

**Nikola Novaković**

University of Applied Health Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia  
nikola.novakovic@zvuh.hr

## The Laughter of Other Places: Humour and Heterotopias in the Works of Edward Gorey

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The paper employs Michel Foucault's ideas on heterotopias, outlined in his essay *Of Other Spaces* (1984), to analyse the interaction of humour and spaces in Edward Gorey's works, with special emphasis on the book *The Evil Garden* (1966). Foucault's theory of heterotopias is used to provide an understanding of Gorey's fusion of sombre places and macabre tales with his characteristically dry humour and to examine what Gorey's heterotopias can tell us about the problem of the categorisation of Gorey as an author of children's literature. In the reading of *The Evil Garden*, the paper illustrates how Gorey's disturbing heterotopias achieve a hybridity of spaces, genres, tones, and reader roles in order to encourage polyvalent readings. Gorey plays with the juxtaposition of various heterotopias, destabilising the reader's position through recurring motifs and intertextual allusions, but the one element that is represented in all those "other" places is invariably humour in all its different forms. It is precisely at the intersection of the various spaces which collide in heterotopias that Gorey's dark humour emerges and performs its subversive function.

**Keywords:** children's literature, Foucault, Gorey, heterotopia, humour, hybridity, intertextuality

The smallest clue may be (or not)  
The one to give away the plot.  
THE IPSIAD, *can. I*

Of all the people on the scene  
Some are betwixt and some  
between.

THE IPSIAD, *can. II*  
E. Gorey, *The Awdrey-Gore Legacy* (1972)

Edward Gorey (1925–2000) was an American writer and illustrator whose works exhibit a detailed crosshatching style reminiscent of Victorian artists and surreal narratives that combine the humorous with the eerie and sinister. Gorey is most famous for his numerous subversive reworkings of various genres from children's literature, most prominently abecedaries in works such as *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963), *The Utter Zoo* (1967), *The Glorious Nosebleed* (1975), and *The Eclectic Abecedarium* (1985), while his other notable books include *The Doubtful Guest* (1957), *The West Wing* (1963), and *The Wuggly Ump* (1963), all of which and many more can be found in the four *Amphigorey* collections of his works. These serio-comic stories are frequently situated in dark and dreary places, old and crumbling mansions, abandoned factories, overgrown gardens and miserable prisons, asylums and madhouses. Many of these places are notable for their unsettling effect of merging within themselves several incompatible spaces, whether obvious or implied, while still retaining Gorey's signature type of humour which utilises surrealism and absurdity. In an attempt to provide a better understanding of this intersection of humour, horror, and disturbing places, this reading will employ Michel Foucault's ideas regarding heterotopias, outlined in his paper *Of Other Spaces* (*Des Espaces Autres*, 1984). The places in Gorey's books are frequently strange or uncanny, even when they appear to be situated in such mundane spaces as homes, gardens, shops, or other urban environments. By acting as thresholds between outside and inside, humour and terror, organised and disorganised, utopic and dystopic, as well as the crossroads of other heterotopias, they complicate our understanding and provoke interpretation. The aim of this paper is threefold: first, to show how humour continuously functions as one of the central and unavoidable elements in Gorey's fiction, despite the strong element of the uncanny and the Gothic. Secondly, the paper aims to offer a reading of Gorey's "other" places of crisis, deviation, and compensation, with specific emphasis on an interpretation of the heterotopia of a garden in *The Evil Garden* (1966). Furthermore, although Gorey is nowadays widely regarded as a major influence on the visual arts, perhaps most notably in the cases of Tim Burton and Neil Gaiman, he is still woefully underrepresented in academic writing, which is why the final aim of this paper is to add to the slowly growing body of research on Edward Gorey's works.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section briefly outlines the existing analyses of Gorey's style, and especially his humour. In the second section, I introduce Foucault's theory of heterotopias and show how it can be usefully employed to provide an understanding of Gorey's fusion of sombre places and macabre tales with his characteristically dry humour. This section also examines what Gorey's heterotopias can tell us about the problem of the categorisation of Gorey as an author of children's literature. The third and the fourth sections provide a reading of one specific heterotopic place found in Gorey's *The Evil Garden*.

### **From humour to horror and back again**

Humour is one of the central elements of Gorey's works, and whether it is prominent and obvious, or hidden under layers of horror and tragedy, it offers a crucial avenue for dealing with the confusion that many readers experience when confronted with

the mysterious mazes of Edward Gorey's texts. That Gorey's works are humorous, and that humour performs an important role in the process of their reading, is certainly no surprising discovery. In her analysis of Gorey's manipulations of form and content, Eden Lee Lackner (2015) shows how his books employ parody: Gorey subverts the reader's expectations by providing only the most basic outlines of a particular genre (Lackner analyses melodrama, Dickensian tales, pedagogical tales, crime fiction, and the Gothic genre), while at the same time removing most of that genre's essential components. For example, in the case of those works that exhibit elements of Gothic literature, Lackner shows how Gorey distances the reader from the emotions of the characters, undermining any possibility of empathising with them, while simultaneously cultivating "an excess of tragedy", with the cumulative effect being humorous (2015: 135):

Much of Gorey's work incorporates shocking acts of violence, tragedy, and inescapable death, the foundation upon which he can pile both literal and figurative bodies. The briefness of his narratives and Gorey's enforced distance between his characters and audience works in tandem with this excessive glee to flout the emotionality and spirituality that is otherwise a part of the Gothic aesthetic. Instead, Gorey's tragedies become comedies as the sheer overabundance of horror reaches ridiculous heights.

