

The Interplanetary Dialectic: Freedom and Equality in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

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Ursula Le Guin's brilliant science fiction novel, *The Dispossessed*, follows in the tradition of utopian and dystopian fictions dating back to Thomas More's *Utopia* and Plato's *Republic*, in which authors explore their hopes and fears for human society by creating imaginary polities. Le Guin's novel raises questions about the role of government and property in human society by presenting two contrasting worlds. At first, Anarres and Urras appear as ideal, versus defective, human societies. Over the course of the novel, Le Guin presents a more nuanced portrayal of the two: Urras, a planet with a range of governments similar to those of present-day earth, if more repressive, sexist, and class bound; and Anarres, an anarchistic breakaway society located on the Urras's moon.

Le Guin begins from the premise that the most important goal of governments and societies is to enable human beings to be as free as possible. This is clearly the standard by which she wants Anarres, her ambiguous utopia, to be judged. Although it is desirable for societies to eliminate unnecessary suffering, Le Guin stresses that suffering is an essential part of human life and that the elimination of suffering is neither a possible nor a desirable goal. Likewise, Le Guin demonstrates that equality is a problematic goal. Anarres's attempt to create a fair and egalitarian society is presented as a good thing, but Le Guin shows us how easily the pursuit of equality can turn into the suppression of differ-

ence. Le Guin has said that her goal in writing *The Dispossessed* was to examine what she regards as the most idealistic and interesting theory of government, that of anarchism.¹

Within the framework of her novel, Le Guin provides a painstaking account of what a society based on the anarcho-syndicalist ideas of such thinkers as Paul Goodman might look like. She goes beyond the usual categories of utopian and dystopian fictions. Through her depiction of her Anarresti hero Shevek's reactions to Urras, she points out how narrow and incomplete our usual views of human motivation may be. For example, Shevek, who has grown up believing that people's primary motivations are internal, is amazed to see how hard Urrasti work for mere external rewards such as money.² Le Guin examines what people would have to sacrifice to reach these anarchistic ideals. Her ambiguous utopia is, in the words of Marianne Moore, "an imaginary garden with real toads in it." Le Guin provides a vivid picture of those aspects of human nature that create hierarchies and bureaucracies even in the absence of formal government.

The novel is told from the point of view of Shevek, a physicist, the first person from Anarres to visit Urras in generations. Le Guin structures her novel by alternating chapters concerning Shevek's experiences on Urras with chapters providing an account of his growing up on Anarres. Through Shevek's observations of Urras, Le Guin paints a vivid picture of the abuses and inequities to which centralized government that is based on the protection of property is prone, as well as a somewhat Rousseauian portrayal of the suffering caused by the accumulation of power and property, even for their most successful accumulators.

At the same time, her account of Shevek's life on Anarres shows both the virtues and defects of this anarchistic society. Le Guin provides a convincing account of a society largely without formal government in which education and social sanctions regulate behavior. As Shevek observes the

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obvious limitations on the freedom of individuals on Urras, he begins to reflect on the more subtle, frequently internalized, limits on individual freedom in his world. He relives his own experiences and those of other creative individuals who are held back in their areas of endeavor by petty bureaucratic individuals who have accumulated power despite the lack of a formal power structure. One of his new acquaintances on Urras argues that she would prefer to cope with external tyranny rather than carry around a little tyrant in her head.

THE WALL

The novel opens with the image of a wall, which will prove to be a recurring motif. Here it is the low, unimpressive, but extremely important wall surrounding the Port of Anarres, which Shevek must cross to enter the freighter that will take him from Anarres to Urras. Le Guin describes it as a dichotomy: from one point of view, "It enclosed the rest of 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" (2). This wall, like other man-made barriers in the novel, signifies the obstacles that human beings create that limit freedom.

