

## To Read *The Dispossessed*

In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.

This paradox and the several surrounding it that close the third movement of Eliot's second quartet, *East Coker*, give us the theme of Ursula K. Le Guin's sixth science fiction novel, *The Dispossessed*. They give it so exactly we are tempted to suspect an influence, an inspiration, or at least working material. But such suspicions are, even when the author shares them, at best interesting conjecture. What we can assert is that, for us as reader, they express so accurately the psychological and metaphysical axes along which and toward which the novel's major characters move that we need not say too much more about the book at this particular resolution—at least for a while.

They free us to position ourselves at a whole set of different distances from the text, each of which is illuminated by its own incident refraction.

They free us from having to summarize the book thematically, once it and they are read.

They free us into reading.

### §1

There is an ideal model of reading which holds that to appreciate a serious book, especially a book of serious fiction, we must give ourselves over to it completely, must question nothing until the whole of it has sunk into our being; we must balk at no twist or eccentricity an author sets us until the entire pattern that informs each microtrope has been apprehended. What marks this model as something of an illusion (if not a downright mystification) is the nature of reading itself. An author presents us with a series of written signs to which we have affixed, both out of and by (i.e., both as referents and operators) our own experiences, various volatile and fluid images that, called up in order by the order of

the signs on the page, interact in a strange and incalculably rapid alchemy to present us, at each sentence, with that sentence's meaning, at each scene with the vision of that scene, and, by the close of the novel, with the experience that is the novel itself. If some of these alchemical interactions falter or will not coalesce for us, if what occurs in our own mind presents us with signs we take for failures on the part of the text, flaws in the vast recipe from which the experience of the novel is concocted, who is to say in which mechanism the fault really lies—the reader's or the writer's?

As Quine has observed, "No two of us learn our language alike[.]" Perhaps the signs we take as flaws signify merely discrepancies in the reader's and the writer's learning.

Yet there is overwhelming evidence (so overwhelming that the critic must approach it with the greatest caution) that language exhibits structural stability—that structural state (to borrow some terms from René Thom's catastrophe theory) where small perturbations during its formation (say in the given individual's language acquisition *vis-a-vis* another's) do not noticeably affect its final form. If this is so, it is this structural stability that gives possessors of language their incredible sensitivity to the single sentences that make up the text. The major manifestation of this stability is the extent to which a number of different readers will recognize a single interpretation of a sentence or a set of sentences as valid, to the seventh and eighth refinement.

The model of total readerly acquiescence tries to prevent our bringing our own experiences to a novel and judging only by gross congruence. It hopes to obstruct the philistine response: "This never happened to me. Therefore it couldn't happen to anybody." But what it also obstructs is the frequently valid reaction: "This *did* happen to me. And it doesn't happen that way."

On a more complex level, when we view a work of art that incorporates into its pattern clear appeals to ideas of society, politics, social organization and reorganization, as well as various syndromes of human behavior, have we any standards to criticize by *other* than our own experiences of the world and of people's behavior in it? Is the critic who says of a character in a novel, "This carpenter's attitude toward her work was unconvincing," any *more* objective than the critic who says, "In working for three years in a firm of carpenters on the West coast and two years as an individual contractor on the East, of the half a dozen women carpenters I encountered, I never met one with this attitude toward her work. This is *one* reason why I was not convinced." We will

agree, I think, that the second is simply taking a greater risk by specifying both the extent and the limits of her or his experience. Such limits necessarily lurk behind all judgment, all analysis. Gross congruence or not, it is probably better to bring them into the open.

In this light, what our initial ideal model displays more than anything else is a vast distrust of that very structural stability that gives language both practical application and aesthetic potential.

In this essay, we shall read *The Dispossessed* against another ideal model—a more complex model, a more elusive and illusive model, a model whose elements have no existence save as various textual moments seen in a variety of distorting mirrors. And it is a model which lies in direct opposition to the one above:

We shall read the novel against its own ideal form.

Yet if we find *this* model untrustworthy, more than likely we shall cite objections that are simply developments of the previous ones: Who is to say that the extensional lacunae, projections, and contradictions that constitute such a model are not intentional elements of the novelistic totality, through irony or in some other mode, forming either some metafictional critique of the larger form; or, perhaps, are simply necessary elements in other, constructive fictive equations than the destructive ones we choose to examine? Who is to say that the appeals to referential accuracy and resolutive coherence that, by assumption, we must make to evaluate such elements as either desirable or undesirable are rightly a concern of fiction in the first place? If they *have* any clear authority, certainly the transition to science fiction must render that authority very dubious.

Yet obviously we feel we can appeal to these assumptions of reference and resolution. For the objections that at first seem to constitute themselves under the general accusation, “Who are you—as *reader*—to decide on the ideal form of a writer’s work?” on examination, seem very close to, if not one with, the old distrust of the structural stability of language itself. These objections are only valid if we believe that on some very basic level language is silent and does not, cannot, and should not communicate (which may well be true) *and* that the final autonomy and authority of the art-text lies *at this level* (which is false) rather than in the interplay of all the other levels—in how that interplay can push back the silent edge.

To construct our model, we shall assume the necessary existence of at least two levels of communication throughout: one, at which the author intends to communicate, and two, at which the language itself,

both by its apparent presences and absences, frequently communicates things very different from, or in direct opposition to, that first level. Because the author is responsible for the text, we must speak of the writer as responsible for both levels. Yet the responsibility for one is intentional *and* extensional; the responsibility for the other begins, at any rate, as merely extensional. Without resort to some complex psychoanalytic theory (and/or an equally complex aesthetic one), we can here afford no more claims for our writer. But we can claim, as reader, that when we experience the two levels as mutually developmental, reinforcing, and expansive, the text seems the richer. (For our suspicions as to whether the writer effects this by talent, skill, genius, or luck, we refer the reader to “Thickening the Plot.”) When we experience them as mutually detractive, obscuring, and simplistically contradictory, the work seems the poorer.

Our defense of this model is, finally, one with our objections to the model we began with: We feel we can make valuating assumptions of reference and resolution in this particular examination because this particular science fiction novel—*The Dispossessed*—demands them: All in the book that asks us to take it as a novel of ideas also asks us to hold the novel up, however sensitively, intelligently, and at the proper angle, to the real.

If the elements we shall cite as destructive *do* work constructively in the novel, citing them in any form, however ill-bounded, ill-focused, or ill-judged, must still accomplish some good. The destructive valuation we place on many of them is, finally, a matter of taste. (As such, we shall use a number of terms—clumsy, awkward, lumbering, pompous, ponderous, etc.—which, in the midst of such an analysis, may well seem, to those who do not share these tastes, the essence of tastelessness.) But it only remains for someone with a more intelligent and sympathetic taste than ours to reconstitute the cited elements properly into the novelistic totality. Such reconstitution, even if it comes as the most crushing rejoinder to the exegesis at hand, still leaves our efforts here their minimal worth as goad, if not guide.

## §2

The opening paragraph of *The Dispossessed* begins (p. 1/1)\*: “There was a wall. It did not look important.” These two short sentences raise,

\*All page references are to *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin, Harper and Row, New York, 1974, followed by the page reference in the paperback edition, *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin, Avon Books, New York, 1975.

shimmering about this wall, the ghosts of those to whom, indeed, it does *not* look important; these ghosts wait to be made manifest by a word. The third sentence reads: "It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared." Were this book mundane fiction this sentence would be merely a pictorial descript. Because it is science fiction, however, the most important word in the sentence is "uncut." To specify the rocks of the wall are uncut suggests that somewhere else within the universe we shall be moving through there are walls of *cut* rock. The ghosts shimmer beside those shimmering walls as well: We are dealing with a society that probably has the technology to cut rock—though for this particular wall (possibly because it was built before the technology was available) the rocks are whole. The fourth sentence reads: "An adult could look right over it; even a child could climb it." Because I have learned my language the way I have, from the black colloquial speech into which I was born, from family and neighborhood variations on it, from school time spent largely with the children of East Coast intellectuals, from the pulp developments of Sturgeon and Bester on the language of Chandler and Hammett, from the neo-Flauberteans and Mallarméans whose chief spokesmen were Stein and Pound ("The natural object is always the adequate symbol"—1913), and whose dicta filtered down through voices like John Ciardi's, Elizabeth Drew's, and a host of other popularizers to form the parameters around which my language in adolescence organized itself, I hear, embedded in that sentence, a different and simpler set of words: "An adult could look over it; a child could climb it." Without asking what *this* sentence means—for it is not part of the text under consideration—we can limit our examination of the sentence that does appear by asking only about those aspects of the meaning that differ from the simpler sentence it suggests. In terms of the difference, I hear in the sentence that actually appears a certain tone of voice, a tone that asks to be taken both as ingenuous and mature, that tries to side with the adult ("right") and condescends to the child ("even a child"); these hints of smugness and condescension betray an unsettling insecurity with its own stance. The sentence protests its position too much. Because, in language, what comes now revises and completes our experience of what came before, this insecurity shakes the till-now adequate mortaring of the three sentences previous; this fourth sentence inadvertently asks us to listen for the echoes of any ponderousness or pontification that may linger from the others.

The echoes are there.

The fifth sentence reads: "Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of a

boundary." We note that the phrase "instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry" is mere fatuousness. If there is an idea here, *degenerate*, *mere*, and *geometry* in concert do not fix it. They bat at it like a kitten at a piece of loose thread. Both "a line, an idea of a boundary" and the next paragraph (that the readers may check for themselves) suggest the referent is more likely topology than geometry; but perhaps it is the gestalt persistence of forms, or subjective contour that is being invoked; or, from the rest of the scene, perhaps it is merely, "Gates are not needed to keep people out." At any rate, it is so muzzy and unclear one cannot really say from *this* sentence what the idea is. We read the next: "But the idea was real." Since ideas are, this statement of the obvious only draws our attention to the nonexpression of the idea in the statement before. The next sentence reads: "It was important." Even if we do not take this as overprotestation, we experience here a dimming and dispersing of those ghosts (to whom the wall looked *unimportant*) our second sentence called up. "For seven generations there had been nothing more important in the world than that wall." The ghosts have vanished.

I feel cheated by their dispersal, even more than I do by the "degeneration into mere geometry." The only person to whom that wall would look unimportant is some Victorian traveler who, happening accidentally upon the scene, would have noticed hardly anything out of the ordinary—a presence, a voice, a literary convention completely at odds with the undertaking.

In summary, so much in this paragraph speaks of a maturity, a profundity which, when we try to gaze to its depths by careful reading, reveals only muddy water, that what seems to stand with any solidity when the rest is cleared is:

"There was a wall of roughly mortared, uncut rocks. An adult could look over it; a child could climb it. Where the road ran through, it had no gate. But for seven generations it had been the most important thing in that world."

For the rest, it is the 1975 equivalent of Van Vogtian babble. And that babble, in Le Guin as in Van Vogt, suggests a vast distrust of the image itself—for a stone wall with no gate ("The natural object . . ."—Pound) gives all the look of unimportance such a wall would need to justify to the reader the "But . . ." of our last sentence. Filling up the empty gateway with degenerate geometry, topology, or subjective contour only sabotages the imagistic enterprise.

Because the book is science fiction, and because in science fiction the

technology is so important, we wonder why the author did not use one of the ghostly sister walls of *cut* rock to sound the implicit technological resonance in a major key. When the whole book is read, and we return to commence our second reading, the image evoked of the first generation of Anarresti, newly off the spaceship, piling up rocks around the to-be spaceport like so many New Hampshire farmers, seems closer to surrealism than science fiction without some historical elaboration—but this sort of questioning is impelled by the momentum lent from the sum of all that opening paragraph's other disasters. It is not really to our purpose.

What is to our purpose?

That many of the images in Le Guin's work, as in Van Vogt's, are astonishing and powerful. And the larger point one wants to make to the Le Guin's, the Silverberg's, the Ellison's (and even the Malzberg's) of our field: If all that verbal baggage meant nothing, there would be no fault. But it does mean, and what it means is overtly at odds with the image's heart.\* That's what identifies it as baggage.

