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Heterotopic Yeats: A Foucauldian Study of the Heterotopic Qualities Found in Some Poems by W. B. Yeats

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ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault is certainly one of the greatest minds of the 20th century whose ever-growing influence may be traced in nearly every field of humanities such as economy, history, and of course, literary theory and criticism. The concept of heterotopia is arguably among the most intriguing concepts developed through the works of Foucault. Simply stated, a heterotopia is a space whose function is to disturb the established order of an existing space, and, as a result, lead to the production of knowledge. However, heterotopias found in Foucault's own works are usually functioning in linguistic, or textual, terms rather than referring to a real, physical space. The purpose of the present essay is to provide its readers with the analyses of some of the poems of the Noble-winning Irish poet, dramatist, and prose writer W. B. Yeats in terms of their heterotopic qualities, and to show that physical heterotopias can also lead to the production of knowledge.

Keywords: Michel Foucault; heterotopia; production of knowledge; W. B. Yeats; *The Tower*

I. INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), the Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet, dramatist and prose writer, is considered, by unanimous consent, as one of the towering figures of not only the English-language literature but the world literature; a writer whose body of works, especially his later and more mature poems, published in volumes like *The Tower* (1928), which are the main focus of the present essay, is among the most challengingly fascinating literary oeuvres known to us, and it is partly due to the profusion of meaningful juxtapositions of the many heterogeneous elements woven together so masterfully that most readers cannot think of the results as anything but magic (Luebering, 243-6).

Michel Foucault (1926-1984), is certainly one of the most important figures of the contemporary thought who, as M. A. R. Habib asserts in his book *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*, “has exerted an enormous influence on many branches of thought in the latter twentieth century” (766); part of our fascination with Foucault arises from the fact that unlike most intellectuals’, Foucault’s works are “unclassifiable”, which means they are not limited to just one field of study, he thinks about and proposes fundamental questions and ideas that may be applied to any field of humanistic studies ranging from history and literary criticism to philosophy and economics (Leitch, 1615).

The concept whose representations in some of the poems of Yeats are to be examined in the present essay, goes under the title of *heterotopia*. Having a look at the comparison made by Foucault in the preface to his groundbreaking masterpiece *The Order of Things* (1966) can give us a basic insight into what heterotopias really are:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’. (Foucault, xix)

As it is noticeable, the definition of heterotopias which is given in the excerpt presented above is in linguistic terms, but the fact that Foucault’s ideas and concepts are usually capable of interdisciplinary applications has led scholars and thinkers to expand the concept’s definition and use it in fields of study other than linguistics as well. One of the good examples of these redefinitions is presented in Robert J. Topinka’s article entitled “Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces”, in which, interpreting Foucault’s basic linguistic definition and his other works and some of his interviews, the author asserts that:

[Although] traditionally, heterotopias are understood as sites of resistance ... sites in which epistemes collide and overlap, creating an *intensification of knowledge* ... [I argue] that heterotopias are not primarily sites of resistance to power but instead sites of *reordering* (55-6)

Introducing the new functions of *intensification of knowledge* and *reordering*, and, perhaps, drawing from Foucault's own sentences referring to heterotopic qualities not necessarily limited to linguistics, like this one taken from his essay entitled "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias":

The space in which we live, from which we are drawn out of ourselves, just where the erosion of our lives, our time, our history takes place, this space that wears us down and consumes us, is in itself heterogeneous. (*Rethinking* 331)

Topinka concludes that heterotopias *problematize* received knowledge through the juxtaposition and combination of many spaces in one site (56), in other words, heterotopias are sites of resistance to and reordering of the established orders and received knowledge, and by doing so, they create a kind of clash of ideas which results in an intensification of knowledge that leads to the *production of new knowledge*.