Shevek has a number of significant dreams about walls throughout the novel. As a young child, distressed by his mother's absence and rejection by his age-mates, who perceive him as different and egotistic, he is comforted when his father explains mathematical principles to him and shows him logarithmic tables. Soon afterward, he dreams of a wall, high and impassable, that prevents him from continuing a journey he must make if he is ever to come home. His father shows him "the primal number, that was both unity and plurality" (33). The wall disappears, Shevek is suffused with joy, and he knows that he has come home. He remembers the joy, but later in his life, he frequently has painful, unresolved dreams about the wall. When, as a man, Shevek commits himself to changing his society and takes the first step that will lead to his journey to Urras, he says this: "Those who build walls are their own prisoners. I'm going to go fulfill my proper function in the social organism. I'm going to go unbuild walls" (332). Takver, his more practical partner, who sometimes speaks for the author, supports his decision but adds that "It may get pretty drafty" (333).

Shevek is the first Anarresti to travel to Urras since the settlement and closure of Anarres more than a century and a half ago. Shevek is not breaking any law by going to Urras, because Anarres has no laws. However, he is violating a basic social custom and exposing himself to considerable danger. He narrowly escapes stones thrown by Anarresti who believe him to be a traitor. When Shevek leaves for Urras, he is on the verge of completing his general temporal theory, which will attempt to overcome the intellectual wall between two apparently contradictory ways of looking at time studied by physicists on Urras and Anarres, the sequency theory, and the simultaneity theory. His work has tremendous implications for travel and communication over interstellar distances. Thus, the complexity of time is an important subject of this

book, making the organization of the novel's discussion of the events challenging. The events on Anarres precede those on Urras in a simple "sequentialist" chronology of Shevek's life. However, through her use of alternating chapters, Le Guin chooses to emphasize the complex interconnections of events. I first discuss Le Guin's treatment of Urras and then her treatment of Anarres, because dialectically and, in the larger scheme of Le Guin's universe, chronologically, Urras precedes Anarres. Le Guin provides a complex picture of Urras and shows that it has good aspects as well as bad. Nevertheless, she primarily uses her account of Urras to point beyond itself. On Urras we are shown the reasons that people would want something better, and these are the possibilities that Anarres represents: a society that would offer more human connection, more equality, and, above all, more freedom.

URRAS

Although Shevek has had some success in unbuilding walls on Anarres and has passed through the wall between Anarres and Urras, once on Urras he finds himself surrounded by new walls, both literal and metaphorical. He is outraged when he finds the door to his cabin on the ship to Urras locked, as locked doors are virtually unknown on Anarres. Once on the planet, he perceives its luxurious vehicles and rooms as boxes. Shevek is nevertheless touched by the humanity of the people he meets. They are not the cold, selfish "propertarians" his education on Anarres has led him to expect (77). He is delighted by the opportunity to discuss physics with those who can really understand him. He reflects on the irony that only here "in the realm of inequity" has he met his equals (72). He is seduced by the natural beauty and complexity of Urras, which contrasts dramatically with the bleakness of Anarres, and he cannot help sometimes feeling at home there.

However, Shevek soon feels the claustrophobia of the walls closing in on him. He begins to suspect that he is surrounded not only by the walls of the beautiful, monastic university where he lives, but also by the more flexible walls that the government of A Io, the wealthy capitalist country that hosts him, keeps in place, even when he travels. He tries to learn about the other countries, such as communist Thu and underdeveloped Benbili, and about the lower classes of A Io, but he remains isolated. Shevek initially does not see that he is being controlled, because he is allowed to address groups of people and proselytize for anarchism. However, he eventually realizes that just as he cannot pierce his colleagues' wall of distant courtesy, his polite audiences do not really hear him (80). He feels that his hope of bringing Anarres and Urras together was foolish; he feels he is doubly isolated, unable to be a part of either world (90). After Shevek has been on Urras for some time, teaching at the university and working (without much success) on his general theory of time, he finds a note from Urrasti revolutionaries accusing him of betraying them and the hope that his world represents (192). At this point, he recognizes the walls that have been built around him, but he can find no way to break them down. He tries to talk to his servant Efor, the only member of the "unpropertied

classes" with whom he has contact, without success (193–94).