The way I have learned my language impells me to make another point here. While it is fair to analyze current, written American in the way I just have, it is totally unreasonable to analyze in this way the language, say, of the mother of the author of *Lady into Fox*. And to be an American intellectual of a certain (pre-Magershack) age is to have read more English prose by Constance Garnett than probably any other single English writer except Dickens. Nevertheless, Garnett's language, both because it is translation and because it is translation *into* the language of another country at another historical moment, is not ours. But too frequently the locutions and verbal signifiers that recall Garnett or other translatorese are scattered through contemporary American as signs of a "European" or "Russian" profundity that the texts simply do not have. Or, if the signs are not from translatorese, they are the borrowed accoutrements of that Victorian traveler, used to counterfeit a Victorian breadth or grandeur. This is pathetic.

I hope it is clear that I am not saying we cannot read works in translation (or Victorian novels). We can get vast amounts of information from a translation (or from a book written at another moment in the de-

\*And what is, finally, at every verbal image's troubling "heart"? A silence, an absence, a space for reading—a locus of reticence where to intrude words at all is to render them noise. In short, it is a heart that is not a heart at all—not an organic containment of muscular, fluctuating volumes; rather it is a surround, a locus for response, for speculation, for optive investigation not only into the endless collection of mutually tolerant possibilities but, even—and this is what we must risk—into the partially mappable plurality of contradictory certainties. In this sense, it is only when we dispossess ourselves of the illusion of "meaningfulness" that we find ourselves in any significant encounter with meaning.

velopment of our own language and culture) *because* languages are structurally stable systems. We are not talking about what is lost in the translation from the language of another time or place. We are talking about what is gained by writing in our own.

### §3

What works in this science fiction novel?

The weaving through various textual moments of the image “stone.” Passive, it appears in walls; active, hurled, it kills a man on the Defense Crew; another wings Shevek’s shoulder. Moments later Anarres itself is a stone falling away on a view screen (to wound or wing what . . . ?) The fragment “But the rock will never hit . . . ”(p. 6/5) among Shevek’s muddled thoughts presages, eighteen pages later (p. 25/23), a younger Shevek’s spontaneous discovery of Zeno’s paradox. “Are we stones on Anarres?” (p. 13/12) Shevek asks Dr. Kimoe at one point. The web of resonances the word weaves through the text gives a fine novelistic density.

The first chapter’s image of time as an arrow (between “river” and “stone”) develops into half the controlling metaphor by which we are given (popularized) Shevek’s scientific theory during Vea’s party, as well as those theories that speak “only of the arrow of time—never of the circle of time” (p. 197/179). What works is that image’s resolution in Chapter Eleven, when Shevek is with the Terran Ambassador, Keng, in the old River Castle in Rodarred, now the Terran Embassy. At one point, as he discusses with her his plan to broadcast his coveted theory to all:

Shevek got up and went over to the window, one of the long, horizontal slits of the tower. There was a niche in the wall below it, into which an archer would step up to look down and aim at assailants at the gate; if one did not take that step up one could see nothing from it but the sunwashed, slightly misty sky. (p. 307/280)

What works is the way in which the discussion of the conflicting “Sequency” and “Simultaneity” theories of time reflect the macro-structure of the novel itself, with its ordered, pendulating chapters, crossing time and space which is, by semantic extension, the goal of Shevek’s theory.

What works is the way, on Anarres, a sign is charged with sexuality: First, a movie of the Urrasti women’s “oiled, brown bellies” (p. 37/33) presented in a context of death (corpses of children, funeral pyres), trans-

formed, in one Anarresti boy's discourse: "I don't care if I never see another picture of foul Urrasti cities and greasy Urrasti bodies" (p. 38/34). Pages later, the transformation moves through another stage with the first description of (the then unidentified) Takver: "Her lips were greasy from eating fried cakes and there was a crumb on her chin" (p. 53/48). Nearly a hundred pages later, this sex/oil/grease/food transition moves a stage further, when Takver acquires a name and a further description:

She had the laugh of a person who liked to eat well, a round, childish gape. She was tall and rather thin with round arms and broad hips. She was not very pretty; her face was swarthy, intelligent, and cheerful. In her eyes there was a darkness, not the opacity of bright dark eyes but a quality of depth, almost like deep, black, fine ash, very soft. (p. 157/143)

One could attack this paragraph just as we did the first. We will make do, however, merely with a mention that the whole discourse of "cute/pretty/beautiful," even applied in the negative, does more to subvert the image than support it. One suspects that those to whom Takver "was not very pretty" are the same ghosts to whom the wall "did not look important." But it is the text itself, as we pointed out in our analysis of the first paragraph, that disperses these ghosts—which is why the phrases, sentences, and ideas that are put in to placate and appease them register as aesthetic failings, or at best as a residue from an unconscious struggle in the writer that, while we appreciate it, is inappropriate to the story unless brought consciously forward. Nevertheless, the locus of the erotic from its inception in the text to this most believable resting place is very real; and it is subtly supported by all the book implies about Anarresti agriculture and eating habits. This aspect of the book is novelistically and, more, science-fictionally fine.

What works? A simple mention, in a single sentence in Chapter One, of "scrub holum" and "moonthorn" as the names of plants glimpsed in the distance (p. 5/4). Then, practically at the book's midpoint, the one plant name unfolds into landscape: "He found her on the steep slope, sitting among the delicate bushes of moonthorn that grew like knots of lace over the mountainsides, its stiff, fragile branches silvery in the twilight. In a gap between eastern peaks a colorless luminosity of the sky heralded moonrise. The stream was noisy in the silence of the high, bare hills. There was no wind, no cloud. The air above the mountain was like amethyst" (p. 158/144). Despite the awkward "a colorless luminosity of the sky" (the word is "glow"), or the logically strained "noisy in the silence," this landscape is affecting. And when, in Chapter Ten, there is

another, passing mention of “scrub holum,” it has been charged not only by what we have learned of its technological use on Anarres in fabric and fermentation, but has also been charged by its association with moonthorn which, because of *its* absence in the passage quoted, renders the scrub holum, mentioned later and alone, that much starker.

#### §4

But to treat a referential enterprise as if it were only a musical structure is to betray it—especially an enterprise as clearly concerned with ideas as *The Dispossessed*. If only temporarily, we must retreat the necessary distance to allow the texture of language to resolve into the incidents and actions by which those ideas are dramatized. And it is at that distance I see many of the actions and incidents contravening my own experiences, occasionally even when the ideas they dramatize, as I understand them, are ones I believe in and approve of.

Anarres has just passed through a prolonged famine. From that harsh, ascetic world, Shevek, confused and mildly injured, is on the Urrasti ship *Mindful*, bound for Urras for the first time:

[I]n those long hours of fever and despair, he had been distracted, sometimes pleased and sometimes irritated, by a simple sensation: the softness of the bed. Though only a bunk, its mattress gave under his weight with carressing suppleness. It yielded so insistently that he was, still, always conscious of it while falling asleep. Both the pleasure and the irritation it produced in him were decidedly erotic. There was also the hot-air-nozzle-towel device: the same kind of effect. A tickling. And the design of the furniture in the officers' lounge, the smooth plastic curves of surfaces and textures: were these not also faintly, pervasively erotic? He knew himself well enough to be sure that a few days without Takver, even under stress, should not get him so worked up that he felt a woman under every table top. Not unless the woman was really there.

Were Urrasti cabinetmakers all celibate? (p. 16/15)

Ignoring the verbal overkill that muffles the real irony of the closing line (as well as the bizarre suggestion that, as egalitarian as professions seem to be on Anarres, cabinet making is customarily restricted to lesbian women and/or heterosexual men), I am cast back to several real situations on a very real Earth. I shall go into them at some length, as they will shape my general discussion of sexuality in *The Dispossessed*.

I sleep on a three-inch foam rubber mattress on the floor, and have for a number of years. I remember, from a conference in the north of England, during a time when I had a cold and a slight fever, a very deep and very soft bed at the guest house where the conference members were to spend the night. The softness certainly promised pleasure—a promise forgotten as soon as I climbed under the sheets and comforter. My general response? Increased awareness of bones and muscles slung in annoying positions; growing aches and general discomfort (rather than irritation); fevers have always dulled my sexual response to things. (The relationship “sex/fever” is a literary metaphor comparing their psychological effects, not a connection between their physical sensations.) For someone used to and comfortable with a hard bed, there is nothing in a soft one even faintly erotic.

But other memories come—of a Canadian I once met in Istanbul who, having arrived only hours before, was in a state of manic excitement to visit the government houses of prostitution, which were all mixed up in his head with Byzantine architecture and Islamic art, from furniture and frescoes to wallpaper. And I recall his disappointment with an afternoon at Topkapi Palace: everything, he said, looked “so uncomfortable!” That evening, we pushed through the high iron gate onto the crowded, muddy cobblestones, elbowed and shouldered our way up to the narrow doors to peer through the clear strips of glass in the rickety, frosted-over windows; and I remember how all my friend’s excitement dampened. Inside, yes, were heavily made-up women sitting around in Western underwear, many, we were told, female criminals who were given the option by the government of reducing their sentence by working there—yet all the emblems of the erotic my friend actually *knew* were absent, though he was apparently a frequenter of Canadian prostitutes. He returned to his hostel greatly disappointed.

Looking over most of the direct dealings with heterosexuality in *The Dispossessed*, I am reminded how much of my own experience seems to have taught me that the erotic, the exotic, the sensual, and the sexual, while they are all related and the paths between them are complex and frequently astonishing, are nevertheless *different* categories. Their overlap is by and large phonic. *All* of them must be learned, and learned differently in different cultures.

A major purpose of the passage quoted is to show that the Anarresti culture is hard while the Urrasti culture is soft. But the interface, with Shevek’s consciousness, constitutes itself under a simple and essentially fictional idea of eros which, on examination, is at odds with the

real erotic intelligence that, say, informs the creation of Takver as a human being to whom Shevek might respond sexually. The unexamined idea behind the passage seems to be that softness and curves, both necessarily and sufficiently, are *the* thing men (Anarresti or Urrasti) respond to sexually—which is just as ridiculous as assuming that the only thing women respond to sexually is hardness and strength. There is no more a woman (or a man) “really there” in a curved table top than there is a man (or a woman) in an oak picnic bench.

Other incidents come to mind: my grandmother, age eighty-seven, seriously explaining to my sister and me, sometime in 1967, that the main problem with men’s wearing long hair was that women simply could not find it attractive and would refuse to marry them; the race would die out. Three years later, when she was ninety, I remember her allowing how a young boyfriend of a cousin of mine, with a shiny black ponytail he could sit on, bound in three places with leather bands, seemed such a dashing, handsome and suave young fellow . . .

Both women and men sexualize what their childhood experiences impress on them, in terms of what the adult culture makes available to them. If something new comes along within the general range of interest, many of them, even as adults, will learn to sexualize it. The idea that “soft/curves” is genetically imprinted on the male psyche and evokes sexual response whenever and wherever it is encountered (like the image of a hawk flying forward [but not backwards!] evokes fear behavior in newly hatched goslings) is far too culturally determined a view of the process.

On most of the earth, the physical labor needed to survive day to day is at least as arduous as that required on Anarres, if not more so. At any rate, it is certainly closer to what life on Anarres demands than the physical labor expended by the academic classes of A-io. Most of earth’s women are neither particularly curvacious nor particularly soft. If soft/curves were a necessary factor for male sexuality to exist, my grandmother’s fears for the survival of the race—reversed male-female—would have been realized well before the neolithic revolution got under way.

Too much of the direct sexual affectivity in things Urrasti, registering on Anarresti males, from the films shown in the training sessions, to Shevek’s actual encounter with sex on Urras, seems to be modeled on my Canadian friend’s and my grandmother’s expectations, rather than on what occurs.

In the party scene on Urras (p. 203/185), Shevek, drunk and aroused after Veä has led him into the bedroom, comes all over her dress. To complain, as some readers have, that alcohol in large quantities is an or-

gasmic inhibitor in men is to miss a larger and more important point: The kind of behavior Veá exhibits toward Shevek men must *learn* to respond to as erotic. That learning process involves battling through it to success (i.e., getting laid) a number of times, at first impelled only by curiosity and any number of social supports that reinforce in the heterosexual male “this is the thing to do.” Shevek, age forty-two and used to the comparative straightforwardness of sex on Anarres, simply has had neither the opportunity nor the motivation to learn to read Veá’s classic cock-teasing as anything but erratic.

Such cock-teasing behavior has its real, social, psychological, and economic justification for women straited in the confines of a repressive, patriarchal society such as A-io; as such, Veá, in many things she says, is one of the more sympathetic characters in the novel. At the risk of rewriting Le Guin’s story, however, somehow it seems more likely that, even drunk and aroused as he is, Shevek would simply burst out laughing at Veá’s antics.