II. ANALYSES OF THE HETEROTOPIC QUALITIES IN W. B. YEATS'S SELECTED POEMS

The first poem to be discussed here is entitled "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" which was published in 1890, and is usually considered the first major poem written by the author. The poem starts with an urge for going, a longing to travel; "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree" (Yeats, *Major Works* 19). As Nicholas Grene states in his book *Yeats's Poetic Codes*, "Yeats's early poems typically conjure up places elsewhere" (44), and the island of Innisfree is a fine example of such places. Let us have a look at the poet's own words about the origin and the intended meaning of the poem;

My father had read to me some passage out of *Walden*, and I planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree. . . . I thought that having conquered bodily desire and the inclination of my mind towards women and love, I should live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom. (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 85).

According to Yeats's own words about the poem, we may come to realize the functions of living on Innisfree; conquering bodily desires and seeking wisdom. But how is this seeking of wisdom possible through living on Innisfree? The answer could be traced in the four lines of the poem's second stanza, in which the poet describes the qualities of the island:

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of linnet's wings. (Yeats, *Major Works* 20)

As it is clearly seen in the lines above, Innisfree is a place whose order stands in opposition to the order of the ordinary or city life; while city life offers noise, crowd, news, etc, Innisfree is a place whose natural simplicity brings peace to the speaker who is certainly

troubled (Hacht 120). As Grene observes, the word ‘there’ which is insistently repeated in this poem, symbolizes a place in which the order of things is different from the usual order, a place that represents the most suitable atmosphere for mystical contemplation (44-5). But how can Innisfree help the poet seek wisdom? The answer lies in the fact that Innisfree is actually a heterotopia whose resistance to the established order, i.e. the order of city life, creates an intensified situation in which the poet may come to produce new knowledge, which is in this case, spiritual knowledge about one’s own self.

The second poem to be analyzed in terms of heterotopic qualities, is one of the poet’s, and the English-language literature’s, greatest poems entitled “Sailing to Byzantium” which was published in 1927. The poem starts with an abrupt sentence: “That is no country for old men” (Yeats, *Major Works* 94). Joseph M. Hassett explains the reason behind this hopeless declaration in the introduction of his book *Yeats and the Muses*:

As the inspirational fumes of memory began to fail, Yeats, feeling that ‘he had lost all inspiration,’ underwent the Steinach rejuvenation operation in 1934, hoping it would cure sexual impotence and reopen the path to inspiration. (6)

Considering the fact that the poem was written in 1927, we may conclude that during the composition of the poem, the poet was still worried by his thoughts about the loss of inspiration, and that is maybe the reason why he started the poem with the aforementioned sentence and continued it this way:

... The young
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees,
-Those dying generations- at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect. (Yeats, *Major Works* 94)

Donald J. Childs believes the above lines to “explain the decorum that prevails in nature [in terms of sexuality]” (202). Thus, the sexually frustrated old poet at odds with the established order of the utopia he lives in, the utopia which admires the youth and pays no attention to the old, yearns for another place whose ordering suits his conditions, a place where he can develop what he can be admired for, that is his spiritual and intellectual qualities, and not his physical vitality. Therefore, he “[sails] the seas and [comes] to the holy city of Byzantium”, that is, as David A. Cross believes, “[the] geographical allegory of an approach to an internal threshold” (216). Now let us take a look at what is going on in Byzantium and how it is different from the country of the youth:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing

To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (Yeats, *Major Works* 95)

Reading the above stanza, we may conclude that here the heterotopic space of Byzantium is a place whose ordering stands in opposition to the established ordering of the natural world that is represented by the country of the youth. This time, unlike the heterotopia of Innisfree, the heterotopic space is not a escape from the city life, but a plunge in the most complicated form of it that is represented by Byzantium which has been described by the poet as “the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy” (Yeats, *Major Works* 502), a plunge in the center of art and artistic expression which are among the most exalted forms of human creativity (Napierkowski, and Ruby 208). However, the heterotopic function is not changed, it is still the production of knowledge; consider these lines taken from the third stanza of the poem:

O sages standing in God’s holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul. (Yeats, *Major Works* 95)

As it may be clearly seen, the poem’s speaker has come to Byzantium with the aim of educating himself in the art of singing, which can of course yield symbolic interpretations. It is interesting to note the fact that the chaotic and forceful images and motions of “holy fire” and “gyre” can also be interpreted as symbolic representations of the intensified situation in which new knowledge is produced. Thus, Byzantium is a heterotopia; it is a space which resists the established order of the only other space included in the poem, and by doing so creates a kind of intensification of knowledge through which the pilgrim-speaker of the poem comes to know some new things about “what is past, or passing, or to come” (Yeats, *Major Works* 95).