Another wall that Shevek recognizes is Urras's inequality between the sexes. The position of women on Urras immediately makes Shevek uncomfortable. Urras is not the kind of violent, misogynous society common in feminist dystopian fiction; rather it is presented as a somewhat Victorian society in which both women and men are straightjacketed by rigid gender roles and sexual mores. Within the one household Shevek visits on intimate terms, that of his colleague Oiie, he is surprised to see Oiie, who speaks publicly of women in belittling terms, treat his wife with courtesy and respect, very much as an Anarresti man would treat his partner. In his own home, the stiff and secretive Oiie appears to Shevek as "a simple, brotherly kind of man, a free man." Although he is touched by Oiie's family life, it still seems to offer "a very small range of freedom" (147).

When Shevek asks his colleagues about the absence of women in the academic and scientific world, they think he is requesting sexual services and offer without embarrassment to provide whatever he might like. When he explains that he was asking about female scientists, they are embarrassed; now he has mentioned something dirty. They assure him that women are naturally incapable of mathematics and abstract thought. When they ask him if they "let women study science" on Anarres, he is puzzled by the concept of "letting" people study something. When he tells them that his teacher Gvarab, whose work they have admired, was a woman, they are shocked, but they do not question their own presuppositions (74–76). Shevek pities these men because of their distorted view of women, which he sees as being caused by their need to possess others. He draws the connection, suggested by the title and echoing throughout the novel, between possessing and being possessed: "They knew no relation but possession. They were possessed" (74–75). One of Shevek's colleagues attempts to counter what he perceives as Shevek's criticism of his attitude toward women with a platitude that ironically emphasizes his view of women as property: "a beautiful, virtuous woman [is] the most precious thing on earth" (75).

On his next visit to Oiie's family, Shevek meets a beautiful, if not by Urrasti standards, virtuous woman, Oiie's sister Vea. His conversations with Vea are the most explicit discussions he has with anyone on Urras concerning life on the two planets. They discuss relations between men and women in the two societies, as well as the opportunities for freedom and the obstacles to it that each presents. Wealthy and glamorous, with a successful husband who is not around much, Vea appears to have the best that Ioti society offers women. Shevek pities but is intrigued by her. When he asks her whether Urrasti women are content with their inferior position, she becomes defensive and argues that women on Urras are not inferior because they run the men and control things without having to get their hands dirty.

Later, when they discuss freedom and sexual mores on Urras and Anarres, we see that Shevek's characterization of Vea as "restless, unsatisfied, and dangerous" hits the mark (215). She is attracted to Shevek and his society because they represent the freedom she desperately desires. She is

excited by the thought that Anarres has rejected confining sexual mores, but she is deeply disappointed when Shevek explains that Anarresti society is an attempt to reach morality, not to throw it out. Vea objects, "I think you Odonians missed the whole point. You threw out the priests and the judges and divorce laws and all that, but you kept the trouble behind them. You just stuck it inside, in your consciences. . . . You're just as much slaves as ever! You aren't really free" (219). Vea's definition of freedom as a complete absence of inner or outer constraint is, as Shevek says, extremely dangerous. Distorted by the hypocrisy of her society, she sees concern for others as a pretense and civilization as an attempt to cover with pretty words the reality that life is a bloody fight in which the strongest prevail.

Despite her extreme position, Vea raises the important issue of internal versus external restraints on freedom. Vea refers to an Urrasti tyrant whose artifacts she and Shevek saw in a museum when she tells him that he and his countrymen have a Queen Teaea inside their heads who orders them around like the queen ordered her serfs. Shevek suggests that she belongs inside our heads, but Vea argues passionately that it is better to have her in a palace because then one can rebel against her (219).

When Shevek begins teaching on Urras, the circumstances of his Urrasti students and colleagues compared with those of their counterparts on Anarres cause him to contrast the types of freedom made possible by these two societies:

They were superbly trained, these students. Their minds were fine, keen, ready. When they weren't working, they rested. They were not blunted and distracted by a dozen other obligations. They never fell asleep in class because they were tired from having worked on rotational duty the day before. Their society maintained them in complete freedom from want, distractions, and cares. What they were free to do, however, was another question. It appeared to Shevek that their freedom from obligation was in exact proportion to their lack of freedom of initiative. (127)

Shevek compares the privileged situation of academics on Urras with the complex web of cares and responsibilities he dealt with on Anarres. However, the lack of initiative and ability of his Urrasti students to think for themselves leads him to conclude that he was more free on Anarres: "He had not been free from anything: only free to do anything" (129).