As Veá’s interest in Shevek, when all is said and done, is only peripherally sexual—no matter how much of “a real man” (p. 173/158) she thinks he is—I suspect that, somewhat relieved, she might have broken out laughing as well. Then, hopefully, they would have sat down and had some sort of conversation in which they gave each other the very real benefit of their mutually alien views.

At any rate, the scene as written—with rampant, primitive lust completely failing to make contact with sophisticated flirtation and coyness—is all “literature.” That the scene also manages to contravene a general law of metabolism and male plumbing is just one emblem of its overall lack of psychological veracity.

In the chapters dealing with Anarres, there is much concern with sex—and some with sexuality. We have pointed out one place where sexuality has been integrated into the fabric of the vision with novelistic acumen. Much of what confronts us, however, is hard to avoid interpreting as a series of subjects explicitly omitted from the foreground—if only because they are explicitly mentioned as pervasive parts of the social background. Social acceptance of homosexuality, a social norm of promiscuity, ubiquitous adolescent bisexuality, and general communal child-rearing are all given us in *récit*. In the discourse of incident and action—the foreground—we are only shown the somewhat anxious effects of the last of these, anxious possibly because it was started, in the particular case of the young Shevek, somewhat later than usual.

One of the strictures that fiction’s recent history has imposed on the novel is the particular complementary nature of foreground and *récit*.

Though the two on the page are horizontally complementary, in the readerly imagination their complementarity is strictly vertical. The last century of popular fiction has made us specifically distrust those segments of the text where didacta are not clearly refocusing what has already been presented in the foreground. Where didacta *replace* foreground, other than in the narrow modes of economic, historical, and, in science fiction, technological summary, such didacta are *the* signs of the aesthetically suspect.

These foreground omissions register firstly as an *aesthetic* flaw: They violate a symmetry that other aspects of the treatment of Anarres strongly suggest.

By cursory count, the number of Anarresti specifically identified as female is forty-three. There is one mention of an unspecified number of old women. The number of Anarresti specifically identified as male is forty-three. There is one mention of an unspecified number of old men. There are nine characters (any of these figures may be off by one or two as I only counted once) mentioned whose sex is not specified. Given the 50/50 deployment of the others, we can feel safe in assuming a similar proportion for the unidentified ones. This deployment, and the actual placement of men and women in the society, does more than all the didactic statements to demonstrate the extent (and limits) of Anarres' egalitarianism. The constant occurrence of women (though seldom men) in positions unusual for them in fiction (though not particularly unusual for them in life) forms a metacriticism of much fiction which seems, through a confusion of women with sweetheart/wife/mother, to posit a landscape in which Woman is a single profession, less interesting because unpaid, but basically on a par with, the single professions of Plumber, Doctor, Lawyer, Artist—these others also represented by one individual apiece, all (of course) male.

The deployment of Le Guin's male and female characters on Anarres is a sign of a didactic concern with the fact that men and women form respectively forty-eight and fifty-two percent of the population. And this didactic concern has been integrated into the fictive foreground. But many other didactic concerns that are indicated in the *récit*, and very closely related to the one we have mentioned, never leave the realm of unsupported didacta. Through the equal number of males and females a certain male/female symmetry is suggested. Though the story is Shevek's story, nevertheless, once he is partnered with Takver, one hopes to see the calculus of novelistic inventiveness applied to both equally, even if we view it from a position closer to Shevek than to Takver.

We hear of Shevek's bisexual youth.

There is no mention of Takver's.

We see two of Shevek's prepartnered affairs, one heterosexual, one homosexual; there is simply no mention, one way or the other, of any prepartnered sex at all for Takver. Shevek, in one of his long separations from Takver, lusts, whether it rings true or not, after the Urrasti woman Vea. There is simply no hint of Takver's ever giving another man a thought—though once, rather mystically, during Shevek's absence, she contemplates “the cities of fidelity.”

The process signified here is the traditional liberal dilemma. Our conservative forebears postulated symmetrical spaces of possible action for women and men and then declared an ethical prohibition on women's functioning in that space: men *may* behave in such and such a way, with minimal consequences. Women *may not*: if they *do*, they will be *punished* (by law, by society, by God). A liberal generation rises that wishes to move into the prohibited space, change the values, and repeal the punishments. Ideals are expressed to this end. Yet there is leftover and irrational guilt. If the conflict between guilt and desire is not resolved, as it seldom is in the liberal, at the level of praxis the *conflict* is repressed, and with it all emblems of the existence of the space in which it takes place. It is not mentioned, it is not dealt with, it is not referred to—and this silence is presented, hopefully, as a sign the problem has been resolved. This leaves the revolutionary with the double problem of first reasserting the existence of the space, *then* securing the rights and guarantees necessary to move about in it. Frequently the liberal is a more difficult opponent than the conservative.

Takver reencounters Shevek near the end of a homosexual affair he is having with his returned childhood friend Bedap. Bedap in fact introduces them. In the alternations of indirect description and foreground incident, any reaction of Takver's to the relation of Bedap and Shevek, or even her knowledge of it (if sex has left the relationship, Bedap and Shevek are still vacationing together), is omitted, whether that reaction is pro, con, or indifferent.

To reason that, well, in the Anarresti society Takver's reaction would probably *be* indifference is to confuse the novel-as-texture with the novel-as-structure.\* Though the novel-as-texture may be as alien as the

\* In current critical terminology “structure” is certainly as beleaguered a term as any. To clarify my own, most idiosyncratic usage, I quote (not without irony) a description from that most intelligent of writers to be called structuralist, who has argued, most intelligently, that he is no such thing, Michel Foucault, writing in *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973, p. 138): “Structure is that designation of the visible which, by means

author can imagine, the novel-as-structure is still controlled by a sort of generalized societal (current, earthbound, and contemporary) interest: If the author wishes to violate this interest, she must leave some meta-fictive sign that she is aware of the interest but, for whatever reason, is not complying with it. (And “I don’t *know* what the texture of the reaction would be” is as good a reason as any for not providing an answer. But this must be signaled somewhere, explicitly or implicitly.) As it is, in the omission of Bedap’s psychological transition from Shevek’s lover to Shevek’s and Takver’s best friend, in the omission of Takver’s response to Shevek’s and Bedap’s affair, the omission of Shevek’s feelings about the movement of his sexual allegiances from one to the other and possible reactions it might cause, there is an element of novelistic chicanery. The point isn’t that such transitions are not believable. In the real world, one way or the other, they are accomplished every day. But the payoff in psychological richness to be gained by some insight into how Bedap, Takver, and Shevek—and by extension the generally promiscuous Anarresti—accomplish such transitions is sorely missed. I find no signs in the text for the author’s understanding of the process; nor any sign that understanding of it might be necessary. The omission seems one with the avoidance of the whole “problem of jealousy” as it has come to be called in the present jargon of “family synergy” and the like (though, more accurately, it might be called the psychological mechanisms for keeping jealousy to a manageable minimum that, of necessity, grow up in any openly permissive society). At least partially, what most likely make Bedap’s adjustments possible are the very real consolations of promiscuity. But as Bedap is the only onstage homosexual in the book, this is simply another aspect missing from the societal picture. (There are—and one almost wants to say “of course”—no women homosexuals in the novel, unless they are all sequestered in some cabinet-making Syndicate known to Shevek but not to us.)

In a conscientious attempt to defuse some of the explosive associations that lurk, like another sort of ghost, around our argument, we would like to go immediately to another example of fictive omission in the novel. In Chapter Nine, Shevek has sequestered himself in his room in the University of A-io and has gotten to work on his new and impor-

---

of a kind of pre-linguistic sifting, enables it to be transcribed into language.” Shortly, in a more overtly theoretical section, I shall complicate matters by referring to “internal structures” and “external structures,” and what is more, as such structures are manifested by a purely mental (i.e., imaginary) event. But this will be merely to render as a psycho-spatial metaphor what Foucault has rendered (by “pre-linguistic”) as a psycho-temporal one.

tant Temporal Theory, which will be the basis of the new, interstellar spacedrive. He has been reading over a symposium from ancient Terra on the relativity theory of "Ainsetain." On the double theory of General and Special Relativity, he muses:

But was not a theory of which *all* the elements were provably true a simple tautology? In the region of the unprovable, or even in the disprovable, lay the only chance for breaking out of the circle and going ahead.

In which case, did the unprovability of the hypothesis of real coexistence—the problem which Shevek had been pounding his head against desperately for these last three days, and indeed these last ten years—really matter?

He had been groping and grabbing after certainty, as if it were something he could possess. He had been demanding a security, a guarantee, which is not granted, and which, if granted, would become a prison. By simply assuming the validity of real coexistence he was free to use the lovely geometries of relativity; and then it would be possible to go ahead. The next step was perfectly clear. The coexistence of succession could be handled by a Saeban transformation series; thus approached, successivity and presence offered no antithesis at all. The fundamental unity of the Sequency and Simultaneity points of view became plain; the concept of interval served to connect the static and the dynamic aspect of the universe. How could he have stared at reality for ten years and not seen it? There would be no trouble at all in going on. He was there. He saw all that was to come in this first, seemingly casual glimpse of the method, given him by his understanding of a failure in the distant past. The wall was down. The vision was both clear and whole. What he saw was simple, simpler than anything else. It was simplicity: and contained in it all complexity, all promise. It was revelation. It was the way clear, the way home, the light.

The spirit was in him like a child running out into the sunlight. There was no end, no end . . . (p. 247/225)

In the same way that indirect reportage of event omitted (or absorbed) the "problem of jealousy" among Bedap, Takver, and Shevek in a way that, to me, feels extremely unsatisfactory, so indirect reportage of Shevek's thoughts has omitted (or absorbed) the discovery of Shevek's great theory, in a way that feels equally wrong.

It is possible that the essentially circular argument that introduces the section (the theory, to be proven, needs something from the realm of

the unproven to prove it; why not take the unproven theory itself, assume it to be already proved, and then use it to supply the missing section that is needed to prove it) is intended as ironical. I suspect, rather, the intention is mystical, though to me it *only* seems circular and the essence of the unscientific—and I speak as someone who believes the kernel of all creativity, artistic and scientific, is indeed mystic (or at least begins in random association). The absorption of the problem of jealousy we had to examine by appealing essentially to the mechanics of mundane fiction; but here we simply cite our own, science fiction traditions. Science fiction, where the turning-up of new and universe-shaking theories is a workaday occurrence, has evolved its own rhetorical postures for dealing with their arrival. At one point, earlier in the same scene, Le Guin evokes one such posture and then abandons it:

He went back to the desk, sat down, and took a couple of scraps of heavily scribbled paper out of the least accessible and least useful pocket of his tight-fitting, stylish trousers. He spread these scraps out with his fingers and looked at them . . . Shevek sat motionless, his head bowed, studying the two little bits of paper on which he had noted down certain essential points of the General Temporal Theory, so far as it went.

For the next three days he sat at the desk and looked at the two bits of paper. (p. 244/223)

If, in the next paragraph, we had learned that Shevek had resolved his great theory during these three days, we would not cavil. We would read the sudden distancing of the final sentence quoted as an intelligent reticence about a subject on which, really, nothing *can* be said. The discovery would have been “omitted,” but it would have been omitted with a certain authority, if not elegance. What these three days do produce, however, is a meditation on Pei, one of the more suspect of the Urrasti physicists, followed by a consideration of Relativity (Pei has given Shevek the Relativity symposium), followed by the climactic passage first quoted.

What the climactic passage does, besides giving the subjective state of the physicist during his discovery (which is acceptable), is to presume to give us that inner nut of consciousness where subjectivity becomes one with the objective validity of the theory itself (which is not). The only signifier that could conceivably hold open the necessary fictive space for the *fictive* objectivity to occur in is “Saeban transformation series”; and it does not. (“Successivity,” and the “concept of interval” have all been given lengthy and comparatively reasonable explanations;

therefore they are not opaque enough to keep the space open.) At minimum we would need several such signifiers (that suggested scientific discourse) woven into a complex structure that replaced the circularly structured argument already cited: because the signifiers would *be* opaque, we would then not be able to tell whether the argument was indeed circular *or* coherent. This structure would have to be complex enough to suggest an imaginative space to fit the needed fictive objectivity—the creation of such opaque structures is the other, older rhetorical posture by which science fiction traditionally has solved this problem.

