Critiquing Space and Unspoken Word: A Study of Peter Goldsworthy's *Wish*

Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay

Peter Goldsworthy's 1995 novel *Wish* may be regarded as a continuation of the theme of heterotopologia that he had already treated in *Maestro (*1989) and *Honk If You Are Jesus (*1992). The heterotopologic problematic had been first superbly theorized by Foucault and later admirably developed by Edward Soja. These critical principles may be appropriately used in interpreting Goldsworthy's novels. While Soja's discourse primarily shows a cartographic centrality, Goldsworthy's novel implicates multiplex forms of spatiality: topological, cultural and psychological. These three forms of spatiality can be understood in terms of Goldsworthy's novel *Wish.*

In *Wish,* the central character J.J. moves in a world of unspoken world of sign language. Belonging to both worlds - the spoken as well as the unspoken – he seems to negotiate a strange space of semiotic complexity. While hovering between these two worlds, he encounters a different space where the animal and the human merge and interact; it dismantles the oppositional politics of the real and the hyperreal. It therefore contests the constructed artifice of simulacra governing the so-called human world. Penelope Nelson while commenting on Goldsworthy's novel *Wish* considers it to be 'hugely unsettling'. Again James Bradley in *Courier Mail* considered the novel as 'challenging, intelligent and heartfelt'. Jack Coulehan in his annotation on the novel locates an element of American cultural imperialism (Literature, Arts, Medicine Database). But these critics hardly ever seek to negotiate the working of heterotopologic space in Goldsworthy's novel.

Michel Foucault gave currency to the term 'heterotopology' which he interpreted in two different ways. In 'Of Other Spaces'*,* he interprets it as the co-existence of several incompatible spaces in a specific real place. Again in *The Order of Things,* he explains it as an interweaving of disjunctive, fragmentary spaces in one impossible space. Despite the contradictory position of

Foucault's analysis in his two works on questions of heterotopologia, he clearly accepts the multivalency of spaces. In 'Of Other Spaces' Foucault contests the nineteenth-century obsession with time-related analysis iconised in history and suggests that the twentieth century will be an epoch of space. He therefore comments,

> "This problem of the human site or living space is not simply that of knowing whether there will be enough space for men in the world - a problem that is certainly quite important - but also that of knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end. Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites." [1]

Again in *The Order of Things* he contends how different forms of episteme relocate themselves in different cultural sites in different periods of history. Although this work was largely attacked by Jean Paul Sartre on grounds of an overt defense of bourgeoisie, it categorically displayed the fragmentation of multiple spaces.

The history of the development of space as a significant problematic in recent criticism may be traced back to the Australian historian Fred Alexander's *Moving Frontiers (*1947). Though Alexander's thesis was largely constructed on the basis of J F Turner's "Frontier Thesis", yet Alexander's interpretation had a distinct relevance to the Australian context of space – a sense of space that adequately supported the Australian national spirit. It was a seminal thesis that sought to interpret the Australian history in terms of its quest for a distinctive national identity. In other words, it was an attempt to correlate the contentions of space and identity in the wider spectrum of the Australian history. Historians as well as creative writers have often turned to the problem of space. Russel Ward in *The Australian Legend (*1958) often depended on questions of frontier and space in his interpretation of Australian national identity. Henry Lawson even drew a sketch map in which he substantiated the imagined territory as *bush, outback* or *never never*. It seems that the

problem of re-worlding or re-mapping the Australian space in terms of its different significations has always been part of the Australian quest for national identity. This came to be further more significant in Paul Carter's *Road to Botany Bay.*

Wish is the story of J.J. who, born of deaf parents, feels the challenge of two different spaces – the world of the sign language and that of the spoken word. But this world of formulaic semiotics of sign collapses as he begins to train up Eliza (later named Wish by him) into the sign language. As far as the sign world remains restricted to a mimetic version of external action, things seem to fit into a codified pattern. But the arousal of emotive interactions in Eliza conduces to a kind of complexity which breaks the barrier between the human and the animal world.

In *Wish* multiple forms of space therefore collide, interact, clash and collapse. This interspatiality moves along a complex direction of disrupting the traditional stereotyping of semiotic/lexical cognitions. This problematising of the spoken word may be located in Goldsworthy's poem *After Babel:*

> I read once of a valley
>
> where men and women
>
> spoke a different tongue
>
> I know that any uncooked theory
>
> can find its tribe
>
> – but this might just be true.
>
> For us there are three languages
>
> – yours, mine and the English between
>
> a wall of noises

But J.J.'s parents are shut out from this world of noises - the world of the spoken word, the world of English. The auditory world is substituted by the world of visual experience. As they watch the TV, they cannot hear, but they "bask in its flickering presence, an electronic fire in a corner of the room, warming them with a constant glow" (16). They watch sport, dance movies, ballet programmes, wildlife documentaries. It is very much like a playful indulgence in a world of the hyperreal that they can never participate in. The space of verbal semiosis creates a sense of appetitive imaging that they can see but they cannot take part in it. Their sense of space, therefore, brings to our mind the problematic of 'simulacrum', a point so distinctively structured by Baudrillard in *Precession of Simulacra*. While contending on the relation between map and territory, Baudrillard contests the earlier standpoint of the precession of territory over the map: "...it is the map that precedes the territory — PRECESSION OF SIMULCRA – it is the map that engenders the territory" (1733). According to Baudrillard, simulacra represents the images that undermine our natural desires, forcing us instead to essentialise, to appropriate and accept the images which are constructed by media, films, advertising; in other words, the natural desires and deeds are determined by the images of the 'hyperreal'. This is evident in J.J.'s childish pranks on his innocent parents in terms of misinterpreting the movies they see. His mistranslation is nothing but an attempt to create a deceptive simulacrum. As a runner, J.J's father could never win because he could never "hear the starting gun, and lost precious time watching the other runners or waiting for the puff of the smoke" (20). Even when they would try creating a sound, "it sounded like the speech of clowns, or spastics" (23).