At a party given by Vea, Shevek makes an eloquent, if drunken, defense of Anarresti superiority, calling on the motifs of wall and prison: "[O]ur men and women are free—possessing nothing, they are free. And you the possessors are possessed. You are all in jail. Each alone, solitary, with a heap of what he owns. You live in prison, die in prison. It is all I can see in your eyes, the wall" (228–29). Frustrated by the incomprehension of his listeners, Shevek gets increasingly drunk, vomits, and passes out. The following morning, he recognizes his role in his own imprisonment. Just as he had tried to vomit up his guilt and self-disgust over his involvement in an imprisonment game as a child, Shevek believes that, the night before, he was trying to vomit up not only the alcohol he had drunk but "all the bread he had eaten on Urras" (272). He tries to become a

free man in the same way that he did when he decided to go to Abbenay and start the Syndicate of Initiative. Pushed into a similar corner on Anarres, he found that the way for him to act as a free man was to pursue the work he was individually called on to do, despite the expectations of society.

Likewise, at this point on Urras, Shevek decides that he won't do physics for the politicians; he will do physics on his own terms. He will complete the general temporal theory he came to Urras to complete. He will "assert by his talent, the rights of any citizen in any society: the right to work, to be maintained while working, and to share the product with all who wanted it" (277). For eight days, Shevek works almost nonstop, completing his theory. Afterward, he falls into a feverish illness. Like his earlier illness in Abbenay (118–25), this illness and recovery signal the beginning of a new connection with the people around him. His servant Efor, who previously rebuffed his attempts to make personal contact, protects and takes care of him. Once Shevek is on the way to recovery, Efor talks to him openly, at last allowing Shevek some insight into his life and the lives of the unpropertied class, supporting Shevek's belief that brotherhood begins in suffering. Efor helps Shevek leave the university secretly and get in touch with Urrasti revolutionary leaders.

He learns what important symbols Anarres and he personally are for those who seek change on Urras. He speaks at a meeting of the masses in Capital Square that begins a general strike. He says many of the same things he said earlier, to the guests at Ve'a's party, to the handpicked audiences the Ioti government permitted him, but at last he is heard. Speaking "out of his own isolation, out of the center of his own being," he speaks the pain and inmost experiences of his listeners (300).

Brutally, he learns how limited freedom on Urras really is, how violent repression may lie beneath the surface of a society that claims, like A Io, to permit freedom of speech while actually being based on gross injustices. The Ioti police open fire on the crowd; Shevek barely escapes with his life. After three nights of hiding in a basement with a dying man, he is smuggled into the Terran embassy. He asks the Terrans to broadcast the equations of his theory of time, so that he can share the results of his work with all who wish to benefit from it, rather than allowing it to be used by the Urrasti to win wars or make money.

Shevek tells Keng, the Terran ambassador, that the Ioti government brought him to Urras, despite the danger that he would prove to be the spark to their political tinder box, because the government officials believe that the possession of his completed general theory of time would allow them to threaten Terra and Hain and the other star-faring powers with "the annihilation of space" (343). They believe that Shevek's theory will allow their engineers to attain the instantaneous transfer of matter across space. Shevek tells Keng that although his equations will not accomplish that, they will make possible the development of the ansible, a device that will permit instantaneous communication between any two points in space. Keng, who has personal experience of the temporal implications of interstellar distances, immediately grasps the tremendous implications of such a device: "I could talk to diplomats on Chiffewar, you

could talk to physicists on Hain, it wouldn't take ideas a generation to get from world to world" (344).

This invention will do on a larger scale what Shevek sought to do on a small scale by coming to Urras. The Anarresti had cut themselves off; they refused to talk with the rest of humanity. Shevek sought to open up communication by coming to Urras. Keng expands on the degree to which the ansible will break down the barriers: "It would make a league of worlds possible. . . . 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" (344).

At this point, his experiences have rendered Shevek deeply pessimistic. He believes that Urras has nothing to offer Anarres and that his journey has been wasted. Keng's broader perspective balances Shevek's hopelessness. She realizes that the defeat of the forces for change Shevek has witnessed is not necessarily permanent. She tells Shevek that Urras is not Hell: "I know it's full of evils, full of human injustice, greed, folly, waste. But it is also full of good, beauty, vitality, achievement. . . . It is *alive*, tremendously alive—despite all its evils, with hope" (347). She has seen, on Terra, the worst consequences of human folly and greed, but she still has hope for the future. She believes that communication between the various human societies can lead to progress.