The next poem to be discussed here is again taken from the collection *The Tower*; the poem is entitled “Meditations in the Time of Civil War”, and consists of a cycle of poems some of which that show strong heterotopic qualities are to be analyzed here. “Ancestral Houses” that is the title of the first poem in the cycle, is a poem in which the speaker provides the readers with a powerfully constructed, philosophical description of “some [rich,] violent bitter man [‘s house]”; flowering lawns, planted hills, artistic architecture, etc. This seems to be a utopic space, representing all that seems to be perfect, but in fact there is no trace of productivity, of any kind, attributed to the house, and one of the conclusions one may draw from the poem is related to the last two lines of its third stanza:

And maybe the great-grandson of that house,
For all its bronze and marble, ‘s but a mouse. (Yeats, *Major Works* 101)

And the conclusion is the fact that all the seemingly perfect qualities of this utopic house result in the *production* of a great-grandson who is nothing but a mouse, a useless character.

The second poem of the cycle, “My House” written in 1923 is another selected poem to be analyzed . This poem represents the heterotopic core of the whole sequence; the first stanza of the poem is a description of the surroundings of the poet’s house, i.e. Thoor Ballylee, “[the

poet's] tower home, located in the townland of Ballylee, near the town of Gort" (Conner 13), which is in sheer contrast with the first poem's description of the rich man's house; "Where 'Ancestral Houses' conceives the house as a majestic sublimation of Renaissance or Georgian strength, 'My House' pictures Yeats's tower as roughly bucolic and bluntly *occult*" (Ross 166). Moreover, there is another reason why we can consider Thoor Ballylee as a heterotopic space and that could be drawn from the following lines taken from the poem:

Two men have founded here. A man-at-arms
Gathered a score of horse and spent his days
In this tumultuous spot,
Where through long wars and sudden night alarms
His dwindling score and he seemed castaways
Forgetting and forgot;
And I, that after me
My bodily heirs may find,
To exalt a lonely mind,
Befitting emblems of adversity. (Yeats, *Major Works* 103)

As Topinka asserts in his article, "the heterotopias juxtapose many real, incompatible spaces in one space" (57). Therefore, Thoor Ballylee can be considered a heterotopia, since it juxtaposes, at least, two entities that are absolutely contradictory; a man-at-arms and a *certain* W. B. Yeats. Now that we have all come to realize that "My House" represents a heterotopic space, let us see if it also functions as one or not. Take a look at these lines taken from the poem:

Il Penseroso's Platonist toiled on
In some like chamber, shadowing forth
How the daemonic rage
Imagined everything. (Yeats, *Major Works* 102)

As M. L. Rosenthal observes in his book *Running to Paradise: Yeats's Poetic Art*, the poet toils on late at night like John Milton, who in his poem "Il Penseroso" dreams of invoking Plato's spirit to reveal the capabilities of the human mind after death (234); so as it can be clearly seen, the house described in "My House" is absolutely a heterotopia whose aim is to produce occult, and maybe forbidden, knowledge about the supernatural realm of the afterlife; nevertheless, that is knowledge too.

