

Parisa Changizi
University of Ostrava, Czechia

2020, Vol. 17 (2), 117-136(284)
revije.ff.uni-lj.si/elope
<https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.17.2.117-136>
UDC: 821.111.09-313.2Le Guin U.K.

“Permanent Revolution” to Effect an Ever-Evasive (Ecological) Utopia in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyse Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* from an ecological perspective. In her ecologically conscious story, Le Guin explores the (ironic) manifestation and repercussions of humanity’s environmental fear, the virtues and ills of an ever-evasive ecological utopian society that is paradoxically informed by eco-friendly and ecophobic propensities in its pursuit of freedom through the vigorous practice of the art of dispossession, and the possibility of transcending the hyper-separated categories of difference that include the human/non-human dichotomy. What Le Guin seeks in her fictional effort above all is a permanent revolution advocating a never-ending diligent and earnest endeavour to effect an improved, preferable society with a revised awareness of its relations to its human and non-human Others, free from the ethic of exploitation rather than a promotion of an already achieved perfect state.

Keywords: ecophobia, dispossession, freedom, biocolonisation, human/non-human dichotomy, ecological utopia

Učinek »stalne revolucije« na izmuzljivo (ekološko) utopijo v romanu Ursule K. Le Guin *Mož praznih rok*

POVZETEK

V članku analiziram roman *Mož praznih rok* Ursule Le Guin z vidika ekologije. V tej ekološko ozavešeni zgodbi avtorica raziskuje (ironično) udejanjanje in posledice okolijskih strahov človeštva, vrline in slabosti izmuzljive ekološke utopične družbe, ki se v iskanju svobode na način razlastninjenja in možnostjo preseganja vseh dihotomij (tudi človeško/nečloveško) paradoksalno napaja tako iz ekologiji prijaznih, kot tudi iz ekofobičnih praks. Skozi pripoved Ursula Le Guin zasleduje zlasti možnost stalne revolucije, ki se zavzema za nenehno tvorno in predano prizadevanje za boljše, ustreznejšo družbo na način spreminjanja odnosov do človeških in nečloveških Drugih z zavračanjem etike izkoriščanja, in ne s promocijo že obstoječega stanja popolnosti.

Gljučne besede: ekofobija, razlastninjenje, svoboda, biokolonizacija, dihotomija človeško/nečloveško, ekološka utopija

1 Lord, We Know What We Are, But Know Not What We May Be: Introduction

Ursula Le Guin was writing at a time when the modern environmental movement was beginning to find its way onto the American scene. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* in 1968, and Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* in 1971. The First Earth Day took place in 1970, and the First World Environmental Summit held by the UN in 1972. Furthermore, Le Guin's writing career coincided with "the period of United States colonial expansion – into Vietnam, into Central America, into space, and out to the moon" (Bassnett 1991, 52). She was also writing in the middle of the Cold War, and that is probably why her voluntarily isolated near-utopian society, with its constant references to metaphorical and concrete walls, is uneasily reminiscent of East European communist countries (Klarer 1992, 116). Le Guin, in effect, hauls the very earthly conundrums of humanity and our universe as we know it, ecology and politics being at the forefront, to be played out on the stage of her bizarre, and a shade exaggerated alternate worlds. Then she moves to weave the ecological, feminist and pacifist stances of the time coupled with her philosophical and Taoist sensibilities into the fabric of her story. The seemingly alien environments and peoples of her planets prove to be familiarly decipherable. As Lem puts it in his *Solaris* (1961, 72),

[w]e don't want to conquer the cosmos, we simply want to extend the boundaries of the Earth to the frontiers of the cosmos. For us, such and such a planet is as arid as the Sahara, another as frozen as the North Pole, yet another as lush as the Amazon basin. . . . We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors.

Le Guin holds up a mirror by imagining forward and onto her exotic, estranging environments to critique the reality of the world as she sees it. In her ecologically conscious story, Le Guin sets out to explore the (ironic) manifestation and repercussions of humanity's environmental fear, the virtues and ills of an ever-evasive ecological utopian society that is paradoxically informed by eco-friendly and ecophobic propensities in its pursuit of freedom through the vigorous practice of the art of dispossession, and the possibility of transcending the hyper-separated categories of difference that include the human/non-human dichotomy.

The Dispossessed (1974), on the surface, is the same old story of "the lone individual succeeding against the odds" (Jose 1991, 189). However, upon closer inspection it becomes a nakedly candid thought-experiment in contemplation of an austere anarchism within the context of extreme ecological scarcity. The story takes place on two neighbouring planets, Anarres and Urras, with occasional references to other worlds. On one hand, the rich and abundant Urras closely resembles our Earth through its three societies: the exploitatively capitalist and hierarchical A-Io with suffering subordinate classes, the centralised authoritarian socialist Thu, and the Third World, post-colonial Benbili. On the other hand, Anarres is a "barren world, a world of distances, silences, desolations" (Le Guin 2002, 300) inhabited by the (self-)exiled anarchists from Urras. Anarresti are followers of a revolutionary female philosopher named Laia Odo who never set foot on the desert planet. The collective survival of the inhabitants is maintained by the Production and Distribution Coordination (PDC) that controls all the

natural resources, even though Anarres lacks any central government, and an inescapable social conscience that mandates a life of austere sacrifice and deprivation. The novel is built around Shevek, a brilliant Anarresti physicist, who dares challenge the rigid status quo of his society with the noble aspiration of pulling down walls through completion of his Theory that will make instantaneous communication possible. He leaves the arid Anarres for the lavish Urras in the hope of finding more tolerance. However, much to his chagrin, he finds himself being used as a pawn in dangerous Urassti political games. Ultimately, Shevek manages to break free and seek asylum from the burnt-out Terra, Earth in the future. With the help of Keng, the Terran Ambassador, he secures universal and equal access to his Theory for all nine Known Worlds. Upon completion of his mission, he returns home to keep fighting the good fight, reinvigorating the true revolutionary spirit of Odonian philosophy that seeks and values freedom above all.

2 Human Judges Can Show Mercy. But Against the Laws of Nature, There Is No Appeal: Tragic Ecophobic Resistance

A sense of place and the natural world around us is an integral part of our experience on planet Earth. As Carroll (2004, 157–58) contends,

[t]hroughout most of our evolutionary history an alert attentiveness to the natural world would have been crucial to our survival, and the latent emotional responsiveness that attends this adaptive function has not disappeared with the advent of controlled climates and supermarket foods. Responsiveness to the sense of place is an elemental component of the evolved human psyche.

In this “alert attentiveness,” we have come to develop two contradictory views of nature: It can be both friend and foe at the same time. Biophilia, “the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (Kellert and Wilson 1993, 31), defines the positive side of our relationship with the environment. However, we also feel a deep-rooted hostility toward the natural world as our existence is constantly threatened by it. Ecophobia, as a recognisable discourse and one of the hallmarks of human progress, is “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism” (Estok 2009, 208). Simon Estok (2009, 210) believes that ecophobia more than anything is about control, power, and survival:

Human history is a history of controlling the natural environment, of taking rocks and making them tools or weapons to modify or to kill parts of the natural environment, of building shelters to protect us from weather and predators, of maintaining personal hygiene to protect ourselves from diseases and parasites that can kill us.