By identifying the grotesque "intersection of humour and death" as one of the characteristics of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in Gorey's works, Lydia Horne (2016: 4) also emphasises the importance of reading and understanding his approach to humour. Gorey's texts are filled with the motif of death and dying, whether through appropriately Gothic symbolism or by actually including scenes showing the events preceding or following a death, but Gorey "presents these notions to the reader in a manner that is enjoyable through his suffusion of humor, thereby successfully defeating terror with laughter" (Horne 2016: 23). Gorey's use of the carnivalesque spirit exposes institutions and customs related to death to which we unconsciously subscribe, revealing their ridiculous nature and "using humor as a mechanism to relieve our unease as we face reality without the guidance of prevailing institutions" (23). In her analysis of the motif of a child's (random) death in Gorey's alphabet book *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, Emily Petermann (2018) situates the text in the tradition of cautionary tales and verse, showing how Gorey, by abandoning causality, narrative development, and a didactic purpose, moves beyond parody into nonsense. Once all these elements are stripped away from the structure of a cautionary tale and the meaninglessness of existence laid bare, what is left is not horror, but humour: "[H]is readers are encouraged [...] to react rather with laughter than despair, as they relish the randomness of the situation and the inconclusiveness of the narrative to savour Gorey's particular brand of dark humour" (Petermann 2018: 29).

While Lackner's and Horne's approaches to genre stripping can certainly aid us in navigating through many of Gorey's texts and particularly in understanding his peculiar brand of humour paired with horror, there are still as many texts which resist attempts at applying such reading strategies. As this paper shows, such texts do not adhere to a single or dominant identifiable genre, and yet remain both amusing and

confusing, humorous and mystifying. In such cases, as in those examined by Lackner, Gorey's reader continues to act as a detective who "must step back from the text and puzzle out the plot itself. Gorey's dense illustrations and sparse text therefore work together to obscure the narrative, making it the audience's responsibility to take on the detective role and use the sparse narrative clues to puzzle out the progression of the plot" (Lackner 2015: 110). Of course, even if there is no actual plot to speak of (most notably in the case of *The West Wing*), the fragments or suggestions of a story and those of characterisation peppered throughout Gorey's baffling books constantly haunt the reader's desire to establish a stable identity for the narrative with which they are grappling. In the quest for this identity, the reader is provoked into posing questions regarding the genre, the characters, the author, and, ultimately, the reader: Am I a reader of Gothic fiction, a sentimental romance, or a detective story? What emotion should I feel? Fear, compassion, disgust, curiosity, boredom? Alexander Theroux reflects on this difficulty of categorising Gorey's books: "What was the genre? Fiction? Fable? This book is wordless! That one is one-inch high! That one pops up! This one folds the wrong way!" (2011: 165). When visiting Gorey's strange worlds, we seem to be stepping into the tennis shoes of one of his most famous creations, the funny-looking creature from *The Doubtful Guest*, which one day appears in the home of a certain vaguely aristocratic family and causes them much inconvenience by eating a plate, stealing the horn from the gramophone, tearing pages from books, creeping around the house at night, etc. Like the Doubtful Guest, we pick up this or that clue, put it down in search of another, wandering aimlessly around the many shadowy Victorian halls of Gorey's creations, while at the same time doubting the very process of our reading: Are we reading the "right" way? Have we missed anything? Is there some detail that will let us reach the impenetrable centre of the shifting labyrinth of Gorey's tales that seem to mock those very attempts?

## Disturbing places

It is precisely this idea of Gorey's text as a labyrinth that will lead us in the direction of a framework which we can employ when reading those stories that seem to resist the abovementioned strategies of Lackner and Horne and yet continue to create Gorey's typically subversive humorous effect. Labyrinths are places whose peculiar functions and contradictions align them with Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, first introduced in his work *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (*Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, 1966) and later elaborated upon in a lecture given to architects (1967) which served as the basis for the text published under the title *Of Other Spaces* (*Des Espaces Autres*, 1984, translated into English in 1986). Foucault posits that we no longer live in a time of homogenous space, the Medieval "hierarchical ensemble of spaces", clearly divided into the sacred and profane, the protected and open, the urban and rural, but in "the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault 1986: 22). We no longer experience the world as "a long life

developing through time” but as “a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (ibid.). The space in which we live is heterogenous space which contains sites “in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (24). Our world establishes a network of sites that are linked to each other and contradict each other but cannot be reduced to one another or superimposed upon each other (23–24). Foucault makes a distinction between utopias, which are unreal, fantastic places that show a perfected version of society, and heterotopias, which are sites where all the other sites in a culture can be found as “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24).

Following this distinction, Foucault outlines the six main principles of heterotopia. The first of these is the fact that heterotopias are present in all cultures, although there is probably no single universal form of heterotopia that can be found. Foucault further distinguishes between two types of heterotopia. First, in primitive societies there were heterotopias of crisis, which Foucault believes are disappearing nowadays. Such places are (or were in the past) reserved for individuals in a state of crisis or change, such as adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, and young men performing military service. Foucault here lists such places as the boarding school and the place of deflowering, such as a train or a honeymoon hotel. These heterotopias of crisis are nowadays being replaced by heterotopias of deviation, places “in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (25). Here Foucault gives examples such as rest homes, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and retirement homes. Following this, Foucault supplies the remaining principles of heterotopia: their changing function during different historical periods (such as in the case of cemeteries, once found in the centre of cities, and later relegated to their edges), their ability to juxtapose several incompatible places in a single space, their link with time (both its accumulation, as in the case of museums, and its transitory nature, for example during festivals), their system of opening and closing that both isolates them and retains their penetrability, and finally their “relation to all the space that remains” (27). As Topinka stresses, the last two points specifically separate heterotopias from utopias, since utopias are always imaginary while heterotopias “do not exist independently of our existence or our way of knowing” (Topinka 2010: 57).

