean desert, but the most significant role is actually attributed to just one specific site in this desert—a scrubland located up in a hilly area amidst steep rocks and cliffs and where there are eleven caves. It is a true wilderness, completely unsuitable for any long-term habitation, and so even within the sparsely populated desert, it is a territory of its own as it is simultaneously close and distant for settlers and travellers: close because it is within walking distance of one of the major trade routes, but distant because of its difficult accessibility and inhospitality. The narration stresses that this area is often unsafe for its animal dwellers, let alone for people, as can be appreciated below in its depiction after a heavy storm:

The storm had lifted stones to show their hidden faces. It had made firewood from bushes, and pulled up roots and soil. Lice and termites tumbled in the daylight where the earth was scarred, busy with repairs. The birds were feeding everywhere. Their nests and eggs

had been destroyed, but they could fret on insects until their stomachs burst. [...] A layer of dust and grit was spread across the ground, like seeds and flour sprinkled on a loaf. This was the way the world had been before mankind, the childhood of the earth when it was innocent and undisturbed. This was the way the world would be when all mankind had gone, when the cleansing wind of prophecy had swept all sins and virtues from the earth and the wilderness was strewn with fallen and abandoned faiths. (Q 201)

The scrubland rises above the desert valley—serene, undisturbed, ominous and inscrutable—which is also reflected in Crace’s portrayal of its environment: he describes the wilderness of “avalanches of dry scree, and a threatening conspiracy of rocks, wind and heat” as “treacherous and unpredictable” (Q 13), “large and inexplicable” (Q 75), and as such a “lazy and malicious host” that it is “undiscriminating in its cruelties” (Q 8) towards all creatures from a foreign habitat.

However, what transforms the character of this uncivilised locale is the fact that the caves are customarily used as refuges by quarantiners who go there to spend time in complete isolation, with very limited food and drink supplies, or even fasting completely, believing that this time spent on their own with their god(s) will change their lives for the better. The motives of these people may vary from the material and personal to the spiritual, such as trying to cure a disease, seeking good luck or achieving some transcendental experience, but the pattern is always the same: they arrive, occupy the caves and, at the end of their quarantine period, they leave for home filled with new prospects as “the scrub sen[ds] all of them away enriched and dryly irrigated” (Q 219). These pilgrims not only provisionally inhabit the scrubland, they also endow it with meanings derived primarily from their hopes and expectations, by means of which they personalise this environment and become attached to it. As a result, the presence of the quarantiners makes the severe and impersonal space into a place bestowed with imaginary and symbolic patterns of human projections and interpretations, and, in consequence, a factor in their identity formation. Also, as they are individuals of different kinds, with diverse personal histories and wishes, the character of the site is inherently one of dialogue and contestation, which infuses the place with a number of contending projections of meaning. Moreover, as the quarantiners tend to be rather isolated and occupy only a small area of the caves and their immediate vicinity, it is justifiable to speak of the concept of landscape to denote the specific environment in which several socially and emotionally charged places are located and reconciled within a larger geographic unit.

The desert scrubland portrayed by Crace meets the parameters Prieto sets out for the *entre-deux*, in-between places. It is innately heterogeneous as its rough landscape with a harsh and changeable climate, it defies control from outside and thwarts all attempts at imposing any kind of regularity, order or hierarchy on it, including that of temporal linearity.<sup>8</sup> The individuals who come to reside there are subjected to natural forces so

<sup>8</sup> David Jasper notes that in the wilderness of the desert “time ceases to be [...] and so the narratives that operate only within the narratives of temporality cease to be effective” (2004, 92-93) in rendering its true character.

hostile that mere survival becomes their principal ambition. With regard to human culture, the scrubland is positioned both inside it and outside it: outside because it lies far away from settlements and the desert travel routes, and it also lacks any permanent connection, physical or imaginary, with society and its daily functioning; yet it becomes somewhere “inside” the culture when every now and then, irregularly and unforeseeably, a member of this culture decides to undertake a quarantining sojourn there. In either case, the scrubland liberates its incomers from the requirements and restrictions of their home cultures and communities. The interstitial and peripheral character of this place is also underscored by the fact that the people who seek hope and solace in the caves themselves tend to be outsiders or not highly regarded individuals in their home milieu, such as the ill, the adolescent, the elderly and the disabled. It is also transitional as the quarantiners go through their respective rituals, rites of passage, fasting, praying and meditations so as to walk away from the scrubland “improved” and, in most cases, hoping to be more fit for re-inclusion into their communities.<sup>9</sup> And sporadically, they actually feel transformed upon their departure,

rewarded for their quarantines with sacred revelations. The scrub allowed them its steep and narrow tracks, and through the softened silhouettes of hills, to their attending gods. And there it stretched its grey horizons to reveal what far-off armies were approaching with their spangling phalanxes of spears, what distant kings and preachers came with gifts and prophecies, how slow and never-ceasing was the world. And there it gave its voyagers their glimpse of paradise (*Q* 220).