ANARRES

As we have seen, Le Guin uses the chapters detailing Shevek's experiences on Urras to point to the need for an alternative society, such as Anarres. In the chapters that take place on Anarres, she shows us many positive things about its society, but she also uses her account of Shevek's experiences from his childhood up to his decision to go to Urras to develop a critique of the shortcomings of Odonian society on Anarres. Shevek, a passionate Odonian, is reluctant to accept the criticisms of his free-thinking friends such as Bedap. However, Le Guin shows how problems within Anarresti society affect Shevek, beginning in childhood.

To begin with, the teachers in the nurseries and learning centers where Shevek spends most of his childhood are portrayed as mediocre individuals who strive to indoctrinate their charges rather than help them think for themselves. For example, they reject Shevek's early thinking about space and time as mere egotism. Shevek, at eight, tries to share his realization of Zeno's paradox, that a thrown rock can never reach the tree: "It doesn't matter how far it's gone, there's always a place, only it's a time really, that's halfway between the last place it was and the tree" (29). The group leader's only reaction to Shevek's precocity and genuine interest in such questions is to eject him from the group for showing off.

Like the image of the wall itself, the expansion into the concept of imprisonment also becomes significant in Shevek's childhood. One of the critical incidents in his childhood concerns an experiment he and his friends conduct with the idea, so far outside of their personal experience, of prison. As eleven-year-olds, they read a biography

of Odo, the woman revolutionary who developed the anarchistic philosophy on which the society of Anarres is based. When they have difficulty understanding Odo's long imprisonment, a traveling history teacher explains prisons to them "with the reluctance of a decent adult forced to explain an obscenity to children" (34). They struggle to understand the notion of this kind of coercion. Why didn't the prisoners just leave? What does "locked" mean? How could they be "sentenced" to do work? What if they didn't want to? Why didn't the others stop the guards from beating a prisoner?

Tirin, the most creative of Shevek's friends, finds an enclosed space they can use as a prison. For him, imagining being immured is sufficient, but some of the other boys want to try it. The domineering Kadagv demands to be imprisoned first. He insists that they choose how long he is to stay there. When Kad emerges after four hours, cocky as ever, declaring it no big deal, the boys decide to provide him with food and leave him for two nights. They release him after thirty hours. Kad, disoriented and having suffered massive diarrhea, exits frightened and humiliated. Shevek vomits repeatedly after Kad's release and is deeply shaken. This episode gives Shevek insight into the experience of both prisoner and jailor and leaves him with a lasting horror of imprisonment that plays an important role in his subsequent critiques of both Anarresti and Urrasti societies.

Although Shevek is slow to criticize Anarresti society, he continues to feel painfully isolated by his differences from others as he grows into manhood. As a teenager, Shevek argues against Bedap and Tirin when they question Anarresti platitudes. They point out what will become a theme of these chapters—that although all Anarresti are supposedly free because no laws make them do things or prevent them from doing them, their society has some powerful methods of controlling the behavior and even the thoughts of its members.

When Shevek goes to study temporal physics with Sabul at the Institute of the Sciences in Abbenay, "the mind and center of Anarres," he finds that the only place he can do his chosen work and the colleagues with whom he must work are at the heart of what is wrong with Anarresti society. Although the original settlers were aware that "unavoidable centralization was a lasting threat, to be countered by lasting vigilance," this vigilance appears to have faded (96). Even in the absence of formal government and hierarchies, informal but often rigid power structures have grown up. Sabul turns out to be a type only too familiar to anyone who has spent time in academia, a petty, jealous mediocrity who has built his reputation by appropriating the work of others, with little ability except for bureaucratic manipulation and a knack for standing in the way of those more talented.