Gorey’s books contain many of the heterotopias Foucault mentions, including mirrors, ships, theatres, opera houses, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, gardens, and cemeteries, the last one functioning as one of his numerous Gothic locales which include “crumbling ruins, lonely manors, windswept moors and shadowed rooms” (Lackner 2015: 136). *The Iron Tonic: Or, A Winter Afternoon in Lonely Valley* (1969) depicts a place that functions as an absurdly bleak amalgam of several types of heterotopia. The story consists of fifteen panels showing various scenes from “Lonely Valley”, each one accompanied by a rhyming couplet and a “spyglass” detail of some part of the scene (with the action in the spyglass occurring before, after, or during the rest of the action in the scene). The first panel shows a heterotopia of crisis, a hotel that houses the elderly and the ill, with the accompanying couplet stating the following: “The people

at the grey hotel / Are either aged or unwell". The remaining panels show, among other places, a cemetery, an orphanage, a "skating pond" which apparently conceals a "family of enormous eels", and an open plain assaulted by everyday objects falling from the sky. Each panel is constructed in such a way that it blends the mundane with some unexplained or utterly fantastic event (a voice emanating from a cloud, a hand visible in a ray of light, a wounded man-sized bird), thus forming additional heterotopias of crisis or deviation. In such places, the logic of events deviates from the everyday order and simultaneously poses a certain enigma or mystery, beginning with the very title of the book itself (which is never alluded to in the story itself, as is very common for Gorey) and the location of Lonely Valley. For instance, the reader may wonder who toppled the statue in the second panel or whether the cause was supernatural, given the otherworldly atmosphere established by other unexplained events. The inclusion of a "spyglass" detail in each panel works as an ironic addition, more often obscuring interesting elements of the image or showing irrelevant details instead of clarifying the sequence of events. For example, the second panel shows a group of people wrapped in thick clothing as they sit on a roof, observing the wintry landscape, while the couplet reads: "The guests who chose to stay aloof / Lie wrapped in rugs upon the roof". However, the detail the reader is probably interested in discovering more about is the ghost-like apparition wandering through the snow, its arms aloft. Who is this person? Is it even a human being or some fantastic creature? No answers are provided. Instead, hilariously, we get a very detailed look at the muffled people, shown in a large circle that obscures much of the background image, though the very fact that they are barely visible under all the layers of clothing ultimately defeats the purpose of showing them in such detail, since so little information is actually conveyed.

The reader's attempts to assemble a coherent story from the pieces offered by Gorey's method of an "unexplained recurrence of an irrelevant object" (Tigges 1988: 191) are destined to fail, thus transforming Gorey's book into a story of the reader's struggle with interpretation, with the depicted heterotopias of deviation thus becoming places where the reader diligently working toward a coherent narrative may be revealed to be the butt of the joke. The humorous aspect of *The Iron Tonic* is further developed through the superficially bleak tone of the book, supported by very dark illustrations and portentous comments in the couplets. Everything is apparently so miserable that the final couplet states: "The light is fading from the day / The rest is darkness and dismay". However, there are some couplets that seem to defuse the Gothic atmosphere, inverting the tone into something closer to ironic levity. For instance, in the panel showing a group of people inspecting a mound of earth, the couplet claims that "They sifted through the ancient mound / No bones or artifacts were found", which undermines the expectation of yet another mystery or the discovery of some eerie ancient skeleton: instead, there is simply nothing, and once again what remains is the humour. Similarly, the second to last panel seems to invert the entire concept of a spyglass detail laid over a background. It opens on a dark plain with a large rock covered with snow, while the spyglass circle simply shows the same rock, only in somewhat greater detail, with the couplet stating:

“They’ve gone and left it all alone: / An absolutely useless stone”. In other words, it seems like nothing at all of consequence has happened, and the fact that the image is commenting on it seems absurd and comical, thus further underlining the humorous disconnect between word and image. This succession of absurd events, coupled with several subversions of an expected revelation of some disturbing or gruesome piece of information, reveals that the heterotopias of crisis and deviation actually conceal a typically Goreyesque laughter of absurdity resonating throughout all the over-the-top bleakness.

In Gorey’s other works, seemingly ordinary places are transformed into heterotopias as they come to function and exist in-between the real and the imaginary. For example, in *Les Passementeries Horribles (Horrible Trimmings)*, a series of wordless panels depicts scenes from everyday life in which the “horrible trimmings” or tassels from the title appear as oversized, menacing objects. The tassels appear to be standing or hovering in the vicinity of several human and animal characters, and the way the tassels are positioned in relation to these characters seems to imply malicious intent. A woman sitting among some trees appears to be stalked by an enormous tassel as it peers from behind the trunk of a tree which is comically too thin to conceal it. In another panel a small child is playing on the coast of a lake or sea, apparently unaware that behind its back another tassel is emerging from the water like some underwater predator. Since they give the impression of being in a state of change from small, inanimate objects into animate and very mobile creatures, the giant decorations imbue each of the locations they inhabit with a sense of a heterotopia of crisis. And yet, although the tassels lend each of the scenes an air of disquiet, the absurdity of such a transformation from an innocuous decoration to a monstrosity leads to a humorous effect, which is further underlined by the emotionless expressions on the characters’ faces and the positioning of their bodies, all of which attest to their bemusement or indifference instead of fear or panic. On the other hand, some of Gorey’s works enact an inversion of this process, as supernatural or absurd events or characters come to function as mundane and ordinary despite their superficial markers of the extraordinary or “other”. For instance, the book *The Prune People* (1983) contains fourteen panels showing a variety of events from the lives of people who have prunes for heads. Although this is initially disturbing, the reader comes to the realisation that the prune people tend to act like normal people (or at least like most of Gorey’s human characters, whose behaviour is often theatrically exaggerated): we see them engaged in theatrical performance, taking part in a funeral procession, playing with kites in tall grass, or dropping a cup and saucer from a balcony. And even if some of the scenes stand out as more eerie than others, the absurdity of the prune-headed people moves beyond horror and into humour. After all, the entire book may merely be read as an extended reimagining of a tradition found in Nuremberg, Germany, of creating little dolls made of prunes, raisins, nuts, and plums called Plum Men, or “Zwetschgenmännle”.