As Estok explains in his “Tracking Ecophobia”, our ecophobia “must be seen as an adaptive strategy” (2015, 31) ensuring our survival in a decidedly antagonistic world. However, imagining and marketing the “badness” in nature, or rather “writing ecophobia”, is a complex affair that has inevitably legitimised our hostile and destructive treatment of the natural world. Imagine Elizabethans who were perfectly familiar with life-threatening problems such as “grain shortages, bad harvests, cold weather, and profound storms” (Estok 2009, 209), and

thus it becomes clear how a dramatist like Shakespeare could have easily written about an unhoused, alienated yet sympathetic king who is victimised by harsh weather in *King Lear*. Analogously, for a modern audience who is familiar with environmental issues such as

polar ice sheets breaking off, global warming, and [Hurricane] Katrina, we may easily see how our media daily writes nature as a hostile opponent who is responding angrily to our incursions and actions, an opponent to be feared and, with any luck, controlled. (Estok 2009, 210)

Le Guin explores this complex human/Earth relationship in the context of an imaginary society on an imaginary planet. For her utopian society, she does not conjure up a highly advanced economy set in the most abundant of environments in which human beings unburdened from the struggle for their basic needs are left to pursue the highest forms of human flourishing. Instead, she imagines a people that have managed to maintain an acceptable level of liberty and equality regardless of great ecological scarcity. In *The Dispossessed*, those who live in Le Guin's utopia do so under conditions of extreme deprivation in a desert-like environment: "This was a dry world. Dry, pale, inimical" (Le Guin 2002, 100). This could be seen as a response to the years 1972 and 1973, that signalled the fading of the age of abundance enjoyed in the first two decades after the end of WWII. The new scarcity mentality was probably a child begotten of America's defeat in Vietnam, the oil crisis, and the publication of the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* (1972) (Ramírez 2015, 86). Le Guin herself, in an interview (Slaughter 1998, 38), avers that the reason for this setting is that she believes less is more when it comes to her story:

[W]hen you're doing a novel there's an awful lot of stuff in it, a lot of information to be given. It simplifies life to put it in the desert. If I had had to describe all the different kinds of plants in a rainforest planet, the novel would have just crawled out of the living room. A desert really can simplify things for the writer – large open spaces with people standing around in them.

The description of Abbenay, the centre of Anarres, showcases this idea of utmost clarity in simplicity: "There was a vividness to things, a hardness of edge and corner, a clarity. Everything stood out separate, itself" (Le Guin 2002, 83). Anarresti ideology even exalts this austerity as a form of honest purification from the excesses of life: "Abbenay was poisonless: a bare city, bright, the colors light and hard, the air pure. It was quiet. You could see it all, laid out as plain as spilt salt. Nothing was hidden" (Le Guin 2002, 84). However, this elucidating simplicity, or rather extreme ecological scarcity, could also show one of humanity's most relentless fears: a cold, snowy "dead" place is truly the stuff of nightmares (Le Guin 2002, 128). The aridity and hostility of the environment of this near-utopian society can be seen as a projection of humanity's environmental fear that in a reversal of wish fulfilment has become the object of desire. The heroic endeavour for the Anarresti is to rebel against the very abundance they so desperately crave, and survive regardless of the abject poverty of their environment. However, the catch is that they can run all they want but can never hide from the reality of human existence and its inescapable dependency on its environment. This dependency, of course, challenges the central Anarresti ideal of freedom.

What the anarchists crave above all is absolute freedom, and this freedom, they believe, can be achieved if only they genuinely practice the art of dispossession. That is why, in effect, they dispossess themselves of the abundance of Urras and embrace the paucity of Anarres. Here the Anarresti have all the chances they need to exercise their heroic defiance against complete dependency on an environment that offers nothing more than the absolute bare minimum. Green is definitely not a colour native to Anarres (Le Guin 2002, 82). There is “little running water”, and the “scenic” areas are rather limited (Le Guin 2002, 148). Strict rationing, mandatory labour drafts, and threat of famine are part and parcel of life on this desert planet (Le Guin 2002, 205, 211). During hard times, people who are sick or too weak to work get half of already anaemic rations (Le Guin 2002, 257). Anarresti are sometimes forced to “recycle urine” due to droughts and water scarcity (Le Guin 2002, 196). And of course, “thirst and hunger”, in such circumstances, always outrank “cleanliness” (Le Guin 2002, 196). The conditions are so harsh and dreadful that diseased, fatigued bodies are not seen as aberrations from the norm: “He [Shevek] did not consider himself ill; after the four years of famine everyone was so used to the effects of hardship and malnutrition that they took them as the norm” (Le Guin 2002, 266). All these deprivations stand in sharp contrast to the abundance of Urras, a planet they wilfully abandoned to fashion themselves into free agents. When on Urras, Shevek is struck by the most beautiful view he has ever laid eyes on:

The tenderness and vitality of the colors, the mixture of rectilinear human design and powerful, proliferate natural contours, the variety and harmony of the elements, gave an impression of complex wholeness such as he had never seen, except, perhaps, foreshadowed on a small scale in certain serene and thoughtful human faces. (Le Guin 2002, 56)

In comparison, any scene from Anarres would fall short: Anarres is “barren, acrid, and inchoate” (Le Guin 2002, 57). The deserts of Southwest Anarres might be beautiful in their own right but they are, at the same time, “hostile, and timeless” (Le Guin 2002, 57). In effect, Anarresti cannot even make up for what they lack in land by rigorous labour: “Even where men farmed Anarres most closely, their landscape was like a crude sketch in yellow chalk compared with this fulfilled magnificence of life, rich in the sense of history and of seasons to come, inexhaustible” (Le Guin 2002, 57). It is only after spending some time on Urras that the dispossessed Shevek begins to read and more importantly fully appreciate, with great pleasure, the works of great Ioti poets when they speak of “flowers, and birds flying, and the colors of forests in autumn” (Le Guin 2002, 112). It is on Urras that Shevek, the man from a deprived environment, walks “in rain” as the Ioti walk “in sunshine, with enjoyment” (Le Guin 2002, 112). He is probably one of the few people on Urras who can fully appreciate the blessings of that world.

Regardless of all these hardships, the Anarresti have made an arguably fragile peace with their “crude sketch” and among themselves. The Odonian way of life clearly dictates against any form of possession, material or human. This idea is reinforced all the more by the inimicality of the environment that in any case forcibly and drastically revises the sense of entitlement and the human desire to possess. Such principles are instilled in people from a very early age. At the nursery, the matron’s response to a “knobby baby” who does not want to share

his warm spot, a square of yellow sunlight from a window, with a “fat infant” is that here “[n]othing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it” (Le Guin 2002, 26). The knobby baby, we find out, is Shevek, and this is the very first description we get of the protagonist of the story (Le Guin 2002, 26). In Pravic, the language spoken on Anarres, the “singular forms of the possessive pronoun [...] were used mostly for emphasis; idiom avoided them. Little children might say ‘my mother,’ but very soon they learned to say ‘the mother’” (Le Guin 2002, 50). “Money” and “buy” are foreign Iotic words spoken on Urras (Le Guin 2002, 51). Pravic also lacks any “proprietary idioms for the sexual act” regardless of the fact that it seems people can still experience a sense of belonging and ownership in their partnerships (Le Guin 2002, 47). This idea of dispossession is so potent and central to the Anarresti mindset that people even disdain pair-bonding and mother-child attachment. Vokep, an agricultural chemist travelling to Abbenay whom Shevek meets, argues that as women think they own you, no “woman can be an Odonian” (although Odo herself was a woman). He believes that for “most women, their only relationship to a man is *having*. Either owning or being owned” (Le Guin 2002, 46). He basically sees “half of human race” as proprietarians: “What a man wants is freedom. What a woman wants is property. She’ll only let you go if she can trade you for something else” (Le Guin 2002, 46). Shevek even wonders if Beshun, his former partner, had the intention to own him as when he was leaving she was crying and pleading with him not to go. Nevertheless, he concludes, “[s]he had not owned him. His own body had, in its first outburst of adult sexual passion, possessed him indeed – and her” (Le Guin 2002, 47). Then Vokep goes as far as blaming motherhood for female inadequacy in matters of anarchism: “Having babies. Makes ’em proprietarians. They won’t let go” (Le Guin 2002, 47). Similar to Vokep, Shevek himself once pedantically and harshly declares, “[l]ife partnerships is really against the Odonian ethic” (Le Guin 2002, 44). However, he ends up forming such a partnership with Takver, the mother of his two children, which proves to be quite fulfilling after all.

