

Towards a Heterotopic Turn: A Selected Analysis of Glück's *A Village Life*

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Abstract

“Heterotopia” is a minor concept within Foucault’s oeuvre, but one that has caught the attention of writers across a number of disciplines, particularly within Fine Arts and Geography. The concept appears three times within Foucault’s works: in the preface to *The Order of Things* ([1966] 2002); in *Different Spaces* ([1967] 1998); and in a radio recording *Le Corps Utopique, Les Hétérotopies* ([1966] 2009). “According to Foucault, heterotopias are spaces that operate to make existing orders legible. By doing so they unsettle received knowledge that is common sense – both revealing and destabilizing the foundations of knowledge. This destabilization renders knowledge opens to critique, introducing contingency into the present and demonstrating that if the order of things is socially produced, then it can be made differently” (Beckett et al. 2016, 4).

Though the poetry of Louise Glück (1943-) is an exploration of the nuanced relationation between subject and context, there is little doubt on the fact that her texts have earned a spate of critical responses. Drawing from a theoretical apparatus, the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, this paper focuses on the spatial analysis of Glück's poetry in her collection *A Village Life* (2009) which is replete with fields, thresholds, windows, with a major focus on her imaginative repertoire of heterotopic spaces including riverside, darkness, lonely fields, cemeteries.

Keywords: heterotopia, otherness, transitional states, reconfiguration, fragmented self.

Contribution/Originality: The study asserts Glück's choice of spatial imagery as transitional states and places of otherness and ambivalence. The analysis attempts to determine her poetic self through a poetic evocation of spaces of conflict and difference.

Introduction

Poetry could be viewed as another way of using language. It evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound and rhythm. The creative or poetic imagination of the poet uncovers many new dimensions in the modern period. Inner self or the unconscious is revealed in the creative imagining of a poet. This idea of imagination in poetry can be seen as a tool to comprehend reality which is also indicative of a shift in the notion of poetic imagination in the modern period. The imagination enables the poet to discover the unreal out of the real which defines the origin of imagination in the perceived reality.

Fundamentally, the creative essence of poetic imagination sets to free itself from the domination of the senses. Thus a poet with her poetic imagination which is nourished by reality moves towards a renewed reality. In viewing Louise Glück as a poet, one could find a conglomerate of the individualistic and universal, ordinary and oracular, momentary and mythic, tragic and comic.

The Heterotopic Turn in the Selected Poems of Louise Glück's *A Village Life*

The progenitor of the spatial theoretical approach was French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, though Foucault's 1967 lecture titled *Des Espaces Autres (Of Other Spaces)* gave prominence to the theory. In *The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard [1958] 1994), Bachelard examines domestic spaces experienced by the poet from an epistemological perspective. His understanding of spatiality refers mainly to an inner space linked to poetic imagination. According to this view, real objects and places are relevant only in relation to the individual's affective response to them that is how the subject interacts and inhabits spaces and the imaginative effects produced in the psyche (Topinka 2010,56).

“This view was then integrated by French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre: in *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre [1974] 1991), he envisages a dialectic between abstract and social spheres, considering space not as a fixed reality, but as a social product of human practices and of a variety of processes. This theory was highly influenced by Foucault's conception of space and

its relationship with power. In his 1967 lecture, which was only published in 1984, Foucault states that the 20th century established itself as the “epoch of space” (Foucault [1984] 1998, p. 175), causing many thinkers to consider the notion of space as a previous entity in aesthetic, cultural, and philosophical discourse; this stands in contrast with the previous century, which focused mainly on temporality” (Bonasera 2019, 2). “Foucault defines his conception of the term most fully in *Of Other Spaces*; which outlines six principles of heterotopia” (Topinka 2010, 58).

Though the poetry of Louise Glück is an exploration of the nuanced relation between subject and context, there is little doubt on the fact that her texts have received a spate of critical responses. The collection *A Village Life* (2009) is set in an unnamed and undated Mediterranean village, so universal that it could be anywhere. The village is the micro-cosm of the whole human community, and the speaker’s psychological insights on the phases of growth and life are as nuanced and original as always in Louise Glück’s work. “As Foucault describes in *Of Other Spaces*, ‘heterotopias do not exist independently of other sites, including sites of power: They have a function in relation to all the space that remains.’” (Topinka 2010, 60). Here in this poetry collection too, Glück places each of these independent spaces in relation to all the other, something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites than can be found within the culture, are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”, making on the whole a Heterotopia.