Shevek learns Iotic, the language of A Io, the dominant country on Urras, although he is troubled by Sabul's insistence that he keep this knowledge secret. He reads the work of Urrasti physicists and is excited to learn that he can send letters to them on the freighters that travel between the worlds. However, he soon discovers that Sabul has put his own name as well as Shevek's on one of his most important

essays. Shevek is only able to continue the work he wants to do by entering into a mutually exploitative relationship with Sabul, which violates his most basic beliefs about morality and human relationships (117). Doing this literally sickens Shevek. He becomes ill for the first time in his life and has to be hospitalized.

When he gets out of the hospital, Shevek makes a conscious effort to form connections with people. He finds to his surprise that, despite his sense of unacceptable difference, they welcome him. He reconnects with his boyhood friend Bedap. Although he is still reluctant to accept many of Bedap's ideas, Bedap helps him see the source of his problems more clearly. Bedap tells Shevek that he has come up against "the wall" (164). He forces him to recognize that his difficulties with Sabul are part of a larger problem. Anarres has an entrenched power structure that resists change and sets arbitrary standards for creative intellectual work. For example, Bedap, a frustrated educational reformer, says that a month in Abbenay has shown him that he has no chance of accomplishing his goal of improving science instruction in the learning centers. He explains that Sabul and others like him get their power from "the innate cowardice of the average human mind. Public opinion! That's 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" (165).

Bedap argues that although the need for stability and expertise inevitably leads to the development of bureaucracy and hierarchy, Anarresti society has failed to use education to counter this authoritarian tendency: "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" (168).

Bedap introduces Shevek to other creative individuals who have run up against this wall. Shevek continues to disapprove of them even as he admires their independence of mind. The most tragic example of this society's destruction of an exceptional individual concerns Tirin, Shevek and Bedap's brilliant but fragile childhood friend. Bedap tells Shevek that after he left, Tirin wrote a satirical play that was viewed as anti-Odonian. He was subjected to a brutal public reprimand from which he never recovered. Although he qualified as a teacher, he was assigned to a road-repair crew and eventually sent to an asylum. When Shevek finally meets Tirin again, he is a destroyed person, caught in a mental loop in which he compulsively rewrites the play that began his troubles.

Bedap also reintroduces Shevek to Takver, an acquaintance from their days at the regional institute, with whom he makes a commitment to lasting partnership. Through Shevek and Takver's relationship, Le Guin examines the issue of the compatibility of monogamy and family with freedom and the role of family in a society dedicated to the elimination of property.

In designing the social structure of Anarres, Le Guin takes a middle road between those utopian visions that embrace marriage and the family and those that reject them. She acknowledges that human desires are complex

and that both sexual experimentation and monogamy may fulfill human needs. Anarres does not have any formal institution of marriage and does have nurseries in which children can be cared for full time or part time. Young Anarresti enjoy complete sexual freedom, yet a place exists for adults who choose to form permanent or semipermanent partnerships, and parents may choose to keep their children with them.

Although the anarchist philosopher, Odo, herself embraced the idea of fidelity, many Anarresti believe that the concept of such a commitment goes against the Odonian belief in nonownership and freedom. However, Odo argued that freedom is only made meaningful by choice and self-limitation: "if no direction is taken, if one goes nowhere, no change will occur. One's freedom to choose and to change will be unused, exactly as if one were in jail, a jail of one's own building, a maze in which no one way is any better than any other." Thus Odo saw the possibility of promise "as an essential element of freedom" (245). Through Shevek's relationship with Takver, Le Guin shows the degree to which a committed, loving, long-term partnership made possible by monogamy offers something that some, if not all, human beings desire deeply, rather than being merely an inappropriate wish to possess another person, which could be socially engineered out of existence.

Unlike those utopian writers who suggest that social arrangements can solve the problems in human relationships that cause suffering, Le Guin suggests that the things human beings want are difficult to attain, and that even the best social arrangements can offer, at most, a greater likelihood of more satisfactory relationships. Le Guin suggests that Shevek and Takver share a relationship rare in any society, a profound and joyful commitment based on reality rather than romance. Le Guin indicates the degree to which others desire what they have by describing how, despite Shevek's and Takver's relative social self-sufficiency, others are drawn to them, "as thirsty people come to a fountain" (188).