In this part of the essay, the author shifts the focus to the third poem of the same cycle that is entitled "My Table" and was also composed in 1923. This poem starts with the description of the poet's table and the objects on it, and then moves towards giving some insights into the symbolic aspects of the components of the picture it has presented. The setting, i.e. the location of the table, is absolutely Thoor Ballylee which is located in Ireland, but there is at least one object mentioned in the poem that disturbs the homogeneity of this European picture, and that is with no doubt:

Two heavy trestles, and a board
Where Sato's gift, a changeless sword,
By pen and paper lies (Yeats, *Major Works* 103)

“The sword was a gift from Junzo Sato (b. 1897), a Japanese consular officer who introduced himself while Yeats was stopped in Portland, Oregon, on a speaking tour of America” (Ross 168), a gift the placement of which within the poem “suggests a strategic approach to East Asia, referring to the poet’s preoccupation with lineage and aristocratic inheritance” (Nally 184), a “delicately crafted weapon ... [that reflects] the same conjunction of violence and artistry taken up in the sequence’s first two poems” (Holdeman 86).

Now, how could this sword, heterogeneous in itself, change the static utopia of the speaker’s table into a tumultuous heterotopia that may lead to the production of knowledge?! On the one hand, there is Sato’s sword, a Japanese sword forged “five hundred years” before the time the poem was written, and on the other, there are the rest of the objects placed in the poet’s room, including his table, his pen and paper, etc. Reading the poem, one comes to realize that there is no attention paid to any of the objects in the room, except for the sword, which opens the central argument of the poem about the importance of art and the qualities of the artist capable of conceiving a “changeless work of art”. It is not simply a sword, it is like a magical passage to another realm, i.e. the East, another realm whose ordering is different from that of Europe.

This new realm, provides the poem’s speaker with new definitions for art and artists; a clash occurs between what is already known to the speaker, i.e. the European definition, and what he has come to understand through thinking about the origin of the sword, i.e. the Eastern definition, and this clash brings with it an intensification of knowledge in which new knowledge is produced, the knowledge that leads the speaker to saying:

... it [i.e. Sato’s sword] may moralise
My days out of their aimlessness. (Yeats, *Major Works* 103)

The speaker has come to a new understanding of his vocation and now his aimless days may become moralized, or meaningful. Thus, as it was shown, the space described in the poem “My Table” can also be considered a heterotopic one, since it has all the elements of such spaces; juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements (represented through Sato’s sword and the rest of the objects in the room), resistance to the established order (represented through the clash between European and Eastern concepts related to arts), and the heterotopic function of knowledge production (represented through the moralizing effect of the symbolic sword).

The poem intended to be analyzed in this part is entitled “On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac” written in 1922 and also published in *The Tower*. In the beginning of the poem, a *centaur* that is “a fabulous being, half-man, half-horse” (Cirlot 40), is praised, and implicitly invoked, by the desperate poet who admits his “works are all stamped down into the sultry mud” (Yeats, *Major Works* 113).

Interpreting what Yeats himself had said about the significance of the centaur, that is obviously a heterogeneous entity made up of a combination of human and animal qualities that are usually believed to stand in opposition to each other, Ross concludes it must be “allied with a vision of art free of all modern heterogeneity and decadence, strong from contact with the soil of the folk culture” (183).

Reading the above quotation superficially, one may come to take it for granted that the centaur is to discard all heterogeneity and pave the way for a utopic space, but is it really so? It is true that the centaur is the symbol of homogeneity, but the fact that the artistic vision, or the established order, of the era was chaotic and heterogeneous, and the centaur is a seemingly

homogeneous entity introduced in the middle of this heterogeneity, creates not a homogenous space, but another heterogeneous space whose ordering is, of course, different from the previous one. Thus, as you have noticed, the ordering has changed and so the heterotopic space is beginning to be developed.