Heterotopic status of the place is defined by the social and cultural praxis that is connected to it, or through the meanings and messages that heterotopic space emits. Comprehending that every culture in history of mankind has its own various heterotopias, in *A Village Life* Glück also reflects on the universal need for other spaces, as spaces where a cultural praxis or social need is being conducted away from this space, this society/culture, at last this world, this life and this reality.

“Heterotopias are spaces that require cognitive challenges to be worded and explained like the mirror or the cinema panel. In the spatial reality that we see; space that we see as our world, natural and social spaces molded in non-contradictory notions, the otherness of heterotopia represents perceptual meta-disruption. It represents the appearance of a different reality which has

distorting effects for our perception and understanding of everyday reality” (Grbin 2010, 310). Thus the selected poems from this poetry collection bring forth the working of heterotopias as spaces that connect us to the spaces of death, oldness, pain, suffer, as well as spaces that open or close the spaces of other times and cultures. Within this view of Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopia’ the study attempts to analyze the selected poems from the collection *A Village Life*.

Considering the poem “Pastoral”, the very word 'pastoral' opens the discussion of the Foucauldian concept of Heterotopia. Pastoral is often related to shepherds, or their work, way of life, or portraying rural life or, formerly a highly conventionalized form of rustic life. The pastoral generally brings in qualities such as simplicity, charm, serenity and so on. Here in the poem it unfolds a completely opposite idea of pastoral thus leading to the new production of knowledge.

No one really understands
the savagery of this place,
the way it kills people for no reason,
just to keep in practice (Glück 2010, p.5).

The speaker of the poem introduces the readers to a pastoral setting from where people are migrating. Rather than it being a serene atmosphere, a space for happiness, simplicity it has been a space from where people move forward. The already existing knowledge of the pastoral is being questioned, a new production of knowledge regarding the pastoral place happens here. There is a migration from pastoral to city life. Having lived in the city for some time they gradually return to village but then it is so not because of the yearning for the pastoral atmosphere. They experience a crisis when they realize that they have failed in the city. They blame their upbringing, their forefathers, and their pastoral life.

When they come back, they're worse.
They think they failed in the city,
not that the city doesn't make good its promises.

They blame their upbringing: youth ended and they're back,

silent, like their fathers (Glück 2010, p. 5).

The speaker then addresses the youth who have lost themselves, their vigor, their preferences. They are in a state of crisis heterotopia. In living their lives in the pastoral they constantly yearn to go back to the city where they could find their actual self. "They think it's pretty here, but they miss the city, the afternoons / filled with shopping and talking, what you do / when you have no money" (Glück 2010, p. 5). Towards the second half of the poem, the poetic persona is seen opening up, directing the generation to find solace in their dreams thus disclosing an other, a heterotopic space. "To my mind, you're better off if you stay; / that way, dreams don't damage you" (Glück 2010, p.5). The poem creates a heterotopic space where one could sit by the window; see the fields, the river, realities without being imposed to live in shattered selves. This space is pictured throughout the poem as safe, and like any other place where the sun rises, and the mist falls on the mountain. There is then the romanticizing of this heterotopic space in the poem with it's sky, grass and all its liveliness.

Midafternoon, midsummer. The fields go on forever,

peaceful, beautiful.

Like butterflies with their black markings,

the poppies open (Glück 2010, p. 6).

At the end of the poem the speaker discloses that all this was the solace that was gifted by the dream but then through this dream sequence the poetic persona has created the otherness that is the heterotopia. The poem on the whole echoes the beauty of this placeless place or the other.

The poem "A Corridor" takes up the idea of space in an interesting manner. The poem initially shows the kitchen space, where different kinds of aromas persist but gradually the kitchen turns out to be a heterotopia. It becomes the place which indicates not a part of women's life but the relationship that she and her man shares. The kitchen becomes an other space indicating their marital life.

There's an open door through which you can see the kitchen-
always some wonderful smell coming from there,
but what paralyzes him is the warmth of that place,
the stove in the center giving out heat (Glück 2010, p. 25).