Closely entangled with this core ideal of dispossession is the disciplined abjuration of excess. Any form of excess, or “excrement” in Odo’s words, is considered to be poisonous (Le Guin 2002, 84). That is probably why Shevek very quickly notices the profligate ways of non-Anarresti while he is on a ship to Urras. He is surprised to find out they “burn paper”, or that they would just throw the cheap pyjamas away instead of cleaning them: “‘It costs less,’ Shevek repeated meditatively. He said the words the way a paleontologist looks at a fossil, the fossil that dates a whole stratum” (Le Guin 2002, 14). The Anarresti even refuse to enjoy the comfort they can get easily from the “green” energy they harvest:

No heat was furnished when the outside temperature went above 55 degrees Fahrenheit. It was not that Abbenay was short of power, not with her wind turbines and the earth temperature-differential generators used for heating; but the principle of organic economy was too essential to the functioning of the society not to affect ethics and aesthetics profoundly. (Le Guin 2002, 84)

As Rulag, Shevek’s mother, argues, the “self-sacrifice impulse” which might find its apotheosis in “people in the medical arts” does not necessarily lead to “maximum efficiency” (Le Guin 2002, 102). When Shevek expectantly enters a park in Abbenay where they have

the “alien trees” from Urras to “experience the greenness of those multitudinous leaves”, he feels ambivalent toward the ostensible wastefulness of the extravagant foliage: “Such trees couldn’t thrive without a rich soil, constant watering, much care. He disapproved of their lavishness, their thriftlessness” (Le Guin 2002, 85). Even “privacy”, except for sexual activity, is considered to be just another kind of excess, and therefore “not functional”: Shevek’s “first reaction to being put in a private room [to do his physics research], then, was half disapproval and half shame” (Le Guin 2002, 94). Similarly, Shevek feels guilty when he takes the extra desserts he likes at the Institute refectory: “And his conscience, his organic-societal conscience, got indigestion. Didn’t everybody at every refectory, from Abbenay to Uttermost, get the same, share and share alike? [...] He stopped taking dessert at the refectory” (Le Guin 2002, 94–95). In line with Vokep’s twisted logic, Rulag believes that being “proud” of her child is not only “strange” but “[u]nreasonable or even “[p]roportarian” (Le Guin 2002, 104). Takver also thinks that she has spoiled her child by breastfeeding her until she was three, when there was nothing good which she could wean her onto (Le Guin 2002, 263). Takver is, in fact, accused of being “proportarian” when she refuses to put her child in nursery full time (Le Guin 2002, 263). Her “maternal ambitions and anxieties” are seen as a hindrance to her robust common sense: “This was not natural to her; neither competitiveness nor protectiveness was a strong motive in Anarresti life” (Le Guin 2002, 268). There is also “considerable feeling against” personal communication at a distance, because it smacks “of privatism, of egoizing” (Le Guin 2002, 209).

As all these instances show, for a society whose core principle is to eschew excess, they certainly practice what they believe excessively. Shevek even ends up perversely glorifying “famine” as, he believes, it would lead to a psychic ablation:

Now (fed) it appeared to him that the drought might after all be of service to the social organism. The priorities were becoming clear again. Weaknesses, soft spots, sick spots would be scoured out, sluggish organs restored to full function, the fat would be trimmed off the body politic. (Le Guin 2002, 217)

Clearly, this anarchist society borders on fetishising scarcity, as austerity has been sold to the Anarresti as a celebrated form of purification because a life of minimalistic simplicity, highly regulated consumption of natural resources, and vigorous environmental sacrifice is the only plausible way they can survive on Anarres: “What is idealistic about social cooperation, mutual aid,” Shevek wonders, “when it is the only means of staying alive?” (Le Guin 2002, 114). Shevek at first cannot bring himself to fully accept and enjoy the abundance and vitality he encounters on Urras, in contrast to the “utter silence of Anarres” where no bird sings:

And he did feel at home. He could not help it. The whole world, the softness of the air, the fall of sunlight across the hills, the very pull of the heavier gravity on his body, asserted to him that this was home indeed, his race’s world; and all its beauty was his birthright. (Le Guin 2002, 66)

However, gradually Shevek begins to get used to the grace and comfort. Although he remains a vegetarian following his failed attempts at eating meat, he becomes a “hearty” eater gaining three or four kilos (Le Guin 2002, 112) while enjoying the “subtleties of flavor” on Urras

(Le Guin 2002, 176). He even becomes accustomed to “the constant use of the possessive pronoun” (Le Guin 2002, 112). Once faced with a glorious heavy snow, Shevek lets go of his pedantic Odonianism for a moment to indulge unreservedly in the abundance:

The extravagance, the sheer quantity, of the storm exhilarated him. He reveled in its excess. It was too white, too cold, silent, and indifferent to be called excremental by the sincerest Odonian; to see it as other than an innocent magnificence would be pettiness of soul. (Le Guin 2002, 162)

Shevek's disobedience reveals the fundamental flaw and paradox of the Anarresti system.

The whole idea of dispossession, as manifested in the literal and wilful abandonment of Urras and then reinforced involuntarily by the harshness of the environment, is to free people from want and need. Towards the end of novel, Shevek curiously comes to tie the Anarresti freedom with the paucity of their environment. Divorced from all the riches of the worlds, i.e. “[e]nough air, enough rain, grass, oceans, food, music, buildings, factories, machines, books, clothes, history”, the Anarresti men and women “possessing nothing, they are free” (Le Guin 2002, 189–90). The anxiety of the inevitable dependency of humanity on a planet for survival and the threat of constant deprivation leads Shevek to adopt an ecophobic attitude that is in effect very much entangled with the assumed centrality of human beings divorced, to a substantial degree, from their environment. What redeems Anarres, in Shevek's mind, is “the splendor of the human spirit”, whose manumission only came about after being put on the ugly, dusty, dry, dull, dreary, and meagre Anarres (Le Guin 2002, 189–90). In his passionate speech to thousands of the poor and downtrodden who have gathered in the Ioti Capitol Square on the day of demonstration against the oppressive regime, Shevek argues that it is in pain, poverty, and hunger that they will find their brotherhood:

We know that there is no help for us but from one another, that no hand will save us if we do not reach out our hand. And the hand that you reach out is empty, as mine is. You have nothing. You possess nothing. You own nothing. You are free. (Le Guin 2002, 247)

