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Utopian Journeying: Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

Laurence Davis and Peter G. Stillman

*True Journey is return*¹

One of the most persistent criticisms of the literary utopia is that it is radically anti-historical, in the sense that it depicts distant times or places qualitatively different and cut off from the useless burdens of the present and past. From this perspective, the spirit of the utopian is in essence Platonic rather than Heraclitian, because it denies the essential flux inherent in all being. Whereas Heraclitus famously believed that you cannot step twice into the same river, because both you and the river waters flow in continual change, Plato's *Republic* inaugurated a tradition of ideal societies based on timeless and absolute standards occupying a fixed space outside of history. As a result, so the argument goes, literary utopias are either politically irrelevant fantasies or potentially dangerous expressions of a despotic desire to re-shape reality according to an impossible ideal.

To some extent, these criticisms of utopia have merit. Many early modern European utopian writers from More to Bacon and Campanella did indeed imagine qualitatively different futures bereft of historical roots and devoid of processes tending to upset them or change their design. Although the formation of utopian expectations, values and norms was historically embedded in the background of utopian thinking, history as a continuing concern for the past was rejected because of a belief that the new ideal world had to emanate from reason, nature or morality.²

Influenced no doubt by ever-accelerating processes of capitalist globalization, the dominant trend of subsequent Enlightenment and Industrial era utopian thinking has been to postulate a break between the dynamic present of modernity and its comparatively 'primitive' static past. One thinks, for example, of the many so-called 'progressive' or 'dynamic' utopias of the nineteenth century, which acknowledge the extent to which utopian ideals are bound up with time and history, but only insofar as history is conceived in linear, law-like and necessarily progressive terms as a set of fixed and hierarchical stages leading ultimately to a future perfection.

Ursula K. Le Guin discusses her departure from this dominant trend of anti-historical utopia in an exceptionally thought-provoking paper on literary

utopias that she delivered at the University of California in 1982, eight years after the publication of her first utopian novel *The Dispossessed* and three years prior to the publication of her second utopian novel, *Always Coming Home*. Le Guin signalled that her chief focus was the theme of 'returning'.³ While this may seem an unusual theme for an essay on utopias, its rationale becomes clear once Le Guin identifies the primary target of the essay's critical commentary: namely, what she refers to as the 'Euclidean' or rationalist utopia.

According to Le Guin, it is the very essence of this utopia that it is, as More said in naming it, nowhere. A reaction of will and reason against, away from, the here and now and the fetters of the past, the Euclidean utopia is pure model and goal. Like capitalism and industrialism and colonial 'development', it is able to speak only in the future tense, the language of progress, and is thus inherently uninhabitable. Like them as well, it is also potentially highly destructive of what is, insofar as it blinds us to the infinite meaning and beauty hidden in the every day, and propels us forward in an ever more breathless and desperate pursuit of the unattainable. It aims for a goal of static perfection, in which the variegated diversity of life is regulated by principles of reason that are embodied in structures.

The focus of the non-Euclidean utopia, by contrast, is on the temporally extended present, the 'right here, right now' inhabited by living, breathing human beings. Paradoxically, it is such that if it is to come, it must exist already. Indeed, according to Le Guin, it has existed already, as a feature of many of the so-called 'primitive' societies crushed under the wheels of technological 'progress'. It has also flourished in literary form in a relatively small number of utopian works, such as Robert Nichols's four-volume *Daily Lives in Nghsi-Altai* (1977–9) and Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia* (1942), which explicitly rejected the dominant ideology of endless material progress. Clearly associating herself with this tradition, Le Guin urges her listeners and readers to pay heed to the Taoist advice to return to roots, and the Cree counsel to emulate the porcupine in going backwards while looking forward. Again recalling Native American lore, she recalls that Coyote country was not mapped, and suggests that perhaps the utopist would do well to 'lose the plan, throw away the map',⁴ and pay far greater attention to the *communitas* implicit in the landscape of the present.

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin breaks radically from this rootless utopian tradition and explores the characteristics of the non-Euclidean utopia. Her novel begins and ends with the chief protagonist Shevek travelling between the worlds of Urras and Anarres, a neighbouring planet or moon settled some 170 years prior to the start of the story by anarchist syndicalist revolutionaries from Urras. A brilliant physicist working on a unified theory of time, Shevek grows up on Anarres and gradually becomes aware of its shortcomings; he journeys to Urras, witnesses first hand its inequalities and injustices, supports a revolutionary movement there that is violently repressed, and returns home to Anarres.

One of the most distinctive features of Le Guin's utopian narrative is that it is grounded⁵ in a rich landscape of time and place that is the antithesis of ideologies of perpetual progress and human perfectibility. Early in the novel Shevek reflects that 'you shall not go down twice to the same river, nor can you go home again' (54). But from this acceptance of transience he also develops a sophisticated theory of time wherein what is most changeable is the fullest of eternity, and in word and deed he demonstrates that 'you *can* go home again ... so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been' (55).