As it was mentioned before, the poet is desperate and believes his works are worth nothing. Now let us have a look at the origin of his despair:

I ... gathered old mummy wheat
In the mad abstract dark and ground it grain by grain
And after baked it slowly in an oven; (Yeats, *Major Works* 113)

The “old mummy wheat in the mad abstract dark” may be interpreted as the established ways of artistic expression which are found in the abstract darkness that obviously denotes the abstract art that was in fashion when the poem was written, the art that was detaching itself more and more from the common people, the art the centaur is to oppose. Thus, it is no surprise that a poet like Yeats, whose concerns about people can be easily traced through all the stages of his life, becomes desperate with this detached kind of art, or so-called art. However, he finds a way to resurrect himself, and that is through the introduction of the centaur in the static utopia of the art of the era. Consider the turning point of the poem happening right after the three lines quoted above:

But now
I bring full-flavoured wine ...
Stretch out your limbs and sleep a long Saturnian sleep;
I have loved you better than my soul for all my words,
And there is none so fit to keep a watch and keep
Unwearied eyes upon those horrible green birds. (Yeats, *Major Works* 113)

The bread made from mummy wheat is replaced by “full-flavored wine” which absolutely signifies joy and energy. The poet is in peace now, and his peace arises from the fact that he has produced something that can stand against the threat of the “horrible green birds” that may signify anything the poet considered harmful, the poet has produced something and that is of course his new poetry whose symbol is the centaur; and what is poetry but knowledge?! So, as it was discussed, the poem “On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac” can also have a reading in heterotopic terms.

The last poem to be discussed in the present essay is “The Tower” written in 1926 and published in the collection of the same title. The poem, divided into three parts, starts with a meditation on old age, continues with a “historical tour of the neighborhood surrounding Thoor Ballylee” (Ross 257), and ends with the poet’s testament. The focus of the present essay is on the second and third parts of the poem in which heterotopic aspects may be recognized. Firstly, let us have a look at what Brian John thinks of the poem:

The predominant design of the poet's experiences is that of resolution of antinomies, a whirling of gyres, and the dancelike movement to the position Yeats attains. Having climbed the tower's staircase, his position on the battlements reminds us of the wars of self and soul. (188)

The above quotation clearly talks about the heterotopic aspects of the poem, and the poet's mode of expression in general; "resolutions of antinomies" could be used as an equivalent for heterogeneity, which is an essential characteristic of any given heterotopia.

In the second part of the poem, the poet stands on the top of his tower and shouting "as I would question all, come all who can", calls on all the ghosts who have ever been, in one way or another, involved with the history of the tower and its surroundings. This act of invocation is in fact a disturbance of the homogeneity of the world in which the established order dictates that the living talk and the dead remain silent. The poet reorders the world, and this time, he proposes his question to the dead:

Did all old men and women, rich and poor,
Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door,
Whether in public or in secret rage
As I do now against old age? (Yeats, *Major Works* 98)

And then he continues by saying "but I have found an answer in those eyes/ that are impatient to be gone". The poet claims he has "found an answer", which means the knowledge has been produced, but the reader may ask what the produced knowledge is, what the answer is; the answer, though not stated directly, may be found in the third part of the poem, i.e. the poet's testament.

The third part starts with the sentence "It is time that I wrote my will"; the strong certainty of this sentence suggests that the mind behind it has no doubt in anything, meaning the poet has found the answer to all his questions. As you see, the poet's testament is a testament to the fact that the poet has really found the answer to the question he proposed to the dead.

Thus, we may conclude that "The Tower" is also one of Yeats's heterotopic poems.

III. CONCLUSION

As it was displayed through the analyses presented by the author of the present essay, firstly, heterotopias are not limited to just studies of linguistic spaces, and could also be referring to physical places, etc, and secondly, Yeats's poetry, especially his later works, are excellent examples of heterotopic spaces which lead to the production of the new knowledge.

Furthermore, let us not forget how Yeats himself, in the "[Introductory Rhymes]" to the collection *Responsibilities*, confirms, although indirectly and seemingly with shame, his heterotopic stance, where, after calling upon all his forefathers, he tells them:

Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
Although I have come close on forty-nine,
I have no child, I have nothing but a book ... (Yeats, *Major Works* 46)

Is not the valuable knowledge of his poetry the product of his rebelling against the rules?!

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