Indeed what all our analytical battery is trying to establish here is simply that, while the idea of an Urrasti/Anarresti physics that takes into account the ethical and moral resonances within the physics itself (in a way that recalls some of Michel Serre's thought on Leon Brillouin's work in Information Theory) is a fascinating science-fictional idea, what Le Guin presents *as* physics, to me, at any rate, still has the wrong feel—which *is* a subjective response and best be, somewhere, stated as such.

At any rate, what these two fictive absorptions—the problem of jealousy and the Great Theory—suggest more than anything else is the novelistic danger of indirect reportage—both of actions and thoughts—at the best of times. At the moment we perceive our own view of a fictive situation as sophisticated, there seems no way for us to avoid the condensations and highlightings that indirect reportage affords. Yet sophistication is itself a bias, by those same mechanics of omission and emphasis. Unless they are clearly grasped and the intent of the reportage is ironic, they are better avoided. Also, the emphasis science fiction places on foreground detail automatically highlights any bias in the background *récit*: These indirect recounts are doubly risky within our genre precincts. (The highlighting of personal bias, under control, is what makes so many *first* person science fiction tales—largely carried on in this same, indirect reportage—so successful at presenting a distinctive, first-person character.) But there are numerous effects, both good and bad, that are at best muted in mundane fiction which are, by comparison, sharp-edged and clear-sounding here.

## §5

Anarres's egalitarianism is not intended as total. The kind of adolescent bisexuality Le Guin posits for the Anarresti exists in many primitive tribes today (as well as many American summer camps) that exhibit a

far greater sexual division of adult labor and behavior than either Anarres or America.

There are at least four places in the novel where Le Guin leaves signs in the text to indicate these limitations. Before examining them, however, we must begin by saying that we do not feel that the signs as we see them do the job the text demands of them—which is to say, we feel they would have sufficed in a novel of mundane fiction. The analytical imperatives of science fiction, however (and however infrequently they are met), mark them inadequate.

Near the beginning of the prison scene in Chapter Two, we read: “The simple lure of perversity brought Terin, Shevek, and three other boys together. Girls were eliminated from their company, they could not have said why.” Sign one (p. 31/29).

And in the next scene a few years later, when a group of slightly older boys are discussing the politics of Urras, after having seen some films on the decadence of Urras (whose erotic content we have remarked on), we read: “They had come up to the hilltop for masculine company. The presence of females was oppressive to them all. It seemed to them that lately the world was full of girls. They had all tried copulating with girls; some of them in despair had also tried not copulating with girls. It made no difference. The girls were there.” Sign two (p. 36/33).

The semantic associations of these sentences are such that we must read them as an expression of the traditional idea that adolescent boys naturally tend to segregate themselves from girls at the onset of puberty.

Once more I am thrown back to experiences of my own—in the summer camp that prompted my parenthetical statement about adolescent bisexuality five paragraphs ago.

A number of the youngsters I went to summer camp with, between the ages of eight and fourteen, were children I was also in school with. I was not conscious of any great pressure on the sexes to remain separate in my school, but looking back on it I suspect I was not aware of it the way the fish is not aware of water or the bird is not aware of air. Our elementary school had an informal, yet definite dress code. Boys could wear jeans. Girls could not wear pants of any sort—except when it was snowing. Then they could wear slacks. For the monthly school dances, the girls had to stay after classes to decorate the music room. For school trips and fire drills the teachers lined the boys up on one side of the hall and the girls up on the other—and for fire drills boys and girls left the building separately. On the class bus, boys sat on one side and girls sat on the other. And I recall one morning when some seven or eight boys

and a single girl happened to gather in the small equipment room next door to the sixth-floor science laboratory to watch one of the boys perform a (rather ineffectual) hypnosis experiment. Suddenly our middle-aged history teacher, who had apparently been looking through the glass panes of the door, opened it and demanded: "Come out of there! You come out of there!" She marched in, grabbed the girl by the arm, and dragged her out of the room.

From two to four-thirty in the afternoon, all the boys were herded together in the school bus and taken out to Randall's Island for sports activities or, if it was raining, were unceremoniously dumped into the basement swimming pool. To this day I don't know what the girls did during this same time. They may have gone home.

Otherwise, classes were co-ed.

And once I was invited to a birthday party by a girl in my class, with my allowance I bought her an illustrated copy of *Jane Eyre*—but when my parents saw the gift, I wasn't allowed to go to the party because they felt such a book was inappropriate for a young man of twelve to give to a young woman of the same age.

In my school there was a definite tendency, during lunch and free periods, for girls to coagulate over here and boys to clot over there. During this time, I heard much talk about the "natural" antipathy of boys to girls, which the school, of course, was constantly trying to fight by the monthly social dances, in which the girls would do all the preparatory work, and the boys, uncomfortable in suits and ties, would sigh and shuffle and try to stay in as tight little groups as possible until, with much urging from the teachers, one or another of us would go up and ask one of the girls seated along the window benches to dance.

At summer camp, first of all, everyone—boys and girls—wore jeans. The boys slept in tents on the other side of a small hill from the girls' bunk buildings. But the rotating camper work crews that got up early to set the tables in the dining hall were equally male and female; the camper surveying team that was making a contour map of the area was composed of both boys and girls. All camper activities, from overnight hikes and nature trips to pottery and carpentry classes were co-ed. Boys' athletics and girls' athletics were held on adjoining playing fields, at the same time. But volleyball, swimming, and softball, which were the main athletic events, were co-ed. For two of my five years there, there was an attempt to organize an all-boys softball team; in two or three weeks it usually fell apart from competition with other interests. On the camp bus you sat where you wanted, with whomever you wanted.

By my estimate, the time it took for *all* traces of the natural antipathy between the sexes to vanish—and vanish from people who, in many cases, two weeks before had been textbook examples of it—was the four-and-a-half-hour bus trip from New York City to Phoenecia, New York, where the camp was located.

From the time we lugged our steamer trunks up the quarter-mile of hill road to our tents and bunks, friendships had established themselves as frequently across sexual lines as not. As summer wore on, many such friendships developed sexual elements; as many did not. But the difference between behavior in camp and school was clear, noticed, and *talked* about by both campers and counselors. I recall a long discussion with an eighteen-year-old woman counselor and a bright, dumpy girl named Roberta, while the three of us were running off an edition of the camp newspaper, during which we isolated most of the elements I've stressed in this description: clothing, activities, proximity, and free choice.

On Tuesday nights we had square dancing, at which, again, anyone could wear anything she or he wanted; in practical terms this meant the boys wore what they always wore and about a third of the girls put on skirts. The proportion of skirt wearers was far lower at the end of the summer than at the start. Our professional square-dance caller the first evening made it clear that girls could ask boys to dance. And the various square sets, calling, "Two couples! Two couples . . . one couple!" as places were filled was half the fun.

On Friday night there was social dancing, during which it was *required* that the girls wear skirts. Except for one "Sadie Hawkins" dance, it was understood that the boys should ask the girls to dance.

Social dancing was the least popular activity of the week. The boys lingered in groups outside the recreation hall or simply slipped away when counselors tried to corral them in. Inside the rec hall, the girls sat around on the benches against the wall, listless and bored. It was a sudden reversion to another system of behavior and everyone felt uncomfortable.

During my third year of camp (summer of 1954) we formed a campers' committee, of five boys and three girls, who met with Norman, the camp director, in the library behind the office that also served as camp post office. Our committee's proposal was that social dancing be abolished and in its place we have either a free evening or another evening of square dancing.

Norman, who was big on camper self-determinism, looked disturbed. He excused himself a minute and returned with his wife, Hannah, who codirected the camp. They explained to us:

A second square-dance evening would be too expensive since it would mean hiring the live square-dance band *twice* a week.

Also, they didn't think giving up social dancing would be a good idea: Social dancing, they explained, was there to break the natural antipathy between young, adolescent boys and girls.

But there isn't any here, Roberta of the inky fingers protested.

Well, explained Norman, they meant on a more sophisticated level.

Which we assumed meant sex. Which seemed silly because, as with most co-ed summer camps, the counselors spent most of their time from five o'clock to lights-out chasing the necking couples out of the bushes on the side of the road that led from the rec hall back to the bunks. One blond, forward boy on the committee named Kenroy said as much.

Well, we were told, we on the committee were more mature, i.e., all of us on the committee except Roberta were openly known to be "going with" someone. The social dancing, they explained, was for those less mature campers who wouldn't make contact any other way.

"But," explained Roberta (as a "more mature" representative of the "less mature" campers?), "there's more social contact in *any* other activity—even athletics, for God's sake—than during social dancing."

I think it was at this point Hannah suggested that perhaps two or three more "Sadie Hawkins" dances might help—which met with groans all around.

Then Norman explained that we had to understand that social dancing was basically for the girls' sake. The girls liked it. After all, they had brought clothes for it and would feel disappointed if they couldn't use them. (The camp, of course, sent a list of clothes each camper should bring, including—for the girls—dresses, for social dancing.) Wasn't that so?

Sarena, another girl on the committee, said that some of the girls enjoyed dressing up for it, but they were the same ones who dressed up for square dancing. *Nobody*, Roberta added, enjoyed the actual event.

Well, Norman explained, we already understood that more square dancing was out of the question. We boys simply had to understand the social needs of the girls. The girls on the committee had to understand the needs of their less fortunate bunkmates.

And that was that.

We left the library and walked back up the road to our bunks defeated.

We had been told we hadn't seen what we had seen; that we didn't understand what made clear sense; that we were being selfish when social conscience was precisely what had prompted us to act (to those of

us on the committee social dancing was an endurable nuisance; to the shyer campers of both sexes it was a horror). One of the things I remember from that walk back up to the bunks under the sun-filled branches that lapped above the road: While the five of us boys grumbled among ourselves, the three girls, including the otherwise irrepressible Roberta, were silent. The feeling of solidarity we had all had coming down to present our idea had vanished. The girls felt apart and uncomfortable. We boys were aware of it and confused by it—but at that age we did not understand what had just been done specifically and pointedly to three of our group of eight.

This is the personal context against which I read the two scenes the quoted passages come from. Though I could quite easily imagine such “naturally” all-male scenes taking place in or around my school, I simply couldn’t imagine them taking place at my summer camp—even in the next few hours after our encounter with Norman. To point out that Anarres, even with its egalitarian child-rearing practices, is not a summer camp is to beg the question with an obviousness. The point is, of course, that the naturalness and immutability of such natural and immutable behavior that the two cited passages (and Norman’s and Hannah’s argument) make their implicit appeals to is open to question and analysis. And whether my thirteen-year-old analysis of the situation is or is not correct, there is a larger, aesthetic point that frames the question here.

Mundane fiction can get by with a clear and accurate portrayal of behavior *that* occurs merely *because* it occurs. Science fiction can not. In an alien culture—and both Anarres and Urras are alien cultures—we are obliged to speculate on the reason behind any given behavior; and this speculation, whether implicit or explicit, must leave its signs in the text. The scenes and paragraphs cited are signs of the limitations on the social egalitarianism of Anarres; they are not signs for the causes of those limitations.

Nothing prevents an SF writer from writing a story about an intelligent species in which adolescent male bonding behavior is imprinted on the genes. (The species might biologically and genetically bear a resemblance to birds, who exhibit much complex behavior that may well be genetically controlled.) Similarly, nothing prevents the SF writer from writing about an intelligent species in which such behavior is completely the product of intrasocial forces. Indeed, the writer if she chooses can write about a species in which the reason switches back and forth according to changes in the moon.

What we must remember, however, is that once mundane fiction has

accomplished its portrait of behavior at some historical moment, from the here and now to the distant past, if we ask of it: "But what do you think the surrounding causes are?" mundane fiction can answer, without fear that it is shirking its job, "Frankly, I don't know. It's not my concern." But because science fiction is not constrained to answer such a question "correctly," within its generic precincts the "I don't know. It's not my concern" of mundane fiction not only becomes self-righteous and pompous, it signifies a violation of the form itself. Science fiction may ultimately end with an "I don't know" about any given point, but only after a good deal of speculation, either implicit or explicit, has left its signs in the text.