From his relationship with Takver, Shevek gets the strength and clarity he needs to defy society and pursue his own vision. Most of his conversations about the problems of Anarresti society take place with Bedap or other friends, but the crucial discussions in which Shevek realizes the actions he must take are with Takver. To Takver he articulates the significance of the reality that although people talk about refusing a posting as if it were an option, almost nobody ever does it: "[W]e're ashamed to say we refused a posting . . . the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate—we *obey*. We fear being outcast, being called lazy, dysfunctional, egoizing. We fear our neighbor's opinion more than we respect our freedom of choice" (330). To her, he articulates the answer—they must return to Abbenay together and start the Syndicate of Initiative. Likewise, when Shevek and the others in the syndicate are at a loss as to their next move, Takver tells him what, on some level, he already knows: that he must go to Urras. Their relationship is strong enough that he can leave without abandoning his family, even though there is a real possibility that he may be unable to return. His relationship with Takver provides a

center from which he can journey while retaining the possibility of coming home.

DEPARTURE

The penultimate chapter of *The Dispossessed* deals with the events that lead up to Shevek's departure to Urras. In it we see the extent of the conflict that Shevek's new Syndicate of Initiative has brought Anarres. To the dismay of their opponents, who believe that this threatens the existence of Anarres, those in the syndicate have built their own transmitter and have initiated radio contact with the Urrasti. A proposal by Bedap to reconsider the terms of the Closure of Anarres and to allow some Urrasti claiming to be Odonians from the underdeveloped country of Benbili to come to Anarres is met with horrified predictions of the destruction of Odonian society on Anarres. Shevek argues that the aim of their society is freedom, not safety; they must therefore be willing to take risks for the ideals of their society to survive. The less dangerous possibility of sending an Anarresti to Urras is also raised, but this meets with an equally hostile response.

After this inconclusive meeting, Shevek finds out that the power structure has methods besides direct opposition to combat his syndicate. He receives an offer, brought to him by Sabul, of a permanent autonomous posting at the Physics Institute, with complete access to regular channels of publication for his work. At first, Shevek's friends interpret the offer as a sign of victory, but Shevek grasps that it is an underhanded attempt to separate him, its best known member, from the Syndicate of Initiative (365–67).

As Shevek's family gathers that evening, they finally share how much hatred and rejection they have all suffered, demonstrating that the fear of breaking social norms on Anarres is well founded. Shevek has experienced name-calling and physical violence. Takver is being forced out of a job she loves. Most heartbreakingly, their brave, vulnerable, eight-year-old daughter Sadik has been abandoned by her friends, excluded from games and subjected to increasingly spiteful vituperation from which the older children and adults in her learning center no longer try to protect her. This situation is untenable for Shevek, but he refuses to go back. With Takver's encouragement, he moves forward. Shevek accepts an invitation to visit Urras, in the hope that by doing so he can open a door that will let a little more of the fresh air of freedom into both worlds (379).

RETURN

The Dispossessed ends with Shevek on his way back to Anarres. Le Guin leaves his arrival to our imagination. He travels not on an Urrasti freighter, but on *The Davenant*, a Hainish interstellar ship, run by people from the distant worlds of Hain and Terra. This delicate, beautiful ship reminds us of the existence of possibilities other than the antithesis between the austerity of Anarres and the opulence of Urras. Despite disappointed hopes, Shevek is happy. He senses that an important promise has been fulfilled. He is pleased with the news from Anarres, although there will be

conflict and the outcome is uncertain. He will be met by large contingents of friends and enemies, but he has many more supporters now than he had before his journey.

Shevek takes another bold step and decides to allow Ketho, a Hainish crewmember, to disembark with him on Anarres. He claims the right to interpret the Terms of the Closure of Anarres for himself and decides that the exclusion applies only to Urrasti, not to all foreigners, as is commonly held on Anarres. He explains to Ketho that he can enter Anarres only as an individual, only on his own personal initiative, not as any kind of representative of a foreign government and that he takes his chances when he does so: "once you walk through the wall with me, then as I see it you are one of us . . . you become an Anarresti, with the same options as all the others. But they are not safe options. Freedom is never very safe" (384).