The poem introduces the readers to a family where in the first half of the poem, there is a portrayal of their happy love life. Their bedroom space, where she sings lullaby to their children, patiently awaiting her husband, this very space, the private space of marriage that they build soon changes to chaos. It becomes a heterotopia where instead of his wife he shares company with a self ' who despises intimacy'(Glück 2010, p.25). The initial heat, love and warmth of their relationship are not the same, it completely turns and thus becoming an other.

as though the privacy of marriage
is a door that two people shut together
and no one can get out alone, not the wife, not the husband,
so the heat gets trapped there until they suffocate,
as though they were living in a phone booth (Glück 2010, p. 25).

When the man wakes up from his thoughts, the heterotopic place that he has created for himself still reverberates his wife's singing which he knows to be temporary. In this space he has only his pleasure that is his wine and not the warmth of a human. "Some nights, he still hears a woman singing to her children; / other nights, behind the bedroom door, her naked body doesn't exist" (Glück 2010, p.25).

In the poem "Via Delle Ombre", there is a poetic persona who lives in the shades or of the shadows. The speaker who wakes up in her house is unpleasant on realizing how grim her place is and tries to escape from the harsh reality by spending most of her time outdoors. Thus she escapes her place and creates her own heterotopia which takes the form of her workspace or the bar. "And every morning I see again how dirty this place is, how grim" (Glück 2010, p. 30).

During the day at work, I forget about it.

I think about work: getting colored beads into plastic vials.

When I get home at dusk, the room is shadowy-

The shadow of the bureau covers the bare floor.

It's telling me whoever lives here is doomed (Glück 2010, p. 30).

At the bar she has the company of the bar owner, who instructs her to come out of her moods back at home. Meanwhile both the speaker and the bar owner create an other space watching the television. Inside the screen there is an other space, a heterotopia where the poetic persona fashions the actions of the players by turning the volume of the television. "If we're alone, he turns down the volume of the television. / The players keep crashing into each other / but all we hear are our own voices" (Glück 2010, p. 30).. Through the games, or films they have watched they explore the other spaces that they are free to wander at times talking of which just to explore new connections.

On her way to home, being in the heterotopic space that the self has created, the speaker forgets about the grimness of the house. The poetic self, busy fashioning the hero, his journey and actions form emplacements leading to new productions of knowledge. From that Heterotopic space the poetic self-moves again to explore new realms where she becomes one with the surroundings, enjoying the pleasantry nature has gifted. Thus creating a new space for the self. "I do what the hero does. / He opens the window. He has his reunion with earth" (Glück 2010, p.31).

The poem "A Slip of Paper" introduces the readers to many places that were once inhabited by many and then left for new ventures. The poem is initially narrated from the perspective of a patient who is a chain smoker and his consultation with a doctor. The space that the patient occupies becomes a heterotopic space in that he has deviated from the normal behavior of an individual. The body that is protected, worshiped and loved by many is spoiled by the speaker.

What have you done to your body, her silence says.

We gave it to you and look what you did to it,

how you abused it.

I'm not talking only of cigarettes, she says,
but also of poor diet, of drink (Glück 2010, p.33).

The doctor who has migrated to this particular village and who consults the patients here lives in a place of her own where she has her own lifestyle and practices. As a doctor she tries to treat the speaker and helps him out. "She's a young woman; the stiff white coat disguises her body. / Her hair's pulled back, the little female wisps / suppressed by a dark band. She's not at ease here," (Glück 2010, p.33). The speaker who hasn't had an opportunity to care for his body has failed to realize the importance of the space it provides. "No one taught me how to care for my body, / You grow up watched by your mother or grandmother" (Glück 2010, p.33). The doctor is helping the speaker to escape from entering the door to death where he envisages a country of death. This heterotopic place then becomes to him an ideal place which he fears not. "There's a trap- door here, and through that door, / the country of the dead. And the living pushes you through. / they want you there first, ahead of them" (Glück 2010, p.33).

The poet also draws parallel between places occupied by the doctor where she has her medical books, prescriptions and the patient who has his cigarettes. The patient he who doesn't fear is willing to enjoy the company of his pleasures and this to be in the heterotopia of the dead. "And I pocket it, a sign to go. / And once I'm outside, I tear it up, like a ticket to the other world" (Glück 2010, p.33). The poem ends with a self that is awaiting the darkness, to embrace that heterotopic place where one gets new knowledge about everything. "You get into bed alone. Maybe you sleep, maybe you never wake up. / But for a long time you hear every sound. / It's a night like any summer night; the dark never comes" (Glück 2010, p.34).