The transitional dimension of the place is thus given by the fact that the pilgrims come and go, only to be replaced by newcomers, and it is also considered by these transitory residents as a stepping stone, a vehicle of transformation, to a more bearable destiny. And last but not least, it meets Prieto’s criterion of possessing a dynamic creative property as it is an intermittently vigorous site intersected with a number of lines of force as each resident’s interference with the environment disturbs its natural equilibrium and stirs its undercurrent energies to new incidents and stories.

The novel’s scrubland, with its caves used as quarantining shelters, also falls within Foucault’s delineation of heterotopia. It simultaneously mirrors and contradicts other sites from the culture by receiving and “rectifying” individuals who are somewhat incompatible with these official places and the institutions embedded in them. It is a counter-site that differs entirely from all the other places within this culture. In terms of its temporality, it is heterochronous, operating across the linear timeline by means

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Palmer argues that Crace’s novels use marginal landscapes—liminal spaces on the “cusp between nature and culture,” “in and out of time” (2012, 52)—as both a symbol and a setting. Such liminality “suspends the dominant conventional organisation of human relationships and ties, and allows another, destabilising mode of organisation briefly to be glimpsed” (2012, 52-53), enabling the writer to explore “moments of extremity and transformation” (2012, 56).

of circularity and layering: its time arrangement is circular as newly arriving pilgrims recurrently succeed the departed ones, yet these temporary stays do not affect the peculiar character of the place; this arrangement is also one of layering of spatiotemporal experience since the pilgrims do not know one another and have different sociocultural backgrounds, which is why the accumulation of this experience is palimpsestic rather than being a continuum. Also, although secluded, it is potentially accessible to anybody, but those few who wish to reach it need to make a gesture in the form of undergoing the lengthy and strenuous journey into the hills. From the point of view of heterotopia typology, the scrubland represents a perfect example of crisis heterotopia as the quarantiners are exactly those individuals Foucault associates with this type, for instance, an elderly man ill with cancer, an infertile woman, or a zealously pious youth. Yet it is also a heterotopia of fleeting, transitory temporality which, in spite of its provisionality, aims at a kind of eternity through the cyclical recurrence of its temporary residents and the incessant layering of new experience and accumulation of new energies. Thanks to this, it is a place which opens itself to the pilgrims' imaginary projections, one that propels their innermost hopes, wishes and dreams, including those which might not comply with the demands of the cultures whose pressure had prompted them to undertake the quarantine.

Crace's treatment of his fictional environment corresponds with Tally's and, in particular, Prieto's ego-centred and phenomenological approaches, both in the sense of how it affects his characters' states of mind, and in how he makes readers experience this environment through his distinctive rendering. The scrubland is, first of all, a place of disparate human experience whose clashing lines of force *Quarantine's* narration tries to map. Jasper observes that in *Quarantine*, just as in Crace's other stories, a "deep yearning" can be found "within and beneath the teeming, external stuff of his worlds" where the human condition "is always located in the particularities of place" (2018, 176). A significant part of the novel focuses on some of the protagonists' spatial experience and awareness, particularly on how these are reflected in their consciousness and on how they affect their mental processes. The ultimate otherness of the landscape forces the quarantiners into a heightened awareness of and alertness towards the peculiarities and perils of the place from the moment they arrive: "They were so concentrated on the land which would be their host for the next forty days, and so fearful of it, that hardly a beetle could move without them knowing it" (Q 16). The environment's impact on the quarantiners' psyche is instant since they have to restructure and simplify their values so as to prioritise those related to their immediate survival, especially putting up with the discouraging discomfort of their temporary lodgings, enduring the cold "unity of damp and sleeplessness inside the caves" (Q 41). For them, the scrubland is both real and imaginary—real as they are exposed to it in its unembellished essence, imaginary as they had formerly conceived it and have projected their expectations into it. Crace pays attention to how they experience and perceive this environment, and the characters given prominence in this sense are Jesus, Marta and Miri.