For him, brotherhood begins in “shared pain” (Le Guin 2002, 54). He emphatically makes it clear that if they seek Anarres, they must come to it with empty hands: “You must come to it alone, and naked, as the child comes into the world, into his future, without any past, without any property, wholly dependent on other people for his life” (Le Guin 2002, 248). In this, Shevek is not merely pontificating to the crowd, as when his daughter is born he is more than happy that her birth was in the middle of a drought:

I'm glad Sadik was born now. In a hard year, in a hard time, when we need our brotherhood. I'm glad she was born now, and here. I'm glad she's one of us, an Odonian, our daughter and our sister. (Le Guin 2002, 208)

Shevek maintains that suffering (and not love or solidarity) is the condition they live on (Le Guin 2002, 52–53). The whole point of the Odonian principles of “mutual aid” and “brotherhood”, in turn, Shevek argues, is to “*prevent* suffering” (Le Guin 2002, 53). However,

he realises that the system is not perfect. The “social organism” can alleviate pain and suffering by curing diseases and preventing hunger and injustice; however, the fundamental truth of existence cannot be rewritten: “But no society can change the nature of existence. We can’t prevent suffering. This pain and that pain, yes, but not Pain. A society can only relieve social suffering, unnecessary suffering. The rest remains. The root, the reality” (Le Guin 2002, 52). Any attempts to live outside of that reality or to evade it, Shevek avers, will “drive you crazy” (Le Guin 2002, 138). He then gives us a clue as to what the root of this suffering is. “Man’s problem”, he believes, has always been about survival at the level of species, group, or individual, the very thing the natural environment constantly threatens (Le Guin 2002, 188). Therefore, the common factor linking their existence is “the suffering caused by shared environmental conditions” (Pak 2016, 131). In other words, the natural environment is the architect of their shared pain and misery, and their only relief from their ultimate foe is the haven of human solidarity that has its roots in the ideal of dispossession.

However, the prerequisite to ecological emancipation, through cognisance of the root of their shared pain, the practice of perfervid dispossession, and the subsequent embrace of human solidarity, for which Odo’s philosophy implicitly calls, is ecological oppression. They are indeed in a Catch-22 situation. And it is exactly in this vicious cycle that one might find the tragedy of Anarresti’s life. Shevek, in a conversation with his friend Bedap, blames their misery solely on the meagre environment of Anarres, an environment that was supposed to reinforce their freedom:

It’s not our society that frustrates individual creativity. It’s the poverty of Anarres. This planet wasn’t meant to support civilization. If we let one another down, if we don’t give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us. Human solidarity is our only resource. (Le Guin 2002, 139)

While talking to Takver, Shevek discloses that he is grappling with sterility in his heart and mind, linking it to the impotence of their environment:

About the time sex began to go sour on me, so did the work. Increasingly. Three years without getting anywhere. Sterility. Sterility on all sides. As far as the eye can see the infertile desert lies in the pitiless glare of the merciless sun, a lifeless, trackless, feckless, fuckless waste strewn with the bones of luckless wayfarers... (Le Guin 2002, 150)

On the “vital, magnificent, inexhaustible world” of Urras (Le Guin 2002, 109), Shevek finds himself in a paradise where he has complete leisure to focus on his work. However, later on, he comes to feel “dry and arid, like a desert plant, in this beautiful oasis” (Le Guin 2002, 108–9). This disappointing turn of events is blamed once again on the barren landscape of Anarres, although he is no longer in that environment: “Life on Anarres had sealed him, closed off his soul; the waters of life welled all around him, and yet he could not drink” (Le Guin 2002, 109). If exuberance is indeed “the essential quality of life” (Le Guin 2002, 155), then, ironically for a dispossession-seeking Anarresti, a sense of hostility toward the paucity of environment on Anarres is warranted. As Shevek writes to Takver when in Abbenay, “it is the climate here that makes misery” (Le Guin 2002, 209) and nothing else. When faced with the Urrasti practice of drinking to escape the sorrows of the world for a night, Shevek resignedly

declares that the woes of their world of nothing but limitation are just “inescapable”, with or without alcohol (Le Guin 2002, 68). Therefore, although the Anarresti lead environmentally-conscious lives, the sense of ecophobic Otherness still lingers as nature remains the main target of their frustration.

3 But No Perfection Is So Absolute, That Some Impurity Doth Not Pollute: Trouble in the Edenic Paradise

The Council of World Governments decided in the year 771 to give “the Moon to the International Society of Odonians – buying them off with a world, before they fatally undermined the authority of law and national sovereignty on Urras” (Le Guin 2002, 80). The immigration of the Odonians to Anarres is reminiscent of that of the Europeans to colonial America, adding a peculiarly American character to the novel. When the Settlers come to Anarres there is even an indigenous population, i.e. the miners, who consequently get at least partially misplaced. Seemingly free from any colonial guilt, Gimar, a woman who grew up in Southrising, where the miners are, explains: “Some of them stayed and joined the solidarity. Goldminers, tinminers” (Le Guin 2002, 42). “They still have some feast days and songs of their own,” Gimar continues (Le Guin 2002, 42), though the Settlers eventually manage to institute and impose their own traditions and festivals (Le Guin 2002, 194). Similar to the Pilgrims, the anarchist rebels come to Anarres with dreams of establishing their own free society in paradise. However, Le Guin departs from the promise of “Edenic Possibilities” as the central facet of the concept of the American Dream in terms of the environment. The elaborate scheme of “dispossession” taken to its extreme in relation to the environment proves to be self-defeating, after all. Odo’s lofty dreams of decentralisation and connected communities through communication and transportation free from capital, establishment, the self-perpetuating machinery of bureaucracy, and the dominance-drive of individuals are hindered by the not-so-generous ground of Anarres: “On arid Anarres, the communities had to scatter widely in search of resources, and few of them could be self-supporting, no matter how they cut back their notions of what is needed for support” (Le Guin 2002, 81). These plans were devised by a woman who after all had never set foot on this barren world: “[S]he [Odo] had lived, and died, and was buried, in the shadow of green-leaved trees, in unimaginable cities, among people speaking unknown languages, on another world. Odo was an alien: an exile” (Le Guin 2002, 86). Therefore, it seems that Le Guin’s ambition with this environment is of another kind. She envisions neither the collapse of a civilisation due to violent conflicts over scarce resources, nor the burgeoning of a totalitarian yet sustainable form of government in quest of a perfect state at the time of environmental scarcity. She definitely does not set out to scare people into a state of revised awareness. Instead, she maps out her ambiguous utopia of a fairly thriving people in environmental *hell*. What she faithfully does is to translate the environmentally conscious practice of frugality under the influence of the environmental movement into the widely practiced governing norms of her near-utopic society: “Man fitted himself with care and risk into this narrow ecology. If he fished, but not too greedily, and if he cultivated, using mainly organic wastes for fertilizer, he could fit in” (Le Guin 2002, 155). In this sense, the flawed, antagonistic place becomes ironically the *locus amoenus*, the new Eden, as it engenders all the more the sense of rigorous

cooperation, compassion and solidarity, and advocates widespread eco-friendly practices in virtually every aspect of life.