With all this as precursor, we can revise our initial valuation of the first two signs of the four we are discussing: The scenes in which the passages occur stand as signs that (among other things) the behavior on Anarres, despite sexual integration of the professions, is not *that* egalitarian. The two paragraphs themselves, however, stand as signs of the author's refusal to speculate as to why the behavior is what it is—and as such simply don't make good science fiction.

A third dramatic sign of the limit to the egalitarianism of Anarres is the scene with Shevek and Vokep in the truck depot of Yin Ore:

"Women," Vokep said . . . "Women think they own you. No woman can really be an Odonian."

"Odo herself—"

"Theory. And no sex life after Aseio was killed, right? Anyhow, there're always exceptions. But most women, their only relationship to a man is *having*. Either owning or being owned."

"You think they're different from men there?"

"I know it. What a man wants is freedom. What a woman wants is property. She'll let you go only if she can trade you for something else. All women are proprietarians."

"That's a hell of a thing to say about half the human race," said Shevek, wondering if the man was right. Beshun had cried herself sick when he got posted back to Northwest, and raged and wept and tried to make him tell her he couldn't live without her . . . "You know, I don't agree," he said to long-faced Vokep, an agricultural chemist traveling to Abbanay. "I think men mostly have to learn to be anarchists. Women don't have to learn."

Vokep shook his head grimly. "It's the kids," he said. "Having babies. Makes 'em proprietarians. They won't let go." He sighed. "Touch and go, brother, that's the rule. Don't ever let yourself be owned."

Shevek smiled and drank his fruit juice.

"I won't," he said. (p. 46/42)

In this rather grim scene of two sexist men, one mouthing sexist contempt and the other sexist homilies, the author is again delineating the psychological limits on Anarres sexual equality.

The theme is picked up in Chapter Ten in the fourth and last dramatic sign we shall discuss, when Takver, upbraiding herself for having urged Shevek, in Chapter Eight, to publish his book as a collaboration with the older and jealous physicist Sabul, says:

" . . . I'll tell you what was wrong. I was pregnant. Pregnant women have no ethics. Only the most primitive kind of sacrifice impulse. To hell with the book, and the partnership, and the truth, if they threaten the precious fetus! It's a social preservation drive, but it can work right against community! It's biological, not social. A man can be grateful he never gets into the grip of it. I think that's why the old archisms [governments] used women as property. Why did the women let them? Because they were pregnant all the time—because they were already possessed, enslaved." (p. 292/266)

Putting aside the final apposition's myriad suggestions anent the novel's title, we learn here, with this echo of Vokep's opinions, the extent to which this familiar matrix of ideas is accepted by (at least one of) the women of Anarres as well as the men; each scene supports the other; both, together, render our picture of the society more coherent.

But two points must be made:

If we actually review the text concerning the publication of Shevek's book, we find that little or none of Takver's behavior is a real referent for any of the ideas that, in the passage just quoted from Chapter Ten, Takver expresses. In Chapter Eight both Takver and Shevek agreed that, as the *Principles* is a work of science, it made little difference whose name or names the book came out under. Later, as readers, we discover that the book was not only attributed jointly to Sabul, but that Sabul cut it, rewrote it, and generally mutilated it before affixing his name with Shevek's to the text: that *mutilation* is the crime.

When Takver urges Shevek to let the book be published with Sabul's name, and Shevek agrees, neither she nor Shevek have any way to know that such mutilation will result. Both of the young people are, perhaps,

naive, but her suggestion is made rationally and Shevek accepts it rationally. Where is the biological drive to protect the fetus (or, by extension, the book) in all of this?\*

This is what leaves most of Takver's speech, as quoted, didactic, because there is no vertical support in the earlier foreground, make it sound (whether it is or not) like an author expressing an opinion, rather than either characterization or social portraiture.

In Shevek's life there is a period, which in the actual text of *The Dispossessed* is absorbed not by indirect reportage but by the blank paper between paragraphs, when, change by change, he must become aware of Sabul's editing—whether he learns it in memo after memo over weeks, or is presented *fait accompli* with the edited version. There is a period in Takver's life when, pregnant, she must put up with her partner's misery over this mutilation—or his attempts to suppress that misery; and when she must put up with the idea of the mutilation itself.

At the end of this period, both—we know from the text—will have decided the compromise was a bad idea. But to omit this material, this period of clear and inevitable human change, is poor novelistic intuition. Such change, in its detail, texture, and structure, is *the* referent of fiction.

Our second point is simply this. The fact that various pregnancies in the real world are not experienced as Takver apparently, in retrospect, experiences hers (or as Vokep may or may not have had experience of some other woman's) suggests that pregnancy behavior is also open to analysis and speculation. That ideas on pregnancy behavior in the real world differ from those expressed by two Anarresti (Takver and Vokep), whether the ideas expressed by the Anarresti are coherent with one another or not, suggests that the origin of those ideas on Anarres—whether supported by the real biology of the Anarresti or left over from Urrasti prejudices—is also open to analysis. To show the ideas without signs of speculation on their origin, no matter how well the ideas are orchestrated to suggest the coherence of Anarresti society, is poor science-fictional intuition.

The formal pressure of the traditional fictive concern with change asks for the missing material on Shevek, Takver, and the mutilation of *The Principles of Simultaneity*. The semantic pressure of the topic asks for another scene missing from the presentation of Shevek on Urras in Chapter Five:

\*If anything, a *greater* parental protective concern over the fetus/book from both "parents" would have been better for it.

He got money for the papers he wrote. He already had in an account in the National Bank the 10,000 international Monetary Units of the Seo Oen award, and a grant of 5,000 from the Ioti Government. That sum was now augmented by his salary as a professor and the money paid him by the University Press for three monographs. (p. 115/105)

“Bank” suggests A-io has available some sort of checking system. And we shall have this confirmed in a future scene with Vea in the restaurant (p. 192/175). But at some time Shevek will have to enter a drugstore or a market or the University Bookstore and buy a paper of safety pins, a replacement pair of shoelaces, a writing tablet or a tube of toothpaste. For the first time in his life, he will take money out of his pocket, exchange it for goods, and pocket the change—at which point, presumably, implicit in the description of the incident, he will have some response to this thing called money. He may find it complicated, annoying, fascinating, silly, or what have you. But we sorely miss this response to the reality of coin and scrip.

The scene seems to have been prepared for, on Anarres, at Shevek’s going away party when Turin pretends to be the traditional Poor Urrasti—the Beggerman—and mispronounces the word “buy” which is, of course, not part of demotic Pravic. Any number of times on Urras we see Shevek *without* money—presumably signs of his poor management of the stuff, understandable in a first-time user. We see him avoid using money, as when, in a sort of inverse of Thomas Wolfe’s famous supermarket scene, he recalls an attempt to buy a suit and shoes in the Saemtenevia Prospect, a sort of A-ioti shopping mall: “The whole experience had been so bewildering to him that he put it out of his mind as soon as possible, but had dreams about it for months afterwards, nightmares: . . . a solid mass of people, traffic, and things . . . coats, dresses, gowns, robes, trousers, breeches, shirts, blouses, hats, shoes . . .”(p. 116/105)

The whole thing is too much for Shevek. When he sees the price of the coat (“8,400 units”), he retreats in guilty contemplation of the economic matrix behind it (2,000 units is a year’s living wage, he has recently read). The suit is ordered by phone.

Indirect reportage again absorbs his money dealings in the restaurant at lunch with Vea and again at the dinner later where she makes “no offer to share the cost” (p. 192/175) but suggests he write a check when he is caught short. Earlier, in the candy store where he is finagled into buying a box of sweets to take to her, he is too distracted for his point of view, from which the scene is written, to carry the needed focus on the

monetary exchange. And by then, of course, his first encounter—the one we want to see—is long since over anyway.

I strongly suspect that if we had actually seen, along with Shevek, the coin/script/credit card in Shevek's till-then "empty" hands for the first time in a store, we would have experienced one of those fictive interfaces that would have immeasurably deepened our understanding of both sides: Shevek's psychology and Urras's sociology.

A similar pressure is on us to know about contraceptives. They exist on Urras. During the cock-teasing scene, one of Ve'a's excuses is that she hasn't taken one that day (and there is no indication that Shevek is unfamiliar with the word); and this is the only mention of the subject in the book (p. 203/185). But the occurrence of this one mention sends our imagination soaring back to Anarres, where Takver has had two children and two miscarriages, the last three pregnancies during an intense, worldwide famine.

Availability of contraception on Anarres would suggest one psychological interpretation of these pregnancies. Unavailability of contraception would suggest an entirely different one. The difference in the two possible psychologies for Takver is so great that the reader, ignorant as to whether contraception exists there or not, simply has no access to a vast area of Takver's persona. As she is an engaging character, the sensitive reader feels cheated by the author's withholding (or overlooking) of this information, because it withholds (or overlooks) so much of the character.

Let us summarize and draw a concluding point.

Contraception on Anarres, Shevek's first encounter with money on Urras, Shevek's and Takver's reaction to the mutilation of the *Principles*, and the change in amatory status among Bedap, Shevek, and Takvar are subjects that draw attention to themselves primarily by the metonyms they have left about their absences in the text. A very conventional idea of fiction asks that these subjects be resolved in the fictive foreground (or, possibly, in the case of Anarresti contraception, at least presented in the *récit*). A less conventional idea of fiction asks that they either be resolved in the foreground *or* that some metafictional sign be left in the text to indicate the author does *not* intend to resolve them.

Anarresti ideas about pregnancy and Anarresti adolescent male bonding behavior want a different resolution in the novel from the one they get. What suggests this different treatment is the specifically science-fiction model which holds that the origin both of ideas and social behavior—especially when the author is free to speculate and invent what

she cannot know—is of equal interest with the ideas and behavior itself. This concept, that ideas and behavior, however natural/moral/unquestionable, have affective social histories, is one of the indubitably significant messages that informs science fiction's inchoate textus. (This message is *not* intrinsic to the textus of mundane fiction.) A compendium of the various rhetorical postures, which both the most sophisticated and the most ham-handed science fiction have devised to support this model (and of which the model is constituted) would guide us through most of the truly significant verbal tropes traditional to the genre up through the beginning of the sixties: Sometimes ideas are seen as degenerate, as in Bester's Scientific People in *The Stars My Destination*; sometimes they have developed, as with Asimov's atomic traders in *Foundation*; others are seen as simply laterally transformed. Yet there is hardly an SF writer who has not expended some considerable amount of whatever linguistic inventiveness she possesses on presenting a compressed, syntactic, or imagistic representation of such an ideohistory.

The discovery of Shevek's temporal theory also wants—against the SF model—a different resolution from the one presented: here, however, what is asked for is an omission. The two rhetorical postures of omission discussed, by which SF traditionally deals with the coalescing of new conceptual knowledge, are in dialogue with the above concept of ideas as historically effected systems. Indeed, these rhetorical conventions of omission are what keep the message of the historicity of ideas and behavior from being *merely* a message in the narrow and propagandistic sense. These conventions of omission are the second of a pair of parameters, of which the concept of ideohistory is the first, which together create a richly contoured field capable of infinite modulation, in which exploration can proceed in any direction, and within which any number of subtle points can be posited. What the conventions of omission acknowledge is that, while ideas *do* have determining histories, a *new* idea is, indeed, new. In terms of any determining matrix of extant knowledge, its center is unknown. While certain conjectures may be made *about* any new idea, its center, till it actually arrives, however outrageous or conservative the speculation about it, must *remain* unknown. (That the center *is* unknown is what justifies, supports, impels the breadth, complexity, daring, and richness of speculation in the first place.) Together, the convention of ideohistories and the convention of idiocentric omissions (or opacities) generate the basic SF dialectic. The two conventions are what finally allow science fiction to treat ideas as signifiers—as complex structures that organize outward in time and

space (they have causes, they have results) as well as inward (their expressions, their forms, their deconstructions) yet some parts to that complex structure nevertheless registering as reasonably opaque. The two conventions are what free science fiction from the stricture that has held back so much modern thought, of treating ideas as signifieds—as dense, semantic objects with essential, hidden, yet finally extractable semantic cores. We must remember that in science fiction, speculation is a metaphor for knowledge; too many critics today find themselves arguing, however inadvertently, that (rather than ceding to this metaphoric hierarchy) knowledge of some sort of prior, privileged system (say, “science”) can or must generate some metaphoric commentary on the use, workings, and efficacy of speculation itself. This is simply not the case.