In this chapter we elaborate on Le Guin's creative development of the utopian tradition by exploring ways in which she narrates utopia without assuming unchanging utopian frameworks, linear progress, or human perfectibility. Specifically, we focus on the themes of change, freedom and initiative, promises, and utopian journeying.

Unlike utopias of perfectibility and stasis, Le Guin's utopia foregrounds change at both a societal and an individual level. The anarchist utopian society on Anarres originates in revolutionary change. But it ossifies and decays over time, suggesting that even in a good society individuals may pursue power and fear the opinions of their neighbours. Utopia cannot transform human nature: the will to dominate is as 'central to human beings as the impulse to mutual aid is' (168). At the same time, Shevek and his friends create counter-tendencies, new ways to re-invigorate anarchist society. The 'close' of the novel is open-ended, stopping just before Shevek's landing on his return to Anarres. So Le Guin does not tell her readers whether he will be greeted with open arms, with violence or with some other change-making response. Neither static nor rigid, Anarres is constantly evolving.

Individuals also change. For instance, Shevek is transformed by significant life episodes, such as his enduring partnership with Takver and his fraught working relationship with Sabul, who accrues power and privileges as leader of the physics syndicate. Contrasts with other characters emphasize Shevek's changes and transformations. His critically astute friend Bedap fails to find a fulfilling direction to life; and Tirin, an imaginative playwright, cannot move beyond his first play. Unlike perfect – and insipid – characters who live in a structurally well-organized utopia and who simply choose or live within the confines of those structures, and unlike visitors to utopia who are converted to a belief in the utopia, for Shevek life is a process of change.

Change occurs because individuals make decisions and undertake initiatives that alter their lives and the lives of others. A perfected utopia, a utopia without change, or a utopia characterized (like *Looking Backward* or *A Modern Utopia*) by a rational structure within which people live – these types of utopias cannot encompass human actions that change the society; they can at most allow choices that do not disturb the utopia's order. In *The Dispossessed* Le Guin explores important dimensions of human freedom beyond the standard sense of freedom as choice.

On Anarres individuals do have freedom as choice. But they can also question existing social principles and practices, and act contrary to them, by individual or group initiative. In the face of Anarres's decay, Shevek and his friends decide to form a 'Syndicate of Initiative', which publishes material refused by existing syndicates and eventually undertakes other initiatives, such as communicating with Urras and advocating for Shevek to go to Urras. These initiatives involve 'the power of moral choice – the power of change, the essential function of life' (333) and can transform the basic principles and practices of society.

Arguing before the PDC, an anarchist coordinating system for all the syndicates, Shevek asserts that it is the 'right of the Odonian individual to initiate action harmless to others' (357), whatever that action might be – even if it is the novel action of travelling to Urras and returning, and even if some PDC members advocate Anarres's continuing isolation from Urras. But after the debate, Shevek decides to act on his own initiative by travelling to Urras. In a free society each person, alone or with others, acts on his or her own initiative. Individuals must themselves generate the circumstances in which they live. And individual freedom and initiative in turn undermine fixed structures and linearity.

In a world of change, neither nature nor logic provides stability. Takver loves the organic cycles in the fish she studies, but human beings are not fish, for 'whom the present is eternal' (187). Humans remember the past and can act to try to bring about a future. Humans also cannot rely on nature as a standard, a criterion, or basis for action: Shevek, feeling tremors, knows the 'earth itself was uncertain, unreliable' (314), a thought with particular resonance as we write this chapter, only months after the earthquake and tsunamis that devastated Japan. Nor can logic, interpretation, reason or constitutions provide stability: the intense argument at the PDC about Shevek's journeying to Urras and back indicates that reason provides a plurality of possible answers. In the face of nature's restlessness and reason's indeterminacy, 'the enduring, the reliable, is a promise made by the human mind' (314).

A promise intervenes in the cycles and movements of life, creating a new path to follow. A promise originates in freedom and is a self-imposed limitation on freedom: 'I promise' is to undertake that there are some things I shall do, and others I shall refrain from doing. Individuals themselves freely limit their freedom by committing to specific actions, and thus make possible the establishment of trust, union and community.

An individual can make a personal promise, as Shevek does when he promises himself that 'he would never act again but by his own free choice' (8). A couple can undertake mutual promises to create a small community of trust and commitment, as do Shevek and Takver. Larger groups are also built on promises and flourish with trust. The syndicates are built on the promise that everyone will be treated equally and fairly, and that no one will usurp administrative work into political power – a promise certainly broken

by Sabul with the physics syndicate. Anarres was started by Odonians who committed to live together in an Odonian fashion on their new planet, and whose revolutionary song, sung by the protestors on Urras during Shevek's stay, refers hopefully to 'the promise kept' (299).