Another aspect of Gorey’s heterotopias that I wish to briefly touch upon is their significance within the existing confusion about the categorisation of Gorey’s books

as children's literature. As Kevin Shortsleeve shows in his thesis *Unhappily Ever After: Edward Gorey and Children's Literature*, numerous scholars and reviewers have expressed their uncertainty about situating Gorey's works in the field of children's literature. There are claims that Gorey's texts are "hard to categorize as children's books" or even that he is "mistakenly categorized as an author of children's books", while there are also those who go so far as to claim that Gorey is "quite unsafe for children" (Shortsleeve 2002: 3). Shortsleeve, however, falls firmly into the camp of scholars who claim that Gorey's books are suitable for children, and in fact the purpose of his entire thesis is to confirm that Gorey "was a children's author and, further, that his contributions to the field of nonsense literature are both unique and valuable precisely because his work and career raise doubts about the accuracy of current understandings of children's literature" (4). Lackner also comments on this problem, but disagrees with Shortsleeve's claim that Gorey "fits neatly within the umbrella of children's literature" because such an approach ignores "the ambiguity at the heart of Gorey's oeuvre" (Lackner 2015: 102). One reason for this ambiguity is certainly Gorey's style, both at the level of illustration and narrative. His illustrations, created with his signature "detailed cross-hatching" and "amazingly complicated pen-and-ink work", instantly remind one of Victorian illustrators, so much that, according to Theroux, "most newcomers to his work tend to think that he is a long-dead Victorian illustrator" (Theroux 2011: 159). The various locales, their furnishings, the people who populate them, as well as their customs, behaviour, and appearance, all work together to evoke a strange, muddled version of the Victorian era mixed with elements of the Edwardian period, as well as occasional modes of transportation, fashion accessories, and dresses borrowed from the Roaring Twenties. Such stylistic collages of various influences allow Gorey to perform the heterotopic juxtaposition of several conflicting time periods within a single space.

When it comes to the narrative level, the large majority of Gorey's works contain most of the elements that would allow us to categorise them as children's literature. His books often consist of illustrations accompanied by short paragraphs or only two or three lines of text, which is characteristic of picturebooks intended for children. Many of the characters described in the texts or depicted in the illustrations are children, especially in those works which are more obviously aimed at a younger audience, such as *The Wuggly Ump*, which is also one of his books in colour. Many of Gorey's texts are written in rhyming verse, including numerous examples of couplets and limericks, and can be categorised as nonsense poetry, which is a form frequently found in children's literature. Furthermore, many of Gorey's stories focus on such subjects as death, murder, misfortune, criminals, and sacrificial violence, as well as eerie locales such as cemeteries and dark attics, and monsters like ghosts or mummies, evoking similarly subversive picturebooks such as Shel Silverstein's *Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book* (1961), Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992), and Maurice Sendak, Arthur Yorinks, and Matthew Reinhart's *Mommy?* (2006). Just like these other examples, Gorey's books feature many humorous elements, for instance comedic situations and characters whose portrayal involves overemphasised



theatricality, usually in the same works that contain tropes belonging to the horror or Gothic genre, which simultaneously undermines the frightening effect of those very tropes. This juxtaposition of the comical and nonsensical with the serious and sombre creates a disturbing effect characteristic of heterotopias. Gorey's "other places" are playfully ambiguous and unstable, and therefore reminiscent of heterotopic locales which Nikolajeva (2005) identifies in fantasy literature. Such places are "intricate and convoluted, ever changing, ever shape-shifting", with the "hetero" in their name emphasising "dissimilarity, dissonance, and ambiguity of the worlds" (140). Gorey's worlds are precisely such ambiguous heterotopic spaces, and Nikolajeva's description of "a multitude of discordant universes [...] interrogat[ing] the conventional definitions of children's fiction based on simplicity, stability, and optimism" is certainly applicable to Gorey's shape-shifting worlds, which are simultaneously for children and for adults. This is particularly noticeable in the way the *Amphigorey* anthologies are structured, with darker works interspersed among the lighter ones. Such a carnivalesque space offers incredible liberty for the reversal of usual roles, with adults identifying with a child's experience of reading (Lanes 1975: 6, qtd. in Shortsleeve 2002: 16):

Gorey succeeds admirably in reducing sophisticated adult readers to the state of helpless bafflement and incomprehension so often experienced by small children. Slowly, like that child, the reader gains whatever mastery is possible over this work, and his victory parallels a child's as he imposes whatever fragmentary logic and sense he can on the enigma at hand. It is an exotic and cerebral entertainment, with Gorey forcing his audience to experience the world anew [...].

It is the aim of the following reading of Gorey's *The Evil Garden* to illustrate how the author's disturbing heterotopias achieve this hybridity of spaces, genres, tones, nationality,<sup>1</sup> and reader roles in order to encourage polyvalent readings. Gorey plays with the juxtaposition of various heterotopias, each of which creates the "ambivalent and unstable spatial and temporal conditions in fiction" (Nikolajeva 2005: 140), whether explicitly or implicitly, through symbolism and allusions, but the one element that is represented in all of his "other" places is invariably humour in all its different forms. It is precisely at the intersection of the various spaces which collide in heterotopias of "dissonance, dissimilarity and ambiguity" (ibid.) that Gorey's dark humour emerges and performs its subversive function.

### **A corrupt Garden of Eden**

While discussing the third principle of heterotopias, their ability to juxtapose several incompatible places within one space, Foucault gives the example of a garden (1986: 25–26):

[P]erhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing

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<sup>1</sup> Gorey's works evoke ideas of Britishness (specifically Victorian/Edwardian Britishness) but also bear marks of the American culture.

creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were [sic] like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm.

Gorey's *The Evil Garden* contains one such sinister microcosm. The book, consisting of fourteen illustrations accompanied by rhyming couplets, tells the story of a group of people (five adults and two children) who enter an ornamental garden in which various supernatural animals and plants cause their demise. However, even before we begin reading the book, there is a suggestion that things are not as they appear. This comes in the form of the fictional author's name and the brief foreword written by the equally fictional translator. The author of the book is supposedly someone called Eduard Blutig, which is another of Gorey's many pseudonyms.<sup>2</sup> Since the word *blutig* is German for bloody, "Gorey uses the meaning of his name [...] as the key. Working with his reputation for the macabre, Gorey plays off the idea of his last name as an alternate version of 'gory,' and translates that into a synonym" (Lackner 2015: 147–148). In other words, Eduard Blutig becomes Edward Bloody, thus advertising the bloody business of killing off every one of the characters in the story the reader is about to engage with.<sup>3</sup>