At any rate, it is not surprising, when we look at it in this light, that an SF story or novel that violates one of these SF conventions should violate both. Much of Le Guin’s novel, on some very basic level, takes place away from this richest pair of science-fiction conventions. I question seriously whether the book is the stronger for it.

## §6

The problem of didacta in *The Dispossessed* raises itself on every level. Indeed, the main subject under this rubric—the philosophy of Odo (Cf. Greek *odos* “street” or “road”; and the Chinese *tao* “path” or “way”)—manages to put itself beyond discussion. To disapprove either of the philosophy as an ethical construct, or the way the ethical construct has been used to contour the aesthetic construct of the novel, is simply to declare oneself out of sympathy with the book. A critic who is seriously uncomfortable with either of these aspects had best look for another work to discuss.

The signs Le Guin repeatedly presents to call up the richness of Shevek’s character are: 1) an inner energy and enthusiasm, and 2) a composed and contained exterior. For me, they never quite integrate into a readerly experience of personality. What stands between them and prevents their inmixing are all Shevek’s cool, crisp answers to the straw arguments posed by the Urrasti to the Odonian way. All these answers, which are finally what identify the arguments as straw, belong ultimately to the world of art where, to paraphrase Auden’s *Calaban to the Audience*, great feelings loosen rather than tie the tongue. On highly politicized Anarres, one might argue, the inhabitants seem to spend half

their time talking politics and are therefore very comfortable in political discussions; moreover, half their arguments seem to be a running rehearsal of an argument with their own fictionalized vision of Urras; but *that* "Urras," as Le Guin so effectively points out, *is* an Anarresti fiction. And the arguments that the Anarresti get a chance to practice are all with other more or less convinced Odonians. Those basic premises that a displaced Anarresti like Shevek would have to retrieve to answer not even the political arguments of the Urrasti but the basic assumptions that the Urrasti make without even broaching overt political discourse might take a bit more digging on Shevek's part than they seem to.

On Urras, Shevek is constantly having to face what strikes him as injustice, injustice of a kind he has never met before. In my own experience, such precise and ready answers to injustice come only with repeated exposure to the (many times repeated) injustice, with space between to contemplate, conjecture, and rehearse one's response. The condition of modern woman and man in the face of new outrage, *l'esprit d'escalier*, is unknown to Shevek.

For me it would have added much to Shevek's psychological texture if three or four times instead of having the quick and measured reply on his tongue, or the proper passage from Odo in his mind to bolster him up, he had kept his composure in bewildered consternation but later thought, with the same passion he brings to his other abstract considerations, of what he *might* have said.

Atro's description of the coming of the Hainish to Urras (p. 125/114) and his comparison of origin myths *is* witty *and* easily expressed. It presupposes, however, that he has said as much many times before to many Urrasti who have posed arguments similar to Shevek's. This is why his little speech works both as humor and as characterization. (One only wishes Le Guin could have trusted the humor enough to make do, in the paragraph on Shevek's response, with "Shevek laughed," and omitted the lumbering and tautological "Atro's humor gave him pleasure" (p. 127/115) before going on to "But the old man was serious.") But even in an Anarresti chapter, when Shevek, age nineteen, encounters Sabul over the publication of his paper, we find such descriptions of the young physicist facing his older, hostile professor:

His gentleness was uncompromising; because he would not compete for dominance he was indomitable. (p. 103/94)

This would be barely acceptable as description of a serene, sixty-year-old, Faulknerian patriarch, secure with the confidence of class, money,

and age. As a description of a nineteen-year-old physics major—however sure he is of his rightness—it is ludicrous; and its suggestion of absolute virtue, for either a sixty-year-old or a nineteen-year-old, throws one back to the worst of pulp diction and pulp psychology. Too many sentences like the above dampen the live charge in the details of Shevek's characterization that might actually interact to cast lights and shadows in the reader's mind.

Many of the novel's didactic interchanges concern the difference in treatment of women between Urras and Anarres. "Where are the women?" Shevek asks a group of Urrasti physicists (p. 65/59)—presumably to provoke them, though it seems somewhat out of character.

Mini-speeches follow. And from there on Shevek seems to forget completely the political situation of women on Urras and what (given the author's meticulous care to keep the production space of Anarres equally deployed between males and females) must be taken as women's conspicuous absence.

Again I am thrown back to experience: an English, school-teacher friend of mine once decided to take his vacation in South Africa to visit a mathematician of his acquaintance at the University of Johannesburg. John is a moderate liberal in matters of race—not particularly revolutionary. (Revolutionaries simply do not visit South Africa; nor is this in any sense an analogue of the situation between Urras and Anarres, because trade, emigration, and tourist traffic in both directions between England and South Africa is immense.) Nevertheless, John, like most Englishmen, is aware of the South African racial situation. When he came back from his vacation, he told me: "It's fascinating. In Jo'burg, you just don't *see* any blacks. Anywhere. And because you know they *are* there, you find yourself looking for them *all* the time—even in bars and stores where you'd be rather surprised to see blacks in London. Michael—my mathematician friend—and I were driving from the University to his place, which is in a suburb, and we had a minor smash-up with another car. By the time we had gotten out, there was a policeman there with his pad out, taking down names and numbers. The driver of the other car was Indian. And when the policeman demanded, 'Colour?' my heart began to thud and I grew terribly embarrassed, because I thought *now* I'd run up against it. Then Michael answered, 'Green,' and I realised the policeman was taking down the colours of our cars."

There is no way one can read a 90-percent population of exploited and oppressed blacks as an exact analogue of a 52-percent population of oppressed and exploited women. My recount of John's anecdote is simply

to indicate various tendencies in the basic psychology of the traveler in politically alien space. To take John's anecdote momentarily as fiction, any didacta laid *over* this psychological structure ("I guess the racial situation there wasn't as bad as I thought," or "The racial tension in the air was *that* great; the situation is even worse than I'd suspected," or any of half a dozen other possible didactic conclusions with any of half a dozen possible relations to the socioeconomic reality of Johannesburg) *become* character painting. But without the support of some valid psychological structure, the didacta alone would be fictively vacuous.

There is certainly no way that John's anecdote about the visible absence of blacks could be transferred to the planet Urras and made to fit the visible absence of women in the Ieu Eun University. Such one-to-one transfers usually make schematic, lifeless science fiction at the best of times: and *The Dispossessed* veers close enough to the schematic. Yet one can see a scene in which Shevek, knowing he is going to teach a segregated class (his first), steels himself not to rock the boat. One of the "students," however, is a privileged Urrasti wife or daughter who, interested in such things, has gotten special permission to observe a single class. When she comes up to speak to him after class—perhaps it is customary for the shaved Urrasti women in such situations to wear male wigs—the other men in the class know all about her. But Shevek mistakes her for a man. When he discovers his mistake, he wonders what is happening to his own perceptions of sex while he is there on Urras. In short, one wants something of the folded-back-on-itself recomplication in the psychology of the political alien that John's anecdote conveys. And again, because such an incident on Urras would have had to be an interface, both Shevek's reality and the reality of the A-io culture would have registered as richer by it.

I do not wish to give the impression that science fiction must imitate the real in any simple and singular way. But the charge—of most presumptuously rewriting Le Guin's novel for her—that I have already laid myself open to several times now is one that I cannot see how to avoid in order to make the point paramount here: That point is merely the specifically science-fictional version of the advice the poet Charles Olson once gave a fiction-writing class at Black Mountain College: "Without necessarily imitating the real, we must keep our fictions *up to* the real." No matter how science-fictional our entertainments (in both the active- and middle-voice sense of "entertain"), they must approach the same order of structural complexity as our own conscious perceptions of the real.

## §7

The following six pages are purely theoretical. They have grown up in dialogue with the work of Suvin and others whose papers on science fiction have appeared in the journal *Science Fiction Studies*. I hope to present my own points so that readers need only be familiar with general points, rather than the specific papers I am responding to. Those readers who pursue the text through the following intricacies will find themselves with an exploded linguistic model of the phenomenon that is science fiction along with a massive, if not crushing, critique of such a model's limitations.

In a simple sense, what science fiction does—at the level of coined science-fictional term (e.g., Cordwainer Smith's or Frank Herbert's use of the term *ornithopter*), at the level of the specifically science-fictional sentence (e.g., Robert Heinlein's "The door dilated"), and at the level of the uniquely science-fictional plot (e.g., Theodore Sturgeon's *The Clinic* in which: An amnesiac and aphasic man is brought to a clinic where various people, as they try to piece together his history, discover he is from *an alien world*)—is to take recognizable syntagms and substitute in them, here and there, signifiers from a till then wholly unexpected paradigm.\* The occurrence of unusual, if not downright opaque, signifiers in the syntagm focuses our attention on the structures implied (since the "objects" that define the structures are themselves so frequently mysterious in one way or another), whether internal, external, implicit or explicit to any given signifier (or set of signifiers) in a given SF text. (This I take to be the most salient theoretical point in Scholes's book-length essay, *Structural Fabulation* [University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1975.]) This focusing (or rather refocusing) does not occur in mundane fiction.

These structures are most easily discussed in terms of difference:

At the level of term: How would an *ornithopter* differ in operation and design from either a helicopter or (to appeal to the Demotic meaning of that most classical of Greek roots) a chicken?

\**Syntagm* and *paradigm* are, of course, part of the by now communal vocabulary of structuralism, along with sign, text, signifier, signified, metaphor, metonymy, *et al.* Briefly, and for our purposes, a syntagm is a pattern of signs (or signifiers) that functions by means of patterned interactions. Each signifier in the syntagm also marks a position in the pattern. For each position there is usually a list of other signifiers which, if substituted for the signifier already at that position, still allows the syntagm to go on functioning in a more or less similar way. Such a list is called the paradigm of signifiers for a given syntagmic position. Signifiers not on that list, or from other lists, either bring the syntagm's function to a halt or cause that function to change so greatly that it is best considered a new syntagm.

At the level of sentence: How would the operation and construction of a door that dilated differ from the operation and construction of the door, say, by which I entered this room?

At the level of plot: How would the effects of an amnesiac alien on a hospital differ from those of a amnesiac human; and how would a hospital so effected effect an alien amnesiac different from a human amnesiac? What would be the differences in the processes of discovery and exploration between an alien and a human amnesiac?

Though the easiest discourse, as with all fantastic literature, is in terms of difference, we must not confuse either an easy or a difficult discourse with the primarily mental (or, even better, imaginative) event that is such a discourse's referent.

What necessitates calling the above explanation "simple"—in the sense of simple-minded—and what also leaves any simple idea of "distancing" or "estrangement" (*ostranie*) inadequate to account for the science-fictional phenomenon, is the process which we have mentioned once in passing and which Jacques Lacan has so persuasively brought to the analytical attention of contemporary thought in "Of structure as an inmixing of an otherness prerequisite to any subject what so ever"\* and other seminars: and that is the inmixing that occurs when *any* signifier is put into *any* syntagm, usual or unusual. (In the more available "The Insistence of the letter in the unconscious,"\*\* Lacan speaks of the "intrusion" of the signifier into the signified.) That inmixing (or intrusion) restructures the web of signifiers that is (or is our only expression of) the particular signifier's signified; as well, it restructures the web of signifiers that is (or is our only expression of) that signified below the syntagm itself taken as signifier. Our particular point is that for science fiction such inmixing (Cf. "Shadows/35," also "About 5,750 Words") works in a particular, unique, and identifying way.

Put a bit less polysyllabically: Once the new word has been absorbed into a sentence (that is, identically, as new for it), neither the word, nor the sentence considered apart from the word, retains its old meaning. The extension of the argument both to the science-fictional term and the science-fictional plot should be self-evident; but let us examine further the phenomenon at the level of the uniquely science-fictional sentence.

\*In *The Structuralist Controversy*, Macksey and Donato, eds., The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1972.

\*\*In *Structuralism*, Ehrmann, ed., Doubleday Anchor, New York, 1970, and in *The Structuralists: from Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, de George & de George, eds., Doubleday Anchor, New York, 1972.