Jesus's problem is that he is not able to respond adequately to the discord between the real place and his imagined preconception of it, which rests on his intention to get closer to his God since in the wilderness he will not be distracted from his sacred communion. And indeed, in this regard his vision is fulfilled as the barren and unwelcoming scrubland, with its "valleys waiting for their rivers, the browns and yellows waiting for their green" (Q 22), look to him as if they are still to be completed, and as such an ideal place "to find his god at work" (Q 22). He is at first appalled that this "edge of god's unfinished universe" (Q 77) is not to be worked upon by the Creator any more and is in reality a limbo, but eventually consoles himself with the idea that God, in his generosity, left it incomplete to provide Jesus with "a place opposed to sin and nourishment" where he "could starve himself of both without distraction" (Q 126), a true battleground for him to be "eased to freedom from the devil's grasp" (Q 149). Believing that a harsh and uncomfortable journey and shelter will appeal to God, Jesus deliberately opts for the remotest and least accessible of the caves, an uncomfortable one which is the most exposed to the elements, recklessly deciding to walk up to the cave barefooted, lightly dressed and with nothing to eat and drink, relying on "god's provision" (Q 75) only. His displacement is thus voluntarily undertaken, though on the basis of a fallacious assumption.

His withdrawal into the cave is indicative of his "retreat into the mind" and "stands for the search for a heightened connection with consciousness" (Groes 2018, 156). In fact, the heterotopic site of the inaccessible cave temporarily becomes the shell of his consciousness, a sanctuary for his dematerialised existence. Yet, after a few days, dispirited and frightened, Jesus is filled with disenchantment that the land would not offer greater hospitality to someone like him—humble, modest and devout. Having become exhausted, thirsty and sore, Jesus finds it increasingly hard to concentrate on his unearthly communion, and when his prayers do not result in any divine intervention, he gradually abandons them so as to find a more feasible scheme for his survival. However, he is by then too frail and listless to climb down the precipice that separates his cave from the ground, thus doomed to become a captive of the place and landscape whose severity he believed would make him free. And so he dies, taken in by the scrubland, his body symptomatically having "the colour of the land behind" (Q 205), only to have his wish to be a healer under God's command be fully granted through his resurrection and transcendence.

Marta's hopes in the scrubland are also high as she believes it can cure her infertility. However, unlike Jesus, her encounter with reality is not so desolating or shocking, though its severity takes her by surprise. Not as young and naïve as he is, her expectation concerning the landscape is far more sober and therefore, also due to her optimistic nature, she feels respect for the wilderness and is able to discern its charm:

[Marta] stepped into the damp earth and the bushes at the foot of the cliff. She was surprised how sombre it was, and how blustery the wind had become. [...] But the night was beautiful, nevertheless, more beautiful than any night she had known at Sawiya [...]. This scrubland was the roof. From where she stood, the moon was level with her eyes. (Q 46)

On the one hand, the menacing authority of the landscape makes her slightly fearful; yet, on the other, its discreet grandeur fills her with confidence that her troubles can be overcome there. Although she often feels uneasy there, imagining all the living creatures hidden in the dark outside her cave, she gradually gets used to the place's countless noises and even mildly enjoys listening to "the conversation of the gnats, the dry remarks of crumbling soil" and to "the living rocks around the healer's cave, breathing, humming to themselves, praying even" (Q 115). She takes her stay in this inhospitable place to be a test of her determination to change her destiny. Due to the combination of her tenaciousness and her sensibility towards the landscape, she continues with her quarantine despite the whims of fate, assuming that "[a]nything was possible, in that haggard and incautious land" where "[i]f anything could happen, then it would" (Q 114), as if subconsciously relying on the fact that "there are always miracles in the desert, as it suspends normal categories of human experience" (Jasper 2004, 100). While Jesus's encounter with the unforeseen reality makes his formerly unwavering faith falter, Marta's already strong will strengthens even more when faced with the scrubland's harshness. However, in the narrative's moral dimension, the landscape not only mirrors the characters' states of mind and mental properties, but also actively responds to them. And so, it is as if Marta were rewarded for her perseverance and her belief that getting over hardships bestows recompense: having endured Musa's sexual assault right there in her cave, she is granted her so wished-for pregnancy.

A special case in this regard is Miri. Unlike the quarantiners, she finds herself in the place not out of choice but because of circumstances, when, having been left behind by the rest of her caravan, she is looking for a suitable spot to dig a grave for her dying husband. This, however, does not mean that she suffers less than her quarantining companions: as a young girl she was given by her family to Musa as a wife, only to find that her husband was an egocentric opportunist and an irredeemable brute who soon made her married life a continuous nightmare by treating her like a servant, and not even the fact that she is pregnant with his baby tempers his bullying behaviour. As such, Musa's terminal disease in fact represents for Miri hope for liberation from her miserable existence. As with Marta, it is as if the scrubland knew about her persistence and fortitude, and, trying to alleviate her undeserved suffering, it shows her its less hostile face:

Yet the scrubland welcomed Miri there, to its dead hills. It gave its hospitality to her. It would use what little skills it had to make her life more comfortable, to keep her bedding free from scorpions, her skin unsnagged by thorns [...]. The earth was showing kindness to the flesh. It let her pull its stones quite readily out of the ground, so that her husband's grave grew waist-deep without exhausting her or causing any strains (Q 8-9).