While the action that follows the introduction is indeed macabre, this effect is constantly undercut by the rhyming couplets under each illustration and the reader's consequent retained distance from the deaths themselves. At first, the members of the group appear cheerful, but the second illustration already shows a change in their demeanour, the cause of which is commented on in the adjoining couplet: "There is a sound of falling tears / It comes from nowhere to the ears". This pairing of a sorrowful motif of tears so heavy they can produce a sound with a strange lack of their source, an emphasised "nowhere" (already reminding us of Foucault's heterotopias of nowhere, places "without geographical markers" [Foucault 1986: 25]), situated in a garden inhabited by strange, black plants and vines, produces the impression that "unremarkable items [...] become imbued with paranormal phenomena" (Lackner 2015: 139). This impression continues to be built upon by a succession of progressively stranger and more violent occurrences. At first the group is approached by a small, angry creature,

<sup>2</sup> Gorey famously used various comedic anagrams of his name as authors of some of his works (e.g. Raddory Gewe, Dogear Wyrde, E. G. Deadworry, or Mrs Regeera Dowdy, the translator of *The Evil Garden*).

<sup>3</sup> The brief foreword by Mrs Dowdy provides additional information on the supposed author: "Alas, my translation of perhaps Herr Blutig's most famous work appears on the melancholy occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the next to the next to the last time he threw himself out of a window". With this in mind, the fictional author's last name gains additional significance, for he too is "bloodied" and killed off by Gorey, who does not allow even "his unseen authorial embodiment to escape the macabre pull of his narratives" (Lackner 2015: 149).

then a foot in a striped sock is found protruding from under a heavy rock, followed by the group noticing the nauseous smell of the plants and the arrival of a giant moth. The disturbing series of events escalates with the sudden disappearance of the child Isabelle, whose discarded white sash lying on the ground appears like a vulnerable extension of its owner, engulfed by the menacing black foliage that surrounds it. Great-uncle Franz is strangled by a snake, the group encounters “ferocious bears”, Alexa’s aunt is devoured by a plant, a baby is carried off by oversized “hairy bugs”, and the children’s nurse sinks into a “bubbling pond”. In the final two panels the sky “has grown completely black”, so that the stark white characters appear visually devoured by the encroaching blackness of the plants that have almost merged with their surroundings. In the end, the remaining characters seem to be screaming and panicking or just lying on the ground, defeated and hopeless, for as the couplet under the picture informs us, “Fall down, or scream, or rush about – / There is no way of getting out”.

As mentioned above, gardens are a prototypical heterotopia partly due to their ability to combine in one place elements from locations that may usually be found in entirely different parts of the planet: “Botanical gardens, for example, are a heterotopic mix of incompatible plants, which juxtapose incommensurable ecosystems: alpine plants in lowland London and desert plants in rain-forest Singapore” (Callahan 2017: 362). They also fulfil other principles laid out by Foucault: they are present in most cultures, can represent different time periods simultaneously, and serve different functions depending on the historical period. In her research on botanical gardens, Susannah Wieck shows how what “started as a place to grow medicinal herbs has become a place to showcase plant collections, to conduct research, to remember the past and to provide green lawns and open space in sanctuary from the urban environment” (Wieck 2006: 112). The description of a 2012 project of the Undergraduate School of Architecture of the Pratt Institute in New York centred on heterotopic gardens contains the following description of its theme: “The garden, as the spatial milieu, creates an atmospheric rupture, alternative drifts and wrinkling of space. In an urban, public context, the park is an example par excellence of alternative narratives and resistance”.<sup>4</sup> However, in the case of Gorey’s garden, this is a place that becomes twisted and corrupted and ultimately enacts resistance to its visitors. The evil garden thus comes to function as an inversion of a heterotopia. While Lieven De Cauter and Michiel Dehaene claim that the structure of a heterotopia “is that of a ‘sanctuary’ [...] a refuge, a safe haven, a protected space” (2008: 97), Gorey’s evil garden transforms from a welcoming garden to a final resting place for those whom it consumes, a Gothic location whose “rampant fecundity [...] evokes the ways in which nature, when left to its own devices, will overrun mansions and monuments alike” (Lackner 2015: 149).

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<sup>4</sup> Available on the following website: <<https://cargocollective.com/heterotopicgardens>> (accessed 29 July 2019).



Fig. 1. Charles Méryon, *Le Ministère de la Marine* [The Admiralty], Paris, 1865<sup>5</sup>  
 Sl. 1. Charles Méryon, *Admiralitet*, 1865.

### Intertextuality in the garden

Gorey's works frequently contain intertextual links to other literary, visual, musical, or filmic sources, and *The Evil Garden* is no exception. Perhaps the most famous example of this occurs in the form of a blank piece of paper that can be found lying on the ground in many of his books, including *The Evil Garden*. Mark Dery reminds us of the possibility, proposed by Irwin Terry, author of the fan blog *Goreyana*, that the piece

<sup>5</sup> Etching on laid paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA. Entry 377128. Source: <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/377127>> (accessed 12 September 2020). This work is in public domain.