If we wish to discuss the science-fictional phenomenon in terms of distancing or estrangement, within any easy discourse of difference, we can regard the justly famous sentence from Heinlein's *Beyond This Horizon* as the familiar syntagm that is expressed by the sentence "The door opened" in which the signifier "dilated" (from a till-then inappropriate paradigm) has been substituted at the "opened" position. (Presumably "swung back," "widened," "drifted in," etc., constitute the appropriate paradigm of signifiers for that position.) In terms of difference, however, the mental image of the door has undergone (because of the new predicate) a catastrophic change of form. The imagined door has gone from rectilinear to round; it is now composed of interleaved plates; quite likely its material composition has changed as well. Consider the sentence: "If this door is closed only an inch, one might accidentally trip on it coming through." Such a sentence obviously belongs to the discourse of the restructured web of signifiers (which is all we can express of the signified) rather than to the discourse around either the syntagm "The door opened" or the discourse around sphincter muscles and camera apertures that usually accompanies traditional uses of "dilated." We are dealing here neither with a familiar door suddenly estranged, a familiar process suddenly distanced, nor even a familiar sentence removed from its ordinary environment.

What distancing or estrangement there is is purely an aspect of the word order itself: The estrangement is totally restricted to the signifiers, *vis-a-vis* other genres.

But it is the *new* door and the *new* process (both, of course, imaginary) that are the referents of the sentence. And to say that the referent meaning of the sentence is rebuilt from the "distancing" or "estrangement" of either of these *old* sound-images is at least catachresis, if not just incorrect.

What is significant about the signifier "The door dilated," is not how the mental image is *like* either a conventional door or a conventional camera aperture, but rather how it *differs* from both.

To suggest the ramifications of our argument at the level of term: What is significant about an *ornithopter* is not how it is *like* either a helicopter or a bird. What is significant about it is that, when we focus our mind's eye at the joint of wing and fuselage, we can *see* the hydraulic pistons; when we open up the wing-casing, we can *follow* the cables and pulleys inside, we can *hear* the bearings in the bearing case around the connective shaft—which joints, pistons, cables and bearings are *foreign to both* birds and helicopters but without which our ornithopter *would not fly*.

And at the level of plot: With the story *The Clinic* we must locate this newness not in plot synopsis, but rather by an appeal to those shifts in psychology, those shadows of feeling, those emotional and intellectual signifieds through which the bizarre and astonishingly affective pidgin speech in which the amnesiac alien narrates the tale transcends synopsis as the narrator transcends his own ignorance of his origins—in short, an appeal to those most evanescent yet most felt of fictive phenomena by which fictive experience itself registers *as affect*, *as cognition*—rather than any expression of the way a particular affect, once it registers, is cognized.

The manner by which this inmixing occurs in SF—a manner unique to science fiction—whether at the level of term, sentence, or plot, is what distinguishes SF as a genre. The range of (or, if one prefers: the limitations on) themes, the particular conventions of transportation, economic organization and favored plot tropes that, after such a very brief history as a self-conscious entity, SF has, for better or worse, fixed on for their usefulness or stalled at through its own imaginative anemia, are secondary, malleable, and of more importance to the historical development of the larger subjects they exemplify, i.e., the various social institutions prevalent during the times when the particular science-fiction texts were written. The “ideas” or “conventions” or “plots” are not what make them science-fiction texts.

This inmixing, to the extent the writer envisions herself purveying a signified by a set of signifiers (however complex, connotative, allusive, and vast that signified is; or however stripped, stark, and immediate; however separable from the signifiers; or however inmixed with them—which is to say, to the extent the writer conceives *any* advantage to the reader of the text knowing the language it is written in) is what makes the writing of SF an art.

We have suggested some of the ways in which the internal structure of the sentence “The door dilated” is not the same as that of “The door opened.” A little thought will show that its external structure, i.e., its syntagmic expectations (what might sit, so to speak, on either side of that door, what its function might be in a particular SF text in which it appears), is different as well. (Indeed, “internal” and “external” here are points of view, rather than clearly demarked areas in the space of discourse.) Thus, in Disch’s witty satire *Echo Round His Bones*, a single door, with the aid of a matter transmitter, opens a passageway from Earth to Mars, while in Bester’s infinitely rich *The Stars My Destination*, doors, in his teleporting society, at certain social levels have fallen

out of architectural use entirely while at others they are accompanied by vast systems of blinds, labyrinths, and baffles. And it is the same uniquely science-fictional process of imagistic inmixing, which allows the internal structural modifications to *door* itself when certain sound-images are brought into syntactic proximity, that also governs—when certain phrases, sentences, or larger language units are properly positioned in the text—the external structural modifications around *door*.

Once we realize this, we can see that the discourse associated with the concept of estrangement—the discourse of syntagms and paradigms—with all its implications that “The door dilated” is, somehow, just a replacement for “The door opened,” belies the complex structures, internal and external, of which the specifically science-fictional sentence is the signifier.

“Bat Durston, blasters blazing, brought his spaceship around behind the asteroid,” simply can *not* substitute for “Bat Durston, sixguns blazing, brought his palomino around behind the corral”—though a number of times these lines from an old *Galaxy* advertisement (“You won’t find this kind of science fiction in *Galaxy!*”) have been discussed as though one might, indeed, find such science fiction *somewhere*. But neither cynicism nor sincerity, literary ham-handedness nor verbal sophistication sign themselves in their constitutive sentences (save in the mode of parody) with the particular pace, image density, or development either sentence above utilizes. The educated ear—particularly the ear educated to science fiction—should simply hear both sentences as bogus. More to the point, the example *is* a piece of copywriter’s wit. Science fiction has traditionally suffered from being judged by its packaging. But it compounds the sin to extend such judgment to analysis. There is another argument, that occurs on an entirely different level, which might be what the original advertisement appeals to, if not the discussions of it amidst terms like “paradigm,” “taxonomy,” and “estrangement.” When fictive diction reaches a certain cliché level in *any* genre, we simply cease to care *what* it means. But to claim a substitutability (other than as a metaphor for taste) offers us no insight into the mechanics of meaning within the separate genres, science fiction *or* western.

Though the simple description of what science fiction does with which we began generates, after the fact, the proper string of signifiers, it yields no insight into the possible webs of further signifiers such signifiers form around themselves which is, finally, their signified, their meaning. It yields no insight into what, in any specific SF text, those signifiers may be doing, whether at a specifically science-fictional level or not.

The particular *manner* in which the inmixing of syntagm and signifier occurs in science fiction, whether at the level of term, sentence, or plot, to create something *more than* and *different from* what those syntagms and signifiers yield separately is what makes science fiction. This inmixing is also what makes any analytical separation of the signifiers and syntagms such an artificial construct at best.\* The language with which SF accomplishes its particular mode of inmixing must frequently use unusual verbal juxtapositions, by which certain words are estranged from their more usual, extrageneric contexts. But the process we are trying to fix is that by which we recognize (in the sense of ordinary, imaginative perception) these new and different images, rather than how we later cognize them *as structures* (and, in so doing, find them more or less coherent in terms of the current scientific *épistémé* on which, of course, the ground rules of the game are, both in what is permitted and what is forbidden, laid) once the images are struck up by the hammer of language, like sparks, from the anvil of imagination.

Yet by beginning with this inadequate discourse and by sustaining a certain analytical pressure on it, we have moved to a richer picture of what science fiction is and is not than the discourse first appeared able to provide. And we are reassured by the similarity we immediately perceive with science fiction itself: As a genre, it so frequently begins as a discourse that appears inadequate to discourse on anything at all, but which, by auctorial application to it of a certain analytic energy among its visions, ends up writing much more of the world than, certainly, any description of the discourse can say.

## §8

One fictive problem of Urras remains homologous with a very real problem of Western society in general.

Something I have been doing for the last couple of years to decondition myself: Whenever I am in a situation where it occurs to me that the number of men and women seems about equal, I count.

On the subway platform this afternoon, I saw what struck me as a pretty even spread of women and men. The actual count? Eleven women, twenty-five men.

Somehow, by a process the good doctor B. F. Skinner might best explain, most Westerners—many women and most men—have been con-

\*Our “definition” from page 139 may now be called “*sous rature*.”

ditioned to read groups with sexual proportions of twenty-five/seventy-five to thirty-three/sixty-seven (women/men) as if they were fifty/fifty. Over two years I have managed to decondition myself to the point where twenty-five/seventy-five now *looks* to me like twenty-five/seventy-five. But thirty-three/sixty-seven still looks like fifty/fifty if I don't catch myself. One hopes this will change.

My analysis of this phenomenon is not complete. But I must assume that it is reinforced, if not caused, by the fact that fifty/fifty social groups are so seldom encountered on the street, in trains, on buses, or in airports.

On Anarres, Le Guin has at least, in emblem, taken care of the reinforcement syndrome, if not the causatives themselves. The fictive problem of Urras, like the real problem of earth, is the one that Shevek asks and gets no answer to: "Where are the women?"

I am a man. Frankly, as far as New York, London, Athens, Paris, San Francisco, A-io's Nio Esseia, or any other city, real or imaginary, I have been permitted to inhabit, I do not *know* the answer. Though I would like somebody to tell me, I do not hold it against Le Guin that she has not.

I do hold it against her, however, that she has asked the question and then dropped it as though, somehow, it *had* been answered—and I find it hard to believe this dropping of the question in a character who has not had to fight the reinforcement conditioning that I have had to, or who is moving in an alien political space presumably famous in his own world for its oppression of women. It is one of the missing concerns that leaves Shevek's psychology thin.

In interface with Shevek's psychology, I find Urras's sociology thin. When Shevek escapes the University to find the true masses of A-io, too much of what he finds is literature in the same sense I used the term in the party scene with Shevek and Veä. The journey into Nio, up through the encounter with the beggar, for all its inexact writing, works to evoke the presence of Nio Esseia's inner city. Later, the man whom Shevek is trapped with and who dies over three days through loss of blood from a mere hand injury calls up something real and important about the ironies, cruelties, and frailties of the human machine. But all in between—Shevek's first encounter with and protection by Tuio Maedda's nameless resistance organization, the protest gathering itself, Shevek's speech, and the government retaliation with helicopters and machine guns—lacks texture and resonance. It is not even that too few pages are devoted to all of this—seven, one of which is the speech itself. But many of us have listened, say, from eleven at night to six in the morning to the

live coverage of the police brutalities during the Columbia University sit-in: The protesters had been using the university radio station to organize their activities; when the police jammed the station, the protesters got New York's listener sponsored public radio station, WBAI-FM, to volunteer its facilities, so that the audience was automatically boosted from a few hundred to about three million; after hours of police horses trampling into telephone booths from which students were screaming descriptions of the beatings occurring outside, till glass walls shattered and the lines went dead, and another phone booth or walkie-talky came on to begin the same again, many of us heard, on another, major radio station half an hour after WBAI went off, that there had been "'minor disturbances' at Columbia University last night" which the police had brought under control by nine-thirty;\* I learned of Martin Luther King's assassination from a black man—who had it by phone at two minutes to seven—running up Avenue B and shouting the news to everyone he met; when I turned in to a bar, with half a dozen other people, I saw (after calling my mother who had already been phoned the news by a New Jersey relative) the first media report of the assassination at five minutes after the hour (a time confirmed by a dozen news reports over the next three days)—a substantial portion of the country's black community knew of the assassination (minutes) before the media released it to the country. I heard the conflicting live coverages of the Cuban response at the United Nations to the Kennedy invasion, on CBS and, simultaneously, a small, FM radio station that I'd accidentally left on at the same time as my television because the sound was the same: CBS (hooked in with NBC and ABC) cut the last thirty seconds of the Cuban Ambassador's speech as well as the thunderous, three minute ovation it received from the United Nations audience, to go immediately into its detracting "analysis" of the speech, while the conclusion and response

\*Many forget that Paris's famous May '68 student uprisings were related, however distantly, to New York's April '68 uprisings, which led to student protests of astonishing force throughout the Americas and Europe. Many people have written books about these months that arguably changed the world—including Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*; Cornelius Castoriades with Claude Lefort and Edgar Morin, *Mai 1968: la brèche*; Dark Star Collective, *Beneath the Paving Stones: Situationists and the Beach, May 68*; Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets*; Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968*; Alain Touraine, *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform*; Rene Vienet, *Enragés and the Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France May '68*; Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*; and Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*. There have also been several novels and films about the period, from James Jones (*The Merry Month of May*), Gilbert Adair (*The Holy Innocents*), Joseph Haldeman (*1968*) and, in film, Louis Malle (*Milou in May*) and Chris Marker (*A Grin without a Cat*).

was coming in over the radio . . . Again, the point here is not to say that the real is worse or better or even more interesting than Le Guin's science fiction. It is simply that if the last decade and a half has taught us anything it is that, over an area of political space as large as the USA, Russia, or, presumably, A-io, the internal structure of a political encounter is only half its relevance; its external structure is controlled by its interface with society's perception organs and information-distributing machinery, which controls the frequently conflicting public "knowledge" of that internal structure.