Indeed, the narration emphasises Miri's exceptionality as a person by likening her character to that of the scrubland:

She had bewitched the scrub on her first day. They were equals in their plainness and their endurance. Usually it was a less forgiving, more dogmatic host, despising doubt and mocking faith at once, and favouring the predatory, whatever their beliefs. It was even-handed in its cruelties [...]. The scrub required its passengers to take care of themselves or go without. The scrub was economical, as well, and boundless in its bareness and poverty (Q 219).

Though not a predator at all but a victim of one, she wins the scrubland's favour through her straightforwardness, stamina and covert strength—undisguised in her diffidence, defiant in her subjugation, knowing in her reticence, alert in her inertia—which actually parallel the distinctive attributes of the landscape. *Quarantine's* phenomenological spatial rendering, which rests in the concord between the properties of the scrubland and the psyches of its occupants, thus prepares the ground for Crace to elevate the environment into a moralising agent of superhuman intervention. The landscape as portrayed in the novel is more responsive to those worthy of its helpfulness, that is, to those devoid of pretence, self-delusion and self-pity, who continue struggling with their fate against all odds. And Miri proves to be such a person, which is why she happens to become a beneficiary of its meagre magnanimity, unlike the male quarantiners who tend to blame the place's stinginess for their misfortunes and disappointments.

Marta and Miri endured their stay in the wilderness because they were able to both respect its otherness as well as confront it when their brighter prospects were at stake. As soon as they have received their "gifts," that is, the conception of a child for the former and the confidence to leave her despotic husband for the latter, they realise it is time to leave the place which, despite its apparent sternness, has shown its generosity to them. Once again, the description of their daring but accomplished flight from Musa's oppression and, as Nicola Allen (2018, 120-21) observes, the constraints of the religion that has allowed their subjugation, their journey down to the desert valley to take the route to Marta's place is full of polysensory landscape images:

Marta and Miri hurried on in silence down the landfall [...]. The scree grew softer as the temperatures increased, closer to the valley floor. The earth was gypsum, spiced with salt. It smelled of eggs. But by the middle of the afternoon—already covered in a yellow film of salt—they'd reached more gently sloping and more sweetly smelling ground, a landscape of soft chalk and which a child could pull apart in its hands as easily as breaking bread. The land was more reliable, at last, and they could walk side by side towards the trading road (Q 236).

Having learned to move on the treacherous and unpredictable terrain of the scrubland, they find their hasty descent to the desert valley almost effortless. As the land grows more temperate and yielding, so the outlines of their new future—a life more temperate and yielding than their previous experience—start to emerge. Strengthened and invigorated by their (mis)fortunes in the scrubland, the two women

can enjoy the unaccustomed comfort of their journey towards “the uneventful world” (Q 238) of their days to come.

However, agreeable characters are not the only ones who depart from the wilderness “rewarded” for their tenacity and/or endowed with new prospects. At the beginning of the story, Musa, the story’s central antagonist, miraculously recovers from his deadly fever. At its end, though deserted by his pregnant wife, he is far from devastated and downcast since “the scrub would not return him empty-handed to his market-places” (Q 220). The fact that the character of the scrubland actually suits Musa had already been noted by his wife, who deemed it a perfect spot for his grave as the “world from there would seem large and borderless [...] and that would be appropriate for a traveller like [him]” (Q 6-7), a person of boundless self-assurance, self-complacency, appetites but also vigour and perseverance. Some traits of Musa’s character thus comply with what the wilderness demands from its inhabitants if they are to prevail—adaptability, self-reliance, resourcefulness and the will to live—and the way he gets away with his tricks, abuse and misconduct resonates perfectly with the above-quoted observation that the place favours the predatory: as soon as he recuperates, he reveals his rapacious self and, displaying little if any fear of the scrubland, takes control of and exploits the immediate situation by claiming the landscape as his property and, subsequently, making the docile quarantiners pay him rent.