of paper is one of Gorey's numerous allusions to the silent movies of the French film director Louis Feuillade (1873–1925), more specifically an allusion to a scene (Fig. 2) in the first instalment of the crime serial *Fantômas* (1913–1914) (Dery 2018). This piece of paper is never commented on by Gorey's characters and only noticed by a careful reader, but effectively functions as the author's own calling card, a metafictional nudge and a minuscule private joke shared between the author and his reader. *The Evil Garden* constructs several other important intertextual allusions, establishing links with real and fictional places which are then mapped onto the evil garden. The first possibility that immediately suggests itself is a link with the Biblical Garden of Eden. As illustrated above, what started as a virtual garden of delights has shown itself to be its corrupt inverse, but the potential for reading the visitors' demise as an echo of the fall from grace experienced by Adam and Eve in the form of some breach of moral code is undermined by the lack of any sort of transgression perpetrated by Gorey's characters or of a clear rule that may have been transgressed. This parallels what Petermann says about Gorey's use of the cautionary tale format. If a traditional cautionary tale aims to convey a moral lesson by employing Gothic elements such as fear or threat, Gorey's "readers are able to maintain their detachment since nonsense elements serve to ironically undercut those emotions" (Petermann 2018: 28). In her analysis of *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, Petermann shows how Gorey parodies the cautionary tale format by juxtaposing "a moral code by which we would read [the children's deaths] as punishment for transgressions with an amoral world in which the deaths signify nothing" (29). However, since the text leaves out that moral code, effectively eliminating a context for the deaths, "it moves further away from parody to become more fully nonsense" (ibid.). The same effect is achieved in *The Evil Garden*: while the inhabitants of the Biblical garden violated a law set by God, Gorey's characters are guilty of nothing worse than perhaps being lured by the promise of free entry displayed above the garden entrance. This disruption of reader expectations, performed by stripping the tale of the Biblical significance of crime and punishment, while retaining only the frail similarity between the two texts, robs Gorey's characters of their potential pathos. What remains, yet again, is the humour of nonsense. This should come as no surprise, for as Shortsleeve shows in his exploration of various influences on Gorey's texts and illustrations, "no single genre was as foundational to [Gorey] as nonsense" (Shortsleeve 2018: 101), and among the authors of literary nonsense, even according to Gorey himself, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll were most influential for him. Considering the liminality and ambiguity of literary nonsense as a form that provokes the reader into sense-making even as it eludes any such attempt, it is also unsurprising that such texts are particularly conducive to the creation of heterotopic spaces, which in themselves frustrate attempts at division or clear categorisation. Carroll's works contain many such "counter-sites" and "placeless place[s]" (Foucault's very terms sounding like something borrowed from literary nonsense), from the looking-glass to the "contradictory site" of the garden (Foucault 1986: 25), and Gorey's evil garden shares much of its ambiguity with Alice's explorations of the garden of the Queen of Hearts, a place hiding both visual delight and the danger of decapitation.

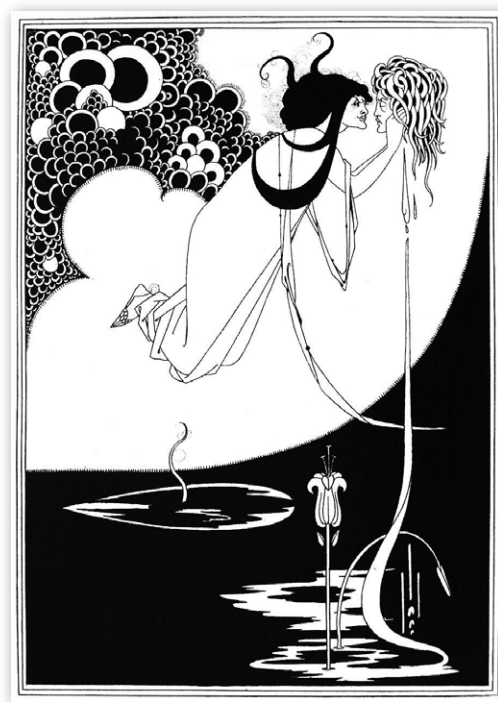


**Fig. 2.** Louis Feuillade, *Fantômas I: À l'ombre de la guillotine* [Fantômas I – In the Shadow of the Guillotine], 1913<sup>6</sup>

**Sl. 2.** Louis Feuillade, *Fantômas I – U sjeni giljotine*, 1913.

Certain other intertextual connections are established at the visual level. For instance, Gorey's black vines and plants suggest a similarity with the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), particularly those done for Oscar Wilde's English version of his play *Salome* (1894) (Fig. 3), thus evoking and aligning the play's themes of lust, corruption, treachery, power, and manipulation with the themes of Gorey's book. Furthermore, Erin Monroe has identified a similarity between *The Evil Garden* and the French artist Charles Méryon's (1821–1868) etchings, whose "dense cross-hatched prints prefigure Gorey's labor-intensive line work" (Monroe 2018: 14). Gorey's worlds seem inspired by the "nightmarish quality of Méryon's Paris" in the fact that they can quickly turn from peaceful environments into deadly traps (15). This relationship is both thematically and compositionally reflected in *The Evil Garden's* scene of the snatching of the baby, which resembles Méryon's etching (Fig. 1) of an attack on an official building by "a fantastic horde of flying horsemen and airborne sea creatures" in a "weird, dystopian nightmare akin to science fiction" (ibid.). Of course, due to the combination of the rhyming couplet and Gorey's specific style of illustration which depicts the ridiculous "hairy bugs" carrying off not only the baby but for some reason its "rugs" as well, the "dystopian nightmare" is reworked into a comedic re-enactment of Méryon's original.

<sup>6</sup> A series of stills from the 1913 film *Fantômas I: À l'ombre de la guillotine* [Fantômas I – In the Shadow of the Guillotine] by Louis Feuillade, from the series *Fantômas*. Source: <[http://parislike.com/EN/happenings/50-LE\\_REGNE\\_DU\\_SANG\\_\\_REIGN\\_IN\\_BLOOD\\_by\\_Erik\\_Morse.html](http://parislike.com/EN/happenings/50-LE_REGNE_DU_SANG__REIGN_IN_BLOOD_by_Erik_Morse.html)> (accessed 20 October 2019). This work is in public domain.



**Fig. 3.** One of Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's play *Salome*, 1894<sup>7</sup>  
**Sl. 3.** Jedna od ilustracija Aubrey Beardsley za Wildeovu dramu *Salome*, 1894.

Gorey's book also sets up links to cinematic texts, which is especially fitting since, as Adrian Ivakhiv shows, cinema is "by its nature heterotopic: it creates worlds that are *other* than the 'real world' but that relate to that world in multiple and contradictory ways" (Ivakhiv 2011: 186). Lackner has already recognised that the striped sock protruding from under a rock establishes a visual link with the Wicked Witch of the East from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), therefore incorporating echoes of the heterotopic space of the world of Oz into Gorey's devilishly funny garden. Furthermore, the abovementioned sinister motif of the sound of falling tears can be thought of as an intertextual echo of one of the Italian *giallo* (murder mystery) movies, *The Drop of Water*. The movie is included in the horror anthology *Black Sabbath* (1963), directed by Mario Bava, and tells the story of a nurse who is haunted by the sound of dripping water after she steals a ring off the hand of a corpse.