However, this is not to say that everyone on Anarres is motivated by such a stellar eco-centric understanding of human/nature relationship. As already partly discussed, many Anarresti have come to accept the frugality of their existence only as a perfunctory obligation in the absence of any better choice, as every principal of their society and its supportive logic is built around the environmental paucity of their planet. Such a careful relationship, one might suspect, may not have been possible on a more munificent planet. More than anything else, ironically, the lean environment of Anarres begins to gnaw at the very freedom it first offered the rebellious exiles. Internalising Odo's philosophy of austerity in every minute aspect of life, and PDC's management of all natural resources on Anarres on the one hand provides "a precarious community with the ideological concepts and the material resources necessary for ecological emancipation" (Nadir 2010, 33). However, on the other hand, these very forces at the same time "obstruct freedom because people, their aspirations, and their habits must be managed according to nature's limits" (Nadir 2010, 33). Shevek corrects Chifoilisk, the Thuvian physicist, who describes him as a man from a "little commune of starving idealists" up in the sky: "Chifoilisk, there aren't many idealists left on Anarres, I assure you. The Settlers were idealists, yes, to leave this world for our deserts. But that was seven generations ago! Our society is practical" (Le Guin 2002, 113). He even goes on to revise this statement to accentuate their noticeable departure from their initial plans due to ecological necessities: "Maybe too practical, too much concerned with survival only" (Le Guin 2002, 113–14). In this way the ecological becomes entangled with the social as the environmental priorities can override those dissenting voices, like that of Shevek, which can threaten the social order, or in other words, the greater good.

Therefore, Le Guin does not shy away from launching an even-handed critique of the anarchist society trapped in their ironic environmentally-hellish Eden. Her dissenting characters on the near-utopian Anarres set out to "question what was not questioned" in their society (Le Guin 2002, 40). Her ultimate vision of *détente* does not presume simple solutions and lack of conflict. Rather her goal "requires resistance and rebellion, political force and personal risk to achieve it" (Moylan 2014, 88). Whether successful or not, *The Dispossessed* steadfastly refuses to champion one way of life over another in the dichotomy of the two sister planets. Shevek as the central character of the story best embodies this contradictory state, as he "has a foot on both planets, and [...] indeed traverses the ethical as well as the geographical distance between them" (Burns 2008, 261). Tirin, Shevek's childhood eccentric friend, is one of the first characters who dares question the perfection of environmentally-deprived Anarres, and consequently sow the seeds of doubt in Shevek's mind. Tirin has serious reservations about the Anarresti's aggressive propaganda against Urras: "If it [Urras] was that bad when the Settlers left, how has it kept on going for a hundred and fifty years?" (Le Guin 2002, 39). He even goes as far as suggesting that they are taught to dysfunctionally "hate" Urras, because if they knew what it was really like then some of them would like at least some aspects of that world: "[W]hat PDC wants to prevent is not just some of them [Urrasti] coming here, but some of us wanting to go there [Urras]" (Le Guin 2002, 39). Interestingly, when Shevek goes to Urras, impressed by the lavish beauty and fecundity of the environment, he thinks to himself that "[t]his is what a world is

supposed to look like” (Le Guin 2002, 57). He is so impressed by the “grace and bounty” that later on he comes to “love Urras”, though he realises that there is no point to his “yearning love” as he is not part of Urrasti world (Le Guin 2002, 76).

Another instrumental dissenter is the character of Bedap, one of Shevek’s closest childhood friends (and later lover). Although Shevek severely disapproves of the “intellectual nuchnibi who had not worked on a regular posting for years”, comprising of Bedap and his “erratic and disaffected lot”, he takes curious pleasure from “their independence of mind” and “autonomy of conscience” (Le Guin 2002, 145). Bedap manages to effectively destabilise the walls of Shevek’s “hard puritanical conscience” (Le Guin 2002, 145). Public opinion, Bedap contends, is “the power structure he’s part of, and knows how to use. The unadmitted, inadmissible government that rules the Odonian society by stifling the individual mind” (Le Guin 2002, 138). He criticises the abusive call-out culture of Anarres that stifles people’s freedom of speech. “Ecopolitical correctness”, stemming not from “the state apparatus but from conformist tendencies”, Mathisen avers, is the “greatest menace to individual freedom” in this green society (2001, 75). According to Bedap, Tirin wrote a play that would seem “anti-Odonian” to only “stupid” people (Le Guin 2002, 141). Consequently, he received a severe “[p]ublic reprimand” that eventually drove him over the edge: “Everybody comes to your syndicate meeting and tells you off. It used to be how they cut a bossy gang foreman or manager down to size. Now they only use it to tell an individual to stop thinking for himself” (Le Guin 2002, 141–42). Furthermore, Bedap argues that the PDC basically has evolved into “an archistic bureaucracy” (Le Guin 2002, 139). Thinking for yourself, he contends, is not always easy. On the other hand, finding and settling in a “nice safe hierarchy” where you do not need to “risk approval” would seem much less demanding to many: “It’s always easiest to let yourself be governed” (Le Guin 2002, 140). Bedap argues that “the will to dominance is as central in human beings as the impulse to mutual aid is, and has to be trained in each individual, in each new generation” (Le Guin 2002, 140). He continues by condemning the educational system that has become anti-Odonian in spirit: “Nobody’s born an Odonian any more than he’s born civilized! But we’ve forgotten that. We don’t educate for freedom. Education, the most important activity of the social organism, has become rigid, moralistic, authoritarian. Kids learn to parrot Odo’s words as if they were laws – the ultimate blasphemy!” (Le Guin 2002, 140). A static, ossified utopia may not be far from metamorphosing into a full-fledged dogmatic dystopia. This dynamicity is not a given, and must be perpetually pursued by individual members. Bedap quite eloquently dissects the “spiritual suffering” of the people for Shevek:

And I speak of spiritual suffering! Of people seeing their talent, their work, their lives wasted. Of good minds submitting to stupid ones. Of strength and courage strangled by envy, greed for power, fear of change. Change is freedom, change is life – is anything more basic to Odonian thought than that? (Le Guin 2002, 139)

The malaise of his society is precisely the dereliction of the spirit of change: “But nothing changes anymore! Our society is sick. You know it. You’re suffering its sickness. Its suicidal sickness!” (Le Guin 2002, 139). A revolutionary society, properly conceived, is permanently revolutionary; it is and it will forever be “an ongoing process” (Le Guin 2002, 147).

The point Bedap makes regarding the social conscience, its infringement upon people's freedoms and individuality, and the fear of change speak to the core of the story and its central rebellion:

We've let cooperation become obedience. On Urras they have government by the minority. Here we have government by the majority. But it is government! The social conscience isn't a living thing anymore, but a machine, a power machine, controlled by bureaucrats! (Le Guin 2002, 139–40)

Of course, more than Tirin or Bedap, it is Shevek who stands to melt the ice around the frozen state of their utopian society; however, he is not unwaveringly determined in his cause from the onset. As Burns (2005, 207) contends, Shevek is

an erstwhile 'tragic' hero, who is placed by Le Guin in a situation where he is confronted by two conflicting moral duties, one as a citizen of Anarres to uphold the values of his own society, the other as a scientist and citizen of the world to pursue 'the truth' come what may for the benefit of all human kind.