Not only does Musa enrich himself by cheating the pilgrims of their money, but he also finds among the caves new merchandise he can trade: the great news of a saviour’s rebirth. Of all the occupants of the scrub, it is Musa who is “blessed” to catch sight of the apparition of the resurrected Jesus, an ethereal experience he, as an exceptionally inventive and persuasive storyteller, will turn into unearthly profit. And so, although his last glance is directed at the distant scree down which the naked, thin Galilean is making his painstaking descent, his mind is already preoccupied with the townscapes—the squares and marketplaces where he will barter the story of his new identity as a zealous quarantiner turned prophet for the favour and money of the rich and powerful. Thus, one of the results of Crace replacing biblical spiritual authority with that of the natural world is that this ethical system also values those whose ability to surmount difficulties need not always arise from honest and unselfish drives.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Quarantine’s* employment and rendering of space and place comply with the analytical and interpretive paradigm of phenomenologically focused geocriticism as developed by Tally and Prieto. Indeed, the novel, “like the desert itself, [...] confuses interior and exterior” (Jasper, 2004, 100), particularly with respect to its characters’ minds and souls on the one hand, and their struggles for survival and redemption in the desert wilderness on the other. Although its story takes place some two thousand years ago, its setting is appropriate for geocritical scrutiny: it is innately heterogeneous, volatile

and transitory, prone to permanent movement. It occupies a remote periphery from the point of view of the quarantiners' home communities, and this remoteness from the centre displaces its human visitors, contesting the very fundamentals of their identity, and on this basis it corresponds with Prieto's *entre-deux* places. Its temporality is cyclical and isotopic, which is why the manner in which it is experienced assumes the form of cumulative, palimpsestic layering rather than that of continuous succession. It also meets the criteria of Foucault's crisis heterotopia and heterotopia of fleeting, transitory temporality. Consequently, the novel's wilderness evinces a latent potential to enhance its occupants' sense of independence, confidence and belief that a welcome change in their lives is attainable.

Sebastian Groes points out that Crace's fiction argues for "a form of cognition that includes landscape, nature, inanimate objects, and animals of every kind (including humans) that exist outside a human timeframe" (2018, 162). Accordingly, *Quarantine's* location crucially determines the protagonists' notions of self and their place in the world. Crace puts a focus on the mental reflections of these individuals' spatial experience, examining the ways in which they condition and affect their daily existence, their feeling of displacement and belonging. The immediate trigger for this process is the tension between the actual place and the quarantiners' expectations which stem from their imaginary projections into it prior to their arrival. Only the unaffected and persistent ones prove able to grasp the in-between place's ominous properties and reconcile the imaginary and the real into an experience that is meaningful and productive in the sense of helping them adjust to the established places of their culture. The narrative thus maps the spaces of the protagonists' experience, through which it allows the readers to simultaneously map the fictitious spaces within the narrative by means of apprehension and interpretation. Crace's phenomenological treatment consists in the consistent examination of the mirroring correlation between the space/landscape and the characters' psyches:

But there was also something rich, at times, about the scrub, despite itself. Something sustaining, unselfish, fertile even. Perhaps this was because it made no claims. It did not promise anything, except, maybe, to replicate through its arrays of absences the body's solitude and to free its tenants and its guests from their addictions and their vanities. The empty lands [...] were siblings to the empty spaces in the heart (Q 219).

Yet Crace goes further than this as the scrubland's dynamics rest in its potential to facilitate a transformation in the lives of those individuals who "deserve" such assistance—those who may suffer or feel miserable but still display a sufficient degree of self-reliance, tenacity and forward-lookingness. However, a combination of these qualities may not inevitably make such a person likable, as is the case of Musa who, despite his pathological self-assertion and boastfulness, benefits from his stay, though at the cost of the loss of his wife and unborn child.

*Quarantine* confirms the legitimacy of its author's reputation as a landscape writer by offering a physical and mental topography of a real-and-imagined place that possesses properties customarily attributed to human beings. The scrubland thus operates on the level of the setting, while also being one of the crucial initiators and movers of the action, almost as if a character in the story. Moreover, it is endowed with a capacity surpassing human possibilities, due to which it can assume the role of a higher principle that controls the forces that determine destinies. In line with this, the narration does not conclude with any of the protagonists, but with an image of "the endless movements on the trading road, the floods, the rifts, the troops, the ever-caravans, the evening peace that's brokered not by a god but by the rocks and clays themselves, *shalom, shalom*, the one-time, all time truces of the land" (Q 243).

In its complexity of meanings, the environment serves as a figurative device for reflecting, anticipating and amending the protagonists' mental processes and states of mind. On top of this, the landscape not only absorbs and mirrors the workings of the human element, but, within the novel's ethical framework, given by the absence of societal as well as divine authorities, it also claims the right to establish justice and to rectify what contradicts "its" notion of the natural order, a legitimate strategy for an atheist and self-proclaimed moralistic writer.<sup>10</sup>

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