Apart from the heterotopic spaces of cinema and Méryon's nightmarish vision, a reference to something far more wicked than the Witch of the East can be read from

<sup>7</sup> *The Climax*, an 1894 illustration by Aubrey Beardsley for Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*. Source: <<http://www.openculture.com/2015/09/oscar-wildes-scandalous-play-salome-illustrated-by-aubrey-beardsley-in-a-striking-gothic-aesthetic-1894.html>> (accessed 29 July 2019). This work is in public domain.

the sign above the entrance to the evil garden.<sup>8</sup> Written in German and embedded in the wrought iron gate, the sign announces free entry (“Eintritt frei!”), while the couplet under the illustration comments on the joy the visitors feel upon entering free of charge: “How elegant! how choice! how gay! / To think one doesn’t have to pay”. Since, according to Foucault’s fifth principle, entering heterotopias involves mechanisms of gaining permission, it is very fortunate that the entrance to the Evil Garden is free. However, the reader who has finished reading the book can go back to this initial sign and grasp how misleading and ironic it is: while the entry is free, the exit may not be, and in fact the visitors are ultimately forced to pay the highest price. The appearance, the language, and the ironic statement of this declaration are reminiscent of another infamous and sinister sign, the one placed above the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp: “Arbeit macht frei” (“Work sets you free”). While both signs seem to be offering freedom, one the freedom from payment and the other freedom from the labour camp, both statements are not only untrue, but also cynical and mocking.<sup>9</sup> The work that the prisoners put into the camp did nothing to expedite their release, since the very purpose of their incarceration was their isolation and elimination. This allusion to the heterotopia of a concentration camp is further underlined by the appearance of sinister and threatening “ferocious bears”, and it is interesting to note that the bears are described as “guarding” the fruit in the garden and not as “protecting” or “watching over” it.<sup>10</sup> The allusions to the Auschwitz sign and camp guards thus evoke another nightmarish place that is certainly not a sanctuary but “[t]he opposite of heterotopia”, as Dehaene and De Cauter term concentration camps, identifying within them “the embodiment of the state of exception, the place of the ban, where the law is suspended”

<sup>8</sup> The front page of the calendar for 2021 sold online by The Gorey Store shows the first panel of the evil garden and the sign over the entrance: <<https://goreystore.com/collections/edward-gorey-calendars/products/edward-gorey-2021-mini-wall-calendar>> (accessed 12 December 2020).

<sup>9</sup> It is curious to notice, however, that the Auschwitz sign, despite being widely considered one of the symbols of the Nazi regime and its organised extermination of “undesired people”, contains inscribed in it an element of resistance to that very regime. If one looks closely at the letters that compose the message “Arbeit macht frei” (Fig. 4), it becomes obvious that the letter “B” is inverted. According to the website of the memorial and museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, the inscription was made by metalworkers labouring under the supervision of Jan Liwacz (1898–1980), a prisoner and master blacksmith. The workers deliberately turned the letter upside down “as a camouflaged act of disobedience”, which apparently went unnoticed by the camp officials (<<http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/arbeit-macht-frei-taken-down-from-the-gate-infamous-inscription-undergoes-conservation,123.html>> (accessed 29 July 2019)). The infamous sign was further subverted in a saying that became popular among the inmates and revealed the lie promoted by the inscription already mocked by the very arrangement of its letters: “Arbeit macht frei (Work sets you free) durch Krematorium Nummer drei (through crematory number three)” (<<https://krakowdirect.com/arbeit-macht-frei-facts-auschwitz-gate/>>>).

<sup>10</sup> Similar, although more direct, examples of the employment of signifiers that allude to the concentration camp and the Nazi regime can be found in later works such as Browne’s *Bear Goes to Town* (1982), in which police officers wear skulls on their caps and their bodies resemble swastikas, and Maurice Sendak and Tony Kushner’s *Brundibar* (2003), where signifiers such as the Star of David represented on yellow badges and armbands attest to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany, while a bushy moustache worn by the villain implies his connection with Adolf Hitler.



(Dehaene and De Cauter 2008: 97). While a heterotopic sanctuary can offer protection from the violence of society and “interrupt the conventional order of public and private space”, a heterotopic concentration camp “is the abject space of total rejection [...] the space where the other, all otherness, is abolished, annihilated (sometimes very literally)” (97–98).



**Fig. 4.** The sign above the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp.<sup>11</sup>  
**Sl. 4.** Natpis iznad ulaza u koncentracijski logor Auschwitz.

Gorey’s garden is thus a juxtaposition of several incompatible spaces: it is an enclosed space initially falsely perceived as an innocuous space, a sanctuary free of charge, which is then quickly transformed and inverted into a bloodthirsty dystopia. While simultaneously incorporating multiple other heterotopias accessed via intertextual links with films and images, the employment of humour acts as a subversive element in each of those spaces and in fact in Gorey’s entire text itself (via the comical couplets and style of illustration). Commenting on such complex interweaving of various places and their functions, Callahan states that a “[h]eterotopia, then, is an interesting concept because it liberates us from the search for singular meaning and encourages us to understand space aesthetically in terms of multiple, overlapping, and contingent dynamics, such as utopia/dystopia/heterotopia” (Callahan 2017: 362). This overlapping of spaces occurs on yet another level: that of the furnishings of Gorey’s Victorian spaces. The rooms and hallways depicted in Gorey’s illustrations are frequently “adorned in ornate furnishings, complex tapestries, wallpapers, and thick, heavy curtains” (Lackner 2015: 11), offering “a vision of not simply richness, but overabundance of pattern” (41). I would also add

<sup>11</sup> Source: <<https://holocaustcenter.jfcs.org/event/fall-2018-jcl/auschwitz-gate/>> (accessed 29 July 2019). The photograph is in public domain.