On deprived Anarres, there is always an emergency that would override every other concern as Sabul, the older, jealous rival of Shevek, berates the latter during the time of the drought, stating "[t]his is a bad time for pure science, for the intellectual" (Le Guin 2002, 218). In a place where everything should be "geared to practicality", the "abstruse, irrelevant" research of Shevek has a whiff of "disaffection, a degree of privatism, of nonaltruism", Sabul rationalises (Le Guin 2002, 220). When Shevek tries to justify the value of his research, he inevitably seeks to prove that temporal physics is "a centrally functional activity" (Le Guin 2002, 220). In this way, control and censorship are openly and hypocritically practiced and justified due to ecological necessities. An incomplete and heavily edited version of *Principles of Simultaneity* is printed in Abbenay with Sabul and Shevek as "joint authors" (Le Guin 2002, 200). Commenting on the manipulation of Shevek's work by Sabul, Dr Chifoilisk asserts, "[h]uman nature is human nature" everywhere (Le Guin 2002, 59–60). Sabul tells Shevek that he is not to share the Urrasti books written in Iotic as they are not "for general consumption" (Le Guin 2002, 89). Upon scrutiny, Shevek concludes that Sabul's attempt to keep the new Urrasti physics "*private*" is just an act of ownership of a property to guarantee that he has "power over his colleagues on Anarres" (Le Guin 2002, 93). To add insult to injury, Shevek later on realises that "[t]he most brilliant insights of Sabul's own works on Sequency were in fact translations from the Iotic, unacknowledged" (Le Guin 2002, 91). Sabul even blocks Shevek from teaching, as the faculty-student Syndicate of Members does not "want a quarrel" with the former (Le Guin 2002, 133). To Shevek, Sabul is "competitive, a dominance-seeker, a profiteer" (Le Guin 2002, 99). Rulag, imparting belated maternal wisdom, tips off his young son that people play "dominance games" at the Institute, and that it takes some experience to figure out how to "outplay" them (Le Guin 2002, 104). At the end of the day, it seems, the only difference between Anarres and Urras is that possessiveness (greed and jealousy) is a "psychopathy on Anarres" whereas it is a "rational behavior on Urras" (Le Guin 2002, 229).

A social conscience and hypocrisy are the reasons why Shevek feels sceptical about his rebellion at first. He fears the violence and hate he could face from his fellow Anarrestis.

Takver is the one who convinces him that the journey to Urras is the right galvanising move they so desperately need. She believes that they have more sympathisers than it might seem, and if Shevek “opened the door, they’d smell fresh air again, they’d smell freedom” (Le Guin 2002, 312). Her remark underscores the fact that freedom is slipping away from the hands of the Anarresti. She even has a contingency plan in case the smell of freedom is not intoxicating enough:

[...] if people are still so hostile and hateful, we’ll say the hell with them. What’s the good of an anarchist society that’s afraid of anarchists? We’ll go live in Lonesome, in Upper Sedep, in Uttermost, we’ll go live alone in the mountains if we have to. There’s room. There’d be people who’d come with us. We’ll make a new community. If our society is settling down into politics and power seeking, then we’ll get out, we’ll go make an Anarres beyond Anarres, a new beginning. How’s that? (Le Guin 2002, 312)

Shevek leaves Anarres for Urras, impelled by his revolutionary spirit. However, over there he is faced with yet another dilemma: “On Anarres he had chosen, in defiance of the expectations of his society, to do the work he was individually called to do. To do it was to rebel: to risk the self for the sake of society” (Le Guin 2002, 225). But on Urras his rebellion, he finds out, does not work for the greater good: “Here on Urras, that act of rebellion was a luxury, a self-indulgence. To be a physicist in A-Io was to serve not society, not mankind, not the truth, but the State” (Le Guin 2002, 225), as his Theory will eventually become “a property of the State” for which he does not want to work (Le Guin 2002, 243). On Anarres, Shevek’s aspirations to freedom are straightjacketed by the ecological realities that make their hostile environment the greatest threat to human life and freedom. On Urras, however, successful navigation of the landscape of politics proves to be the gravest task for the visiting scholar. The love he first feels for Urras’ opulent environment eventually turns into bitter jealousy, especially when he finds himself caught up in devious Urrasti political games:

Watching from the train window Shevek found his restless and rebellious mood ready to defy even the day’s beauty. It was an unjust beauty. What had the Urrasti done to deserve it? Why was it given to them, so lavishly, so graciously, and so little, so very little, to his own people? (Le Guin 2002, 172)

He becomes so disgruntled with the greed and squandering in a world whose basic moral assumption is “mutual aggression” (Le Guin 2002, 173) that he comes to believe that even the “sweet tunes” of birds sing of ownership: “*Ree-dee*, they sang, *tee-dee*. *This is my propertee-tee, this is my territoree-ree-ree, it belongs to mee, mee*” (Le Guin 2002, 171). This bitter jealousy and harsh judgement eventually turn into a nostalgia for his ecologically deprived home and of course his family: “The thought [of going home] threatened to break down the gates and flood him with urgent yearning. To speak Pravic, to speak to friends, to see Takver, Pilun, Sadik, to touch the dust of Anarres” (Le Guin 2002, 226). However, a more balanced judgement of Urras only comes about after learning about the ugly, poor, and unjust side of Urras: insane asylums, poorhouses, executions, thieves, beggars, homeless people, rent-collectors, thousands unemployed, war taxes, dead babies in ditches, and so forth (Le Guin 2002, 234, 240, 243). He realises that his ancestors abandoned this ugly Urras, not the

dignified and beautiful one, “preferring hunger and the desert and endless exile” (Le Guin 2002, 235). Nonetheless, the ugly Urras does not become the “real Urras” for him: “To him a thinking man’s job was not to deny one reality at the expense of the other, but to include and to connect. It was not an easy job” (Le Guin 2002, 235). This realisation is a clear sign of Shevek’s maturation.

There is one more environment-related issue that would cast Anarresti in yet another hypocritical light. Biological colonisation or biocolonisation is “the extension of colonization to the biological resources and knowledge of Indigenous peoples” (Harry and Kanehe 2005, 105), which historically has proved to be utterly destructive, especially to environments where the climates were more temperate, and the native flora and fauna were less resilient to the invading organisms. Anarres, at first, with its limited ecology, was not exactly a target for large-scale colonisation, biological or otherwise: “For two hundred years after the first landing Anarres was explored, mapped, investigated, but not colonized” (Le Guin 2002, 80). In the Third Millennium on Urras, the astronomer-priests located a specific region that “grew green before all others in the lunar new year”, and called it “Ans Hos, the Garden of Mind: the Eden of Anarres” (Le Guin 2002, 80). However, the first manned ship found this “most favored spot” to be, to the traveller’s surprise,

dry, cold, and windy, and the rest of the planet was worse. Life there had not evolved higher than fish and flowerless plants. The air was thin, like the air of Urras at a very high altitude. The sun burned, the wind froze, the dust choked. (Le Guin 2002, 80)

Nevertheless, this anomalous “great green plain” becomes the mind and centre of Anarres, i.e. Abbenay (Le Guin 2002, 82). Furthermore, the ecology of Anarres is so narrow that the colonisers had to exercise extreme prudence:

No animals were introduced from Urras to imperil the delicate balance of life. Only the Settlers came, and so well-scrubbed internally and externally that they brought a minimum of their personal fauna and flora with them. Not even the flea had made it to Anarres. (Le Guin 2002, 155)

And only in Abbenay and “on the warm shores of the Keran Sea did the Old World grains flourish. Elsewhere the staple grain crops were ground-holum and pale mene-grass” (Le Guin 2002, 82). However, regardless of all these limitations, Urras eventually manages to biocolonise Anarres: “In fact, the Free World of Anarres was a mining colony of Urras” (Le Guin 2002, 79), and the annual eight-time visits from Urras prove to be “a perpetually renewed humiliation” to some Anarresti (Le Guin 2002, 78). To his surprise, Shevek discovers that it is not just petroleum and mercury that go back and forth between the two sundered worlds, but also books and even letters (Le Guin 2002, 92). Moreover, the fear of an invasion from the “war-making proprietarians” for their “shortage of certain metals” (Le Guin 2002, 70) lurks in the Anarresti consciousness, though they have had peace for seven generations: “It would cost the Urrasti more to dig the ores themselves; therefore they don’t invade us. But if we broke the trade agreement, they would use force” (Le Guin 2002, 79). All these discoveries force Shevek to acknowledge his naïveté regarding the perfection of Anarres.