Promises are commitments made about the future by individuals speaking and acting in the present, whose commitments carry weight because of their past reliability. Building on their pasts, individuals create their futures by the act of promising. Those who live only in the present – such as hedonistic pleasure-seekers, or those who know only denial (378) – live within a recurring, unchanging cycle, or (in a different metaphor) the locked room of a present without past or future: 'Outside the locked room is the landscape of time, in which the spirit may, with luck and courage, construct the fragile, makeshift, improbable roads and cities of fidelity: a landscape inhabitable by human beings' (335).

In that fragile landscape shaped by promises, individuals freely engage in new undertakings. They make journeys. They set out with a project, a direction, a wish to work towards some different condition or state. But that aim is constantly revised as new constraints or possibilities arise and as intermediate directions are attained or change. For Le Guin, there is 'no end' or goal: 'There was process; process was all' (334). Moreover, the 'separation of means and ends' is 'false', as all means are ends (296, 334). So for Le Guin journeying is a process, an interplay in which means and ends are intermixed, interchangeable and continually changing.

In the process of the journey, travellers are transformed by their aims and activities, and their activities transform the landscape through which they travel. But the meanings of the changes do not become clear until the travellers return home; an action requires completion in order for it to be intelligible. (Indeed, because lives are made up of multiple journeys, any action's completion is but temporary, and its meanings subject to change in the light of future journeys.)

The journey to establish a rationalist or Euclidean utopia is a journey into a static and structured future with a set goal, a journey that leaves home and the past behind. For Le Guin, 'true journey is return', a return home to a new present transformed in unpredictable ways by the journey. The return home can prompt an awareness of what might be called 'the living present', an on-going, continuous present binding past experiences to present aims and directions for the future. In this living present, Tao-like, the present stretches through past and future, sameness includes change, and living involves activity without striving and motion with stillness. Grasping the wholeness of the living present requires not talk or reason but 'hand's touch. I touch the wholeness, I hold it' (190).

So Le Guin invites us, her readers, to explore dimensions of the living present. A train engineer takes journeys of fifteen days and then goes 'home' (310–11) to his partner of eighteen years, because for him the same partner means the

most novelty and variety. After a breakdown from working too intensely and narrowly on physics with Sabul, a recovering Shevek meets Takver again, and they promise to bond with each other. The narrator observes:

It was now clear to Shevek ... that his wretched years in this city [with Sabul] had all been part of his present great happiness, because they had led up to it, prepared him for it. Everything that had happened to him was part of what was happening to him now. (183)

He has returned home from his journeys and can now see their meaning as he looks backwards, and finds himself able to inhabit a living present with Takver. By means of their enduring love for one another they create a small community of trust that is rooted in the past and open to a shared future. In this living present of activity without striving, Shevek and Takver become central to the social life of their friends simply by being themselves (188–9), and in Shevek's work in physics he creates a theoretical structure 'that seemed nothing of his own but a knowledge working through him' (187).

'True journey is return' also because the return to a changed home inhabited by other, changed travellers is an invitation to future journeys that respond to the changes in self, home and others. Euclidean utopias assume an end to journeying when the utopia is attained. But Odonians have no 'expectation of ever stopping' (334) and every expectation of doing what they do best (333); so Shevek journeys to Urras and returns to Anarres.

As individuals journey and return so too do societies. As one commentator on the novel has observed, 'Shevek's individual journey out (away from home and to a foreign planet) is part of a homeward journey for his society (toward claiming the past, in the interest of continuing to build a future)'.⁶ Anarres has been – and continues to be – a future of Urras. The existence of Anarres is a constant reminder that Urras can be different (295), and the renewed activities of revolutionaries hold out hope that Urras, a paradise in some ways and a hell in others, can change. Similarly, Shevek hopes that direct and meaningful engagement with the continuing reality of oppression and injustice on Urras will remind the Anarresti of why they must be eternally vigilant in testing, protecting and renewing their anarchism.

The promise of Anarres is that its revolution can be 'a permanent one, an on-going process' (176). *The Dispossessed* ends just as Shevek is returning home to an uncertain welcome on Anarres. With him is Ketho, an inhabitant of another planet, who is beginning his own journey. He is travelling to Anarres on his own initiative to study anarchy in action, to experience for himself its distinctive way of life, and ultimately to return home with 'an idea, a promise, a risk' (385) of social renewal.

The true journey is thus a creative venture into the unknown, linking past, present and future in an open circle. The utopian element in *The Dispossessed* is not so much Anarres as a society but Anarres as an open-ended promise, a

‘potential permanent source of renewal of thought and perception’,⁷ which ensures that the past never assumes a final shape and the future never shuts its doors.

Stepping back from the text of *The Dispossessed* to return to the question of its significance in the context of the utopian tradition as a whole, we conclude that Le Guin’s utopia differs from so many previous literary utopias by refusing to separate sharply past, present and future; is and ought; means and ends. Whereas the dominant rationalist utopia is a reaction of reason and will against and away from the here and now and the fetters of the past, *The Dispossessed* is an achieved example of a grounded utopia rooted in a rich landscape of time and place. It depicts utopian aspirations not as a star in the heavens or a fixed point on the horizon towards which we sail, but as an ever-present home to which we are continually returning.