carpets and rugs with very prominent floral patterns to Lackner's list of furnishings that create a suffocating, almost claustrophobic effect. According to Foucault, "carpets [...] were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space)" (Foucault 1986: 26). Therefore, at the level of a motif, the evil garden invades Gorey's numerous other heterotopic spaces, spreading itself like a visual echo over not only their floors and walls but also the characters' garments. And yet, in part due to the employment of humour, Gorey's evil garden remains ambivalent and shifting, retaining a sinister undercurrent beneath the ironic distance established by the removal of emotional elements which Lackner discovers in Gorey's inversion of the Gothic. Stephen Schiff also notices this mutable quality of Gorey's work, claiming that "his victims are too vacuous to inspire pity and terror, and his tone is too cool to make you wring your hands. The only recourse is to laugh, and you do." However, while recognising that "[f]or Gorey, existential dread isn't the subtext, it's the punch line", Schiff simultaneously points out that Gorey's works are not easily classifiable as comedy: "The books are as appallingly funny as if they were parody, but they're not parody, exactly, because in some way they also seem absolutely true; their chill is authentic" (Schiff, 2001: 145, qtd. in Horne 2016: 12). The same is true of *The Evil Garden*, whose apparent simplistic parody hides the chill Schiff writes about. The light-heartedness of this story depicting a family visiting a garden is undermined by the family members' deaths, which is simultaneously subverted by the translator's introduction and the light verse of the rhyming couplets, and the tone of the entire book becomes further complicated by the implied signifiers of a concentration camp. Gorey's text thus enacts a protean space of an ambivalent heterotopia, a space "interrogat[ing] the conventional definitions of children's fiction based on simplicity, stability, and optimism" (Nikolajeva 2005: 140), repeatedly pulling the (heterotopic) rug from under the reader's feet.

## Conclusion

Gorey's works always resist easy interpretations, and this effect rests on the continually maintained tension between the contrasting humorous tonality and the set dressings and related signifiers borrowed from other literary traditions, most prominently the Gothic genre. This tension complicates the reader's experience, undermining attempts to situate Gorey's works neatly in any one of those traditions, and yet curiously retaining the authentic Gothic chill recognised by Schiff. As Gorey's readers stumble through his narrative labyrinths in search of the text's identity and plot, the variegated spaces they encounter are brought into disturbing contact, overlapped and compressed within heterotopias. As illustrated in the example of *The Evil Garden*, Gorey's heterotopic spaces summon other heterotopias, effectively multiplying the places they contain and adding to the complexity of their juxtapositions. *The Evil Garden* evokes the utopian Biblical Garden of Eden, but quickly inverts it through the systematic destruction of its visitors and the intertextual echoing of Méryon's dystopic vision of Paris and the heterotopic space of the concentration camp. The reader's and the

characters' expectation of entering a heterotopia of compensation is thus undermined by a darkly comedic vision of the process of the garden's consumption of its own observers and participants. Although it should function as a perfectly ordered place, the garden is dominated by its surprisingly sinister undercurrent, with the expected order of the garden both devolving into chaotic and all-consuming disorder of the flora and fauna and at the same time implying the order of the concentration camp that serves to facilitate annihilation. However, a deeper, darkly humorous current simultaneously acts as a subversive element that prevents any of the Gothic signifiers from overwhelming the reader, functioning both at the level of the form (via the humorous introduction by a fictional translator, the rhyming couplets, and the illustrations) and the level of intertextual links. The text is therefore in constant flux and functions as a heterotopia of crisis in itself, its identity never allowed to settle permanently on one tonality or one genre structure. Furthermore, the heterotopic garden invades Gorey's other works at the level of the motif, occurring as a pattern that blooms in great profusion on the carpets and drapery of the Victorian rooms pervading Gorey's books. Like the aforementioned piece of paper found lying on the ground in many of his works, the garden comes to function as yet another of Gorey's metafictional calling cards. It is an unexpectedly mobile heterotopia, an "other" space that moves beyond the confines of *The Evil Garden* and into Gorey's other books (e.g. *The Hapless Child* [1961], *The West Wing* [1963], *The Pious Infant* [1966], or *The Gilded Bat* [1966], but perhaps most prominently on the elaborate covers of the *Amphigorey* collections), evoking the twisting passages of its allusions and provoking the readers into going deeper into the narrative labyrinth in search of answers to the problem of discovering a stable identity for the text and its spaces, while simultaneously mocking such attempts: "Fall down, or scream, or rush about – / There is no way of getting out".

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**Nikola Novaković**

Zdravstveno veleučilište Zagreb, Hrvatska

### **Smijeh drugih mjesta: humor i heterotopije u djelima Edwarda Goreyja**

Oslanjajući se na ideje Michela Foucaulta o heterotopijama, izložene u njegovu eseju „O drugim prostorima“ iz 1967., rad analizira interakciju humora i prostora u djelima Edwarda Goreyja, s posebnim naglaskom na tekst *The Evil Garden* [Zli vrt] iz 1966. Foucaultova teorija o heterotopijama upotrebljava se kako bi se ponudilo razumijevanje Goreyjeva spoja sumornih mjesta i jezivih priča s njegovim karakterističnim humorom te istražilo što nam Goreyjeve heterotopije mogu reći o problemu kategorizacije Goreyja kao autora dječje književnosti. U čitanju *Zloga vrta* pokazuje se kako Goreyjeve uznemirujuće heterotopije postižu hibridnost prostora, žanrova, tonaliteta i čitateljskih uloga da bi se potaknula polivalentna čitanja. Gorey se poigrava supostavljanjem raznolikih heterotopija, destabilizirajući čitateljev položaj ponavljanjem motiva i intertekstualnih aluzija, no sastavnica koja je uvijek prisutna u svim tim “drugim” mjestima jest humor. Goreyjev mračni humor izvire upravo na raskršću raznih prostora koji se sudaraju u heterotopijama kako bi ostvario svoju subverzivnu ulogu.

**Ključne riječi:** dječja književnost, Foucault, Gorey, heterotopija, humor, hibridnost, intertekstualnost