Nonetheless, Shevek is optimistic about his own future and that of Anarres. The novel ends with the image of sunrise over Anarres. However, Le Guin gives us reasons for doubt as well as hope. There will be violence when Shevek lands. Presumably, given the statement about the numbers of friends and enemies, it will be premeditated and on a larger scale than the impulsive individual outbreaks hitherto experienced on Anarres. We remember the devastating violence after Shevek spoke to the crowd on Urras. Even if Shevek survives to lie down with Takver that night, will the dream of Anarres survive? Shevek and the syndicate have succeeded in their aim of stirring things up. Shevek's journey and his return have obviously caught the imagination of many people. Ketho's presence on Anarres suggests the possibility of further change and more contact with other societies. However, it seems probable that the opposition of the enemies of change would have hardened and organized. Once the course of events is determined by violence, even if favorably to the forces of change, where will it end? The trust on which a society based on mutual aid and cooperation rests might be irreparably damaged. Perhaps the best possible outcome would involve the kind of complex compromises that would require governmental structures to work out.

Thus, *The Dispossessed* ends with a question rather than an answer. Anarres has flaws too serious for it to be considered a utopia. However, it contains enough that is good and enough hope for a better future that it cannot fairly be described as a dystopia. The doctrine of permanent revolution, which Shevek articulates to both his Urrasti and Anarresti audiences, turns out to be in its own way anti-utopian. Shevek's words to the hopeful crowd on Urras, "You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution," (301) are met with machine-gun fire. When he expresses similar views on Anarres, the context is more hopeful but also renders his statement more radical. Shevek articulates what he sees as the basis of Odonian society: "The duty of the individual is

to accept *no* rule, to be the initiator of his own acts, to be responsible. . . . Revolution is our obligation: our hope of evolution. The revolution is in the individual spirit, or it is nowhere. . . . If it is seen as having any end, it will never truly begin" (359). Shevek embodies this spirit. He sees what is good about his society. He understands the risks, for himself and his world, of continuing to pursue change. Yet he persists and is able to do so within the framework of Anarresti society. He sees his actions as fulfilling the fundamental values of his society. He is able to use Odonian methods; for example, he starts a new syndicate, the customary Anarresti way of doing things. He reinterprets the Terms of Closure rather than simply rejecting them.

Thus, Le Guin suggests that, although there are no utopian endpoints, the attempt to create social structures that allow for greater human freedom and fulfillment is difficult and dangerous but worthwhile. Any society, however well conceived, that perceives itself as that perfect endpoint will become destructive of freedom, a dystopia instead of a utopia. Le Guin makes clear throughout her novel that the goal must remain the cultivation of individual freedom. Any society that sets out to perfect human beings or to do away with pain and sorrow will also endanger people's capacity for joy, freedom, and humanity. Le Guin agrees with one of her more cynical characters that human beings are not infinitely malleable: "Human nature is human nature" (69). As Shevek learns by experience, people on Urras and Anarres are not fundamentally different.

However, Le Guin suggests that we may tend to take too limited a view of human nature. She argues that the impulse to mutual aid and cooperation is as deeply rooted as the tendency toward competition and dominance. She does a remarkable, sometimes dizzying, job of forcing us to see from perspectives distant from our own. She turns the questions we ask about how a society based on voluntary cooperation could work on their head, by showing us the similar uncomprehending questions Shevek and other Anarresti ask about how a society based on competition and coercion could possibly succeed.

NOTES

1. Introduction to "The Day Before the Revolution," in Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (New York: Perennial, 1987), 232. This story, written after *The Dispossessed*, deals with the final day in the life of Odo, the anarchist thinker on whose ideas the society on Anarres is based. In this introduction Le Guin explains the philosophy on which the society she created is based: "Odonianism is anarchism. Not the bomb-in-the-pocket stuff which is terrorism, whatever name it tries to dignify itself with; not the social-Darwinist libertarianism of the far right; but anarchism as prefigured in early Taoist thought, and expounded by Shelley and Kropotkin, Goldman and Goodman. Anarchism's primary target is the authoritarian State (capitalist or socialist); its principal moral-practical theme is cooperation (solidarity, mutual aid). It is the most idealistic, and to me the most interesting of all political theories."

2. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial Classics, 2003), 82. Further references to this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

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