4 Something There Is That Doesn't Love a Wall: Moving Beyond the Dichotomy of Human/Non-human

One of the defining features of Anarres, besides its narrow ecology (Le Guin 2002, 155), is its isolation. The Anarresti have cut themselves off from the rest of the universe (Le Guin 2002, 284). When Shevek is arguing to be allowed to travel to Urras, his proposal is not met with open arms but with threats of violent reprisal. He believes that his fellow Anarresti are “cutting awfully close to the basic societal bond, the fear of the stranger” (Le Guin 2002, 299). In fact, the whole story of *The Dispossessed* begins with a description of a seemingly insignificant “wall” separating Anarres from the rest of the universe:

THERE WAS A WALL. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. [...] But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. (Le Guin 2002, 5)

It is not readily apparent what the ultimate aim of this wall is:

Looked at from one side, [...] [i]t enclosed the universe, leaving Anarres outside, free. Looked at from the other side, the wall enclosed Anarres: the whole planet was inside it, a great prison camp, cut off from other worlds and other men, in quarantine. (Le Guin 2002, 5)

Later on, when Shevek is quarantined as a precaution against contagion for his own protection on the freighter *Mindful*, he declares that “[t]o lock out, to lock in” is basically “the same act” (Le Guin 2002, 13). Shevek’s committed decision to leave Anarres and finish his Theory on Urras is due to this very insular situation in which he finds himself: “Here I’m walled in. I’m cramped, it’s hard to work, to test the work, always without equipment, without colleagues and students” (Le Guin 2002, 311). For Shevek, isolation is the most horrendous curse, a curse in which he participates wilfully while he is on Anarres (Le Guin 2002, 49). But he comes to fear this isolation more than he fears death itself: “To die is to lose the self and rejoin the rest. He had kept himself, and lost the rest” (Le Guin 2002, 9). On Urras, the sense of “loneliness” and “the certainty of isolation” makes Shevek pass severe judgement on his homeland and himself: “He was alone, here, because he came from a self-exiled society. He had always been alone on his own world because he had exiled himself from his society. The Settlers had taken one step away. He had taken two” (Le Guin 2002, 76). The source of his “inward isolation”, as Shevek knows it himself, is that he is “unlike anyone else he knew” (Le Guin 2002, 90). Even his father cannot show him how to exercise his freedom as an individual in that society:

But Palat had not had this curse of difference. He was like the others, like all the others to whom community came so easy. He loved Shevek, but he could not show him what freedom is, that recognition of each person’s solitude which alone transcends it. (Le Guin 2002, 90)

However, whether he likes it or not, he eventually makes a virtue out of his “peculiarities” (Le Guin 2002, 207). The source of “outward isolation” is of course the fear of disruption to the delicate balance of the ecologically limited Anarres.

Le Guin herself was “a Taoist humanist concerned with how we can become disalienated and stop insisting on divisions and function within a mode of interdependency” (Marcellino 2009, 209). The very inviolability of Anarres walled-off from the rest of cosmos undermines its rectitude as it rejects Otherness and difference: “Those who build walls are their own prisoners” (Le Guin 2002, 273). Even within the walls of Anarres, difference is kept under close check by the members of their society. This repudiation of separatism, resting at the very core of the novel, could be extended to the human/non-human dichotomy. When Shevek is a child, one night he dreams that he is on “a road through a bare land” where he comes across a “dense, dark, and very high” wall standing “from horizon to horizon” across the plain (Le Guin 2002, 30). Painfully and angrily fearful, Shevek realises that the wall stands uncompromisingly between him and home (Le Guin 2002, 30). Then he sees his parents transcending the boundary that strictly separates the human from the animal: “It seemed to him [Shevek] that she [Rulag] and Palat were both on all fours in the darkness under the wall, and that they were bulkier than human beings and shaped differently” (Le Guin 2002, 31). It is his animal-like parents that point Shevek towards a piece of dark stone on the sour dirt on or inside of which the number 1 is written (Le Guin 2002, 31). Upon Shevek’s euphoric realisation that “the primal number” which is “both unity and plurality” is the “cornerstone”, the wall disappears and he finds himself at home (Le Guin 2002, 31). On a similar note, Takver seems to have broken the hyper-separatedness of human/non-human categories to enjoy being part of the wholeness. There are no large animals on Anarres (Le Guin 2002, 22), and Shevek is quite surprised when he sees a donkey on Urras. He wonders if Takver would have handled herself better in such an environment:

She had always known that all lives are in common, rejoicing in her kinship to the fish in the tanks of her laboratories, seeking the experience of existences outside the human boundary. Takver would have known how to look back at that eye in the darkness under the trees. (Le Guin 2002, 22)

Shevek has noticed this passionate bond between Takver and natural environment on Anarres:

There are souls, he [Shevek] thought, whose umbilicus has never been cut. They never got weaned from the universe. They do not understand death as an enemy; they look forward to rotting and turning into humus. It was strange to see Takver take a leaf into her hand, or even a rock. She became an extension of it: it of her. (Le Guin 2002, 154)

Takver, in fact, laments the queerly unnatural isolation of Anarres in contrast to the Old World. She believes that the eighteen phyla of land animal, countless species of insects and so forth would inevitably compel humanity to see itself as an extension of that world: “Think of it: everywhere you looked animals, other creatures, sharing the earth and air with you. You’d feel so much more a *part*” (Le Guin 2002, 155). However, people on Urras, the affluent world of natural beauty and grace, do not have this grand realisation. What she does not recognise is that, as a “fish geneticist” living on Anarres (Le Guin 154), Takver has seen the foul side of life on land and the fair side of it in the seas. She has experienced “the completeness of being,” possession and dispossession, and in that she has found fulfilment: “If you evade suffering you also evade the chance of joy. Pleasure you may get, or pleasures, but you will not be fulfilled. You will not know what it is to come home” (Le Guin 2002, 275). Embracing

the two sides of a contradiction and finding the Truth within the wholeness lies at the very core of Shevek's trouble with regard to incorporating both the Sequency and Simultaneity theories of time into his General Temporal Theory that transcends the either/or thinking associated with the logic of scientific discovery (Burns 2008, 103–5). Unification of separate domains informs Shevek's "interest in social reform" and his mission to discover "a unified field theory" (Pak 2016, 132). This fusion of (phallic) linearity and (vaginal) circularity is also manifested in the central cosmological imagery of the novel (Klarer 1992, 113). Looking at Urras that circles around a common centre with Anarres, Tirin declares, "[o]ur earth is their Moon; our Moon is their earth" (Le Guin 2002, 37). Bedap then wonders where "Truth" is (Le Guin 2002, 37). Analogously, the dichotomy of sexuality is undermined on Anarres with quite common experimentation with homosexuality and bisexuality. The Anarresti children all have "sexual experience freely with both boys and girls" (Le Guin 2002, 45).