The poem "Olive Trees" encapsulates the worlds of truth and lies, of city and village, of bricks and nature. The poetic persona is one who accepts the falsity and comforts that the city life assures. At the same time there is his wife who lives in a heterotopic space where she enjoys the beauty of the hills, of the olive trees being one with nature as though in her childhood.

She loves the village- every day she misses her mother.

She misses her youth- how we met there and fell in love.

How our children were born there. She knows she'll never go back

But she keeps hoping- (Glück 2010, p. 53).

The man occupies the warmth that he gets within those brick walls. He isn't concerned with the views that await him. "Some of the others don't care about being warm, feeling the sun on their backs / from the warm brick. They want to know where the views are" (Glück 2010, p. 53). The olive trees portray or stand as metaphor to those souls that need to be cared, tamed and brought into life. There is that natural space where everything could be as it was which all that the wife yearns for and the husband accepts to be false. "And I tell her I know we're trapped here. But better to be trapped / by decent men, who even re-do the lunchroom, / than by the sun and the hills" (Glück 2010, p.54).

Towards the end of the poem there is a mention of another space where one's despair turns into silence. There is only coziness in whose comfort one lives. It is that heterotopic space where now the man resides and from which the woman hopes for an escape. " But a person who accepts a lie, who accepts support from it / because it's warm, it's pleasant for a little while- / that person she 'll never understand, no matter how much she loves him" (Glück 2010, p. 54). There is the heterotopic space represented through a wall in the poem which doesn't give the man the idea of a prison but a satisfaction in escaping from all the tediousness that he felt. "So when you think of the wall, you don't think prison. / More the opposite – you think of everything you escaped, being here" (Glück 2010, p.54).

A Village Life is a collection that can take anytime one as an occupant of that village where we could see the reality of us placed in an archetypal context. Perceiving poetry is equally important as imagination in poetry. However, there has been a considerable shift in the perception of poetry from its ability to engage the world to its newfound ability to rationalise a particular perspective. Poetry is a poet's creation and a reader's choice in that it is the reader who finally enjoys the creativity. Taking this view, reading Louise Glück's *A Village Life* is always a remarkable experience that would lead one to the stark realities and true potentialities of life. The

experiments and changes in the realm of poetry are always welcomed by Glück and are manifested evidently in the treatment of her subjects.

Therefore, reading Glück and her poetry collections would definitely keep oneself in constant engagements with nuances of life and widens our perceptions on everything around us. It helps one to be free of preconceptions and also guide in embarking on new ventures. A comprehensive understanding of Glück's poetry is significant in that the poems in the collection *A Village Life* challenges the way we see culture, nature and the complexities of asserting one's own identity. The archetypal human experiences related in Glück's collection *A Village Life* rise above stereotype and sentimentality through her tight, unembellished diction and her unique insights into specific manifestations of the stages of life.

Conclusion

Thus through the analysis of the select poems from the collection *A Village Life* we can infer that isolated yet accessible, heterotopias represent a space that can indicate us to the origins of thought by distancing us from those origins. This poetry collection brings forth the working of heterotopias as spaces that connect us to the spaces of death, oldness, pain, suffering, as well as spaces that open or close the spaces of other times and cultures. Heterotopias draw us out of ourselves in peculiar ways; they display and inaugurate a difference and meddle with our sense of interiority. They are somehow out of step and in step at the same time. There is no pure form of heterotopia, but different combinations, different intensities, each reverberating with all the others. "For Foucault heterotopias are concrete expressions of utopia. These spaces are important because they are a formulation of the imaginary and actually exist; their virtuality has a local impact with actual effects, rather than embracing a promise. Heterotopia turns back and questions and explores the changing functions and effects of specific spaces which is also evident in the selected poems" (Johnson 2012, p.16). Heterotopia works through a family of principles and produces various thresholds or spaces of ambiguity and discontinuity, but what is important is their position and force at different stages of our lives and their specific reach and capabilities. Seemingly everyday spaces are presented as extraordinary without positing something below, behind or absent (Johnson 2012, p. 16).

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