For J.J., it was, not merely a problem of semiotic spatiality; it generated a problematic of socio-psychic spatiality. In his teens, he intended to disavow their claim on him as a son in public. It generated a dichotomous relationship of public and private space: "I still loved them, that went without saying – at home, in private. In public I was shamed by them" (23). He used to sing his way through The Bob Dylan Songbook; but it was a private space that he constructed for himself to which his parents had no access: "... a private world they couldn't share, or even enter" (23).

JJ.'s acquaintance with Clive and Stella generates a different problematic of space. It initiates a sense of spatiality that can be best understood in Foucaultian terms. Clive and Stella joining JJ.'s Basic Auslan night class gradually transform and complicate his earlier sense of space. The way Eliza - a gorilla in fact—is introduced to J.J. is nothing but the construction of a hyperreal space. Eliza is described as a child, only eight years old, born without a vocal cord. She cannot join J.J.'s class because, they argue: "Eliza's very shy... We hoped that she would agree to come but perhaps she's not quite ready" (32). When J.J. further recommends that Eliza should join classes, they again intensify the sense of the hyperreal. Stella says:

> She is very shy, J.J. Maybe a classroom is not the right environment. We hoped – we realize it's a lot to ask... We hoped that you might consider taking her as a private student. Tutoring her (43).

It is the construction of a hyperreal space because Stella and Clive try to project the imaging of an unfortunate family with a child who has no vocal cord. It is on the basis of this hyperreal imaging that J.J. is gradually drawn into a new, different kind of space.

The world that J.J. enters is essentially closed and guarded, a kind of Foucaultian panopticon. J.J.'s journey to the house of Stella and Clive initiates this sense of incarceration. As he comes nearer their house, the bush, the fence and stubbled field conduce to a sense of prevention and blockade. When he reaches the house of Clive and Stella he finds the words PLEASE CLOSE (in upper case,) "inscribed on a metal plate wired to the gate" (51). The gate's latch can be operated electronically There is also an intercom. He has to push the buzzer and then he hears the electronic voice of Stella: "Push the gate, J.J. - it's open" (51). This is repeated again in Chapter 4 (Book Two): J.J. is again confronted with the same mechanical command: "Push. J.J. …it's open" (110). Even Eliza hates open spaces. She never crosses the limit. Stella explains to J.J.:

> "She never ventures beyond the trees. She hates open spaces – it seems to be some deep-seated instinct" (121).

But it is probably not so much a case of instinct as that of habitual incarceration. Wish has been trained into living a life of incarceration. When J.J. wants to say good night to Wish, we find that Wish sleeps in a locked room: "She [Stella] lifted a key from a hook in the kitchen and headed for the stairs. I watched, startled. Did they lock their mute foster-child in her room at night?" (78). When J.J. suggests putting her in a zoo, Stella immediately reacts: "...you've met her. You've talked with her! And you want to put her in a zoo? A jail?" (102). They consider the zoo as a jail, but the pattern of life they have set for Wish is nothing but a mode of incarceration. Clive humorously talks about giving voting rights to animals: "Of course, to vote, they would have to become Australian citizens. Which means – if they were treated as normal immigrants—passing a basic comprehension test" (86). The questions of voting and citizenship may also be regarded as symbolic references to the problematic of "consent" that perpetuates incarceration. Even the training of Wish's mind by sign language may be looked upon as an entrapment: for Clive, Wish is a merely a test-case as to how animal mind can be acculturated into the human system. But J.J. contests by pointing out that teaching her a human language surely sets a limit to what she can think. But when Wish really tries to transcend the boundaries by indulging in the normative human responses in terms of erotic experiences, things begin to collapse.

The physico-psychological bonding that develops between J.J. and Wish defies the regular social codes. He is arrested by the police on charges of bestiality. When he was led to the prison cell — the watch house — with his hands tied at the back, he lost his sign, his semiotic function. It seemed to him as he had lost his speech. Inside the prison cell, he comes to be incarcerated: "In the smallest hours I entered a state of delirium where I could no longer even choose what to think, the twilight zone of insomnia where thoughts choose themselves" (264). After the death of Wish, J.J. perhaps more seriously realizes the collapse of the world of sign, of the world of language. He therefore tries to imagine a more resonant concept: "I lay back on the soft winter grass and tried again to imagine a different language, a truly religious language which might allow more resonant concepts of past and future, life and death. Could I put the future behind me?" (298).

*Foucault's "Des Espace Autres," was published by the French journal Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuite in October, 1984. It was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. As it was not reviewed for publication by the author, it is not considered to be part of the official corpus of his work. The manuscript was released in an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Foucault's death.

Works Cited

Anzaldua. Gloria: *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestizo,* Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, W W Norton & Co, New York, 2001

Baudrillard, Jean: *The Precession of Simulacra,* Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, W W Norton& Co, New York, 2001

Goldsworthy, Peter: *Three Dog Night,* Penguin Books, Penguin India, New Delhi, 2003

_____ : *Wish,* Angus & Robertson, Australia, 1995

Haworth, William: *Imagined Territory: The Writing of Wetlands,* New Literary History, 30.3, University of Virginia, 1999

Moulthrop, Stuart: *You Say You Want a Revolution,* Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, W W Norton & Co., New York, 2001

Soja, Edward: *Heterotopologies: A Remembrance of Other Spaces in the Citadel - LA,* Postmodern Cities and Spaces, Eds. Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson, Blackwell, 2001