Beyond the philosophical implications mentioned above, it is indeed the practical outcome of Shevek's Theory that makes him a true hero. Pae, a physicist on Urras, informs Shevek that an Ioti engineer has developed the plans for "an instantaneous communication device" called ansible. All the engineers need is for Shevek to finish his Theory (Le Guin 2002, 228). After hearing about Shevek's Theory, Keng, the Ambassador from Terra, realises that it can change the lives of all the billions of people on the nine Known Worlds:

It would make a league of worlds possible. A federation. We have been held apart by the years, the decades between leaving and arriving, between question and response. It's as if you had invented human speech! We can talk – at last we can talk together. (Le Guin 2002, 284)

Through the character of Shevek, whose hope in mankind and science persists throughout the novel, Le Guin introduces an ambivalent attitude toward technoscience. She "draws a distinction", Latham contends, "between military-industrial technologies designed for violent purposes, whether warfare or resource extraction, and *communication* technologies, which allow for the exchange of ideas and information" (2007, 118). Shevek finds himself working in secret to try to secure universal access to his temporal theories in the hope of tearing down walls and bringing everyone together. His plan ultimately comes to fruition only when he manages to transcend the wildly opposed political and geographic boundaries of both Anarres and Urras. The violation of the set boundary of the physical wall on Anarres is what starts the whole journey for Shevek. He then goes on to guarantee equal access to his Theory for everyone instead of giving his "lifework as a present to Sabul, all the Sabuls, the petty, scheming, greedy egos of one single planet" (Le Guin 2002, 311). All that leads to things breaking loose a little on Anarres, and Shevek claims that this has been his objective from the very onset:

It was our purpose all along – our Syndicate, this journey of mine – to shake up things, to stir up, to break some habits, to make people ask questions. To behave like anarchists! All this has been going on while I was gone. (Le Guin 2002, 316)

Upon returning home, he violates the wall once again by bringing Ketho, a stranger, to Anarres (Le Guin 2002, 318). Moreover, his legacy of challenging the boundaries does not

end now that he has an outsider from Urras on Anarres: “If it [the Revolution] is seen as having any end, it will never truly begin”, Shevek argues (Le Guin 2002, 296). For Shevek and Takver, as “the means are the end” Odonians (Le Guin 2002, 120), “there was no end. There was process: process was all” (Le Guin 2002, 275). There are always “walls behind the walls” (Le Guin 2002, 302), and people need to perpetually push forward to bring walls down one by one as they move ahead.

5 Paradise Is for Those Who Make Paradise: Conclusion

The issues of ecology and politics indubitably sit at the very core of Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*. Written in the context of the post-abundance period of the early 1970s, and the burgeoning of the modern American Environmental movement, Le Guin explores the complexities of the human relationship with the natural environment. The story contemplates the ills and virtues of a utopian anarchist society that, in its assiduous pursuit of Odonian freedom through dispossession, has set its austere city upon a barren hill. In their heroic defiance of human dependency on natural environment, and their sacred pursuit of utmost freedom, the Anarresti wilfully and ironically realise their ecophobic nightmare of environmental hell by abandoning the abundant Urras for the meagre Anarres. The Anarresti manage to lead laudably environmentally conscious lives; however, they later on come to understand that the paucity of their environment is in effect constantly infringing upon their most prized and arguably only possession, i.e. their freedom. Furthermore, as Le Guin was writing at the time of the Cold War, she was pushing for a more effective way of communication across the boundaries of difference to effect a greater connectivity. This greater connectivity could be established between any categories of difference, human/non-human included, that could promote more balanced and fair relationships. Another significant task she takes upon herself is to circumvent the desire to prescribe a specific and therefore unambiguous manner of living that would at the same time resolve our social, political and ecological tribulations. That is exactly why she so meticulously scrutinises the flaws and contradictions of her near-utopian society beside its irrefutable and numerous virtues. In fact, Le Guin does not pine after an ideal society; the steadfast quest for such a society itself is what she promotes. In other words, what she seeks in her ambiguous utopia is a permanent revolution advocating a never-ending diligent and earnest endeavour to effect an improved, preferable society with a revised awareness of its relations to its human and non-human Others free from the ethic of exploitation rather than a promotion of an already achieved perfect state. More than anything, what she extends to her readers is the audacity to aspire to imagine alternative ecologically-conscious lifeways hitherto restrained by social, political, economic, and even religious hegemony, as she does with her curiously dispossessed and ambiguous utopia.

This text is a result of the project SGS04/FF/20189 “Ecocritical Perspectives on 20th and 21st-Century American Literature” supported by the internal grant scheme of the University of Ostrava.

References

- Bassnett, Susan. 1991. “Remaking the Old World: Ursula Le Guin and the American Tradition.” In *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Essays on Women and Science Fiction*, edited by Lucie Armitt, 50–66. London: Routledge.

- Buell, Lawrence. 2005. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.
- Burns, Tony. 2005. "Science and Politics in *The Dispossessed*: Le Guin and the 'Science Wars'." In *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, edited by Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman, 195–215. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- . 2008. *Political Theory, Science Fiction, and Utopian Literature: Ursula K. Le Guin and The Dispossessed*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.
- Carroll, Joseph. 2004. *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Estok, Simon C. 2009. "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16 (2): 203–25. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isp010>.
- . 2015. "Tracking Ecophobia: The Utility of Empirical and Systems Studies for Ecocriticism." *Comparative Literature (University of Oregon)* 67 (1): 29–36. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-2861991>.
- Harry, Debra, and Le'a Malia Kanehe. 2005. "The BS in Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS): Critical Questions for Indigenous Peoples." In *The Catch: Perspectives in Benefit Sharing*, edited by Beth Burrows, 102–22. Edmonds, Washington: The Edmonds Institute.
- Jose, Jim. 1991. "Reflections on the Politics of Le Guin's Narrative Shifts." *Science Fiction Studies* 18 (2): 180–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240058>.
- Kellert, Stephen R., and Edward O. Wilson, ed. 1993. *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.
- Klarer, Mario. 1992. "Gender and the 'Simultaneity Principle': Ursula Le Guin's 'The Dispossessed'." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 25 (2): 107–21. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24780621>.
- Latham, Rob. 2007. "Biotic Invasions: Ecological Imperialism in New Wave Science Fiction." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37 (2): 103–19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20479304>.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 2002. *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. London: Gollancz.
- Lem, Stanislaw. 1961. *Solaris*. Translated by Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Marcellino, William. 2009. "Shadows to Walk: Ursula Le Guin's Transgressions in Utopia." *The Journal of American Culture* 32 (3): 203–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2009.00711.x>.
- Mathisen, Werner Christie. 2001. "The Underestimation of Politics in Green Utopias: The Description of Politics in Huxley's *Island*, Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, and Callenbach's *Ecotopia*." *Utopian Studies* 12 (1): 56–78.
- Moylan, Tom. 2014. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. Edited by Raffaella Baccolini. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Nadir, Christine. 2010. "Utopian Studies, Environmental Literature, and the Legacy of an Idea: Educating Desire in Miguel Abensour and Ursula K. Le Guin." *Utopian Studies* 21 (1): 24–56. <https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.21.1.0024>.
- Pak, Chris. 2016. *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Ramírez, J. Jesse. 2015. "From Anti-Abundance to Anti-Anti-Abundance Scarcity, Abundance, and Utopia in Two Science Fiction Writers." *RCC Perspectives* 2015 (2): 83–90.
- Slaughter, Jane. 1998. "Ursula Le Guin." *Progressive* 62 (3): 36–39.