The protest gathering in *The Dispossessed* is a nineteen-thirties day-dream of a nineteen-ten strike—back when things were "simpler." That the Terran ambassador Keng has heard Shevek's speech on the radio and was "very moved" (p. 301/274) by it only sidesteps the complexity to mire the question in unnecessary sentimentality.

Before leaving our discussion of the novel at the resolution of action and incident, we must look at two characters on Anarres and the didactic uses they are put to.

The first is Bedap, Shevek's childhood friend, twice Shevek's lover, his political conscience, friend to Shevek's family, co-frere in the Syndicate of Initiative, and the single homosexual, male or female, mentioned by name in the novel.

The second character is Rulag, Shevek's mother, who leaves him with his father (who parks him fulltime with a nursery at what must be about the age of eighteen months, given the child's speech accomplishments: "Mine sun!" [p. 24/22]); Rulag comes to see Shevek in the hospital some eighteen years later with an offer of friendship Shevek rejects. Some twenty-odd years after that, she is the most articulate opponent in the Syndicate of Initiative to Shevek's plan for going to Urras.

Both these characters are put to different didactic uses, one of which I both disagree with and find personally offensive, and one of which I personally happen to approve of; but neither of which, I feel, are successful within the novel.

We discuss Bedap first:

The Moon stood high over the Northsetting Regional Institute of the Noble and Material Sciences . . . "I never thought before," said Turin . . . "of the fact that there are people sitting on a hill, up there, on Urras, looking at Anarres, at us, and saying 'Look, there's the Moon.' Our earth is their moon; our Moon is their earth."

"Where then is truth," declaimed Bedap, and yawned. (p. 36/33)

The central conceit of the novel is laid out here; Bedap speaks (and is mentioned by name) for the first time.

Bedap gnawed at a thumbnail.

is the next descript we have for the young man. And a page later:

But Bedap, a heavy-set, square-faced fellow, chewed on his thumbnail and said, "All the same, Tir's point remains. It would be good to know the truth about Urras."

"Who do you think is lying to us?" Shevek demanded. Placid, Bedap met his gaze. "Who, brother? Who but ourselves?"

The sister planet shone down on them, serene and brilliant, a beautiful example of the improbability of the real. (p. 40/36)

Some years later, after they have been apart for a time, Shevek is teaching and studying physics at the institute. Shortly after his funeral eulogy for the great, aged physicist Gvarab, he runs into Bedap in front of the Music Syndicate auditorium. The two old friends return to Shevek's room. Shevek talks of all his doubts about his work that the tradition-bound Institute has burdened him with. Bedap tells of his own doubts about the whole Anarresti system; he tells the story of Turin, his satirical play and its aftermath of social disapproval: Turin is now in a rehabilitation asylum.

Le Guin describes Bedap in Shevek's room:

Bedap had small, rather squinting eyes, a strong face, and a thickset body. He bit his fingernails, and in years of doing so had reduced them to mere strips across his thick, sensitive fingertips. (p. 145/132)

One wishes that the description had been worded so as not to insult those of us who had remembered this singular fact of Bedap's habituations over the intervening ninety-eight pages. At any rate, after arguing politics, the two men go to bed:

When he came back [from the bathroom] Bedap proposed to sleep on the floor, but as there was no rug and only one warm blanket, this idea was, as Shevek monotonously remarked, stupid . . . Shevek unrolled the bedding and lay down . . . It was cold. Each felt the warmth of the other's body as very welcome . . . They moved closer together. Shevek turned over on his face and fell asleep within two minutes. Bedap struggled to hold on to consciousness, slipped into the warmth, deeper, into defenselessness, the trust-

fulness of sleep, and slept. In the night one of them cried out loud, dreaming. The other one reached his arm out sleepily, muttering reassurance, and the blind warm weight of his touch outweighed all fear. (p. 152/137)

In our culture, the discourse of affection is hopelessly confused with the discourse of sex/seduction. It is through the equivocation of the two discourses that we presume (and the presumption is confirmed by the next paragraph) Shevek and Bedap make love. Nevertheless, I think this is a moment most readers, especially young ones, will take with them from the novel. Despite the reliance on the confusion of discourses, despite the sentimentality, despite the next paragraph's attempt to make the morning-after situation, which would probably be handled with much gentleness and compassion, appear businesslike and cursory, what is taken away I believe is valid. For one thing, it represents an intelligent synthesis of a very old debate.

Auden has written somewhere that the great crime against the modern spirit is to treat individuals as if they were interchangeable. Anyone who has known the soul-deadening effect of infinite forms, impersonal paychecks issued by an absent or even unknown employer, the routinized societal slots in which so many people spend their lives—or even better, anyone who has known the amazing and astonishing sense of social support, community, and well-being that accrues when, in one's work, one's business dealings, one's social life, one is valued by a community of people as an individual—knows how truly Auden speaks. Social needs remain, but the individuals who fill them are *not* “replaceable.”

Yet, if we do not, at some level, assume that people are interchangeable, what constrains us to treat all equally—before the law, for example? If we *do* respond to people entirely as individuals, we cannot deny that such individual aspects include the fact that one person is more pleasant *to us*, or more useful *to us* than another. How are we to respond then, over any statistical array of people, by laws and rules that take such aspects into account without exploiting them in ways totally biased toward the subjectivity of the law-makers?

It is a complex argument, and in several places Le Guin argues on the more, rather than the less, complex points in it—notably the discussion with (the at-that-point unidentified) Takver at Shevek's going-away party.

The scene quoted recalls strikingly the scene in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, where Michael Valentine Smith makes love (and loses his virginity) with one of (possibly) four women. Somehow, for the rest of the

book, this does not differentiate his relationship, one way or the other, with *any* of them! Heinlein's scene is an exemplar of the psychological self-deception necessary to condone the "interchangeability" Auden decries. Le Guin, however, primarily by use of a much lighter touch (two sentences, rather than two pages), carefully prepared for in more ways than I can outline here, has, by employing a similar anonymity, momentarily effected a moving, intelligent synthesis in a complex debate: Their semantic interchangeability is used here to suggest they are equal in their vulnerability.

In the next paragraph, we learn that their subsequent affair is the resumption of an "adolescent pairing" that has not been mentioned till now. The placing of this important information about the earlier affair here is an example of a frequently effective science-fiction technique for displaying the relative decline in social egregiousness, *vis-a-vis* our own culture, of a particular type of behavior: The character performing this particular professional job just happens to be non-white; the character performing another just happens to be a woman; the character doing thus and such just happens to be naked. That "*just happens*," or any other overt protestation of insignificance, is precisely the sort of didactic mundane fiction has taught us to distrust. But the placement of a given piece of information within the science-fictional syntagm in such a way that our current cultural evaluation of its import must compete against the far decreased import this *position* implies can be a finely honed critical trope in the hands of the best SF practitioners. (The reverse technique—placing some presumably insignificant piece of information in a position which implies great importance to it—is also part of our rhetorical battery.) Because, however, something more than relative social egregiousness is involved in *any* affair, regardless of the sex of the participants (and usually the younger they are, the more important to them it is), and because we must presume this affair was in progress during the scene under the Northsetting moon previously quoted (Occam's razor cuts a much finer line in fiction than in real life), this is perhaps not the best use of the technique citable. At any rate, Le Guin reassures us that the resumed affair is brief: ". . . Shevek was pretty definitely heterosexual and Bedap was pretty definitely homosexual" (p. 153/139).

But the didactic purpose to which Bedap is put (that I referred to earlier) comes with his last appearance in the novel.

Toward the end of Chapter Twelve, Shevek's partner Takver and their daughter Sadik are being harrassed by their fellow workers because of

Shevek's reputation for wanting to open communication with Urras. Shevek and Bedap are walking ten-year-old Sadik back to her dorm when suddenly she asks Shevek if she might stay the night with him and Takver. She tells Shevek "with desperate courage" (an admirable sentiment, if an unhappy hyperbole) that everyone in her dorm thinks Shevek, Bedap, and the Syndicate they have started are traitors. Then she bursts out weeping. Shevek holds her and tells Bedap to go on:

There was nothing for Bedap to do but leave them there, the man and the child, in that one shared moment of intimacy which he could not share, the hardest and deepest, the intimacy of pain. It gave him no sense of relief or escape to go; rather he felt useless, diminished. "I am thirty-nine years old," he thought as he walked on toward his domicile, the five-man room where he lived in perfect independence. "Forty in a few decads. What have I done? What have I been doing? Nothing. Meddling. Meddling in other people's lives because I don't have one. I never took the time. And the time's going to run out on me, all at once, and I will have never had . . . that." He looked back, down the long quiet street, where the corner lamps made soft pools of light in the windy street, but he had gone too far to see the father and daughter, or they had gone. And what he meant by "that" he could not have said, good as he was with words; yet he felt that he understood it clearly, that all his hope was in this understanding, and that if he would be saved he must change his life. (p. 326/297)

Here Bedap exits from the novel.

We have only been given three tangible factors about Bedap's life: he bites his nails, he holds certain political beliefs, and he is homosexual. His political beliefs at this point are one with Shevek's; so that cannot be the life-element to be altered. Some pages earlier (p. 318/290), the author told us he has gotten over his nailbiting. This leaves only one thing in the universe of the novel for him to change.

I currently belong to a gay fathers group—twelve fathers, eighteen children (sixteen biological, two adopted). Two of the fathers live with the children's mothers; ten of us do not. We take our kids together on group trips ice-skating, to local museums, have biweekly communal meals with our kids, and rap sessions without. (The underlying assumption to Le Guin's passage is a complete discontinuity between homosexuality and parenthood, which neither history nor the Kinsey study, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), will support.) But there are a number of homophile organizations that are explicitly committed to the support of children and the extended involvement in their upbringing.

Assuming Anarres, with its complete acceptance of homosexuality, has at least reached the enlightenment level of Manhattan's Upper West Side, one must assume the only reason Bednap might "have never had . . . that" is because he didn't want it.

The innuendo that "if he would be saved" Bedap must change his homosexuality is both coy and pious (already an ugly combination) and, to me, offensive.

What constitutes the offense is that I am sure my reading of the text is *not* the one Le Guin intended. I suspect her identification with Bedap during the envisioning of the scene was such that, like him, she too "could not have said" what all this precisely signified. There are too many verbal signs in the paragraph—the meaningless absolute, "perfect independence," the simple cliché itself "would be saved"—that suggest a situation which, however "felt," is not vividly seen, accurately analyzed, nor clearly represented. The whole effect is vague, and—one suspects for the author—possibly symbolic of some sort of heterosexual consciousness quite apart from her denoted subject: a homosexual male's perception of a (by Anarresti standards) socially egregious family relationship. Nevertheless, one way to find out what you're thinking is to write it down and read it over carefully; once read over, it is hard to ignore the letter of the meaning, which certainly shines the more brightly in the light of personal offense, but which, offense or no, still lies at the core of this vague and diffuse surround of signification. For the didactic reduction of this paragraph is no different from the idea expressed by a fifty-six-year-old part-time milk company clerical worker, Julia Kaplan, in a recent *Ms.* magazine when interviewed on her thoughts over the possibility that the Equal Rights Amendment might help homosexuals: "I think these people *should* feel ashamed. It's not normal." What Kaplan says does not offend me; I simply disagree. What Le Guin says does—precisely because one can sense the idea itself mystified in the paragraph that presents it so that no open disagreement is possible.

But what should be brought home here is far more important than any personal offense: In so conventionalized a discourse as fiction (and science fiction has almost all the conventions of mundane fiction as well as a panoply of its own), we have the choice of saying precisely what we want to say (which requires a massively clear vision and intense analytical energy), or saying what everyone else has said (which is what happens either when vision fades, analysis errs, or energy fails). There *is* no middle ground. The concert of the three—vision, analysis, and energy—at work within the field of a given language is what we rec-

ognize as language skill/talent/craft. But the cliché, at almost any level, always signals one of the three's failure; the cliché indicates this because language is as structurally stable as it is: indeed, the cliché—at almost any level save the ironic—is the stability of language asserting itself without referent.

The didactic purpose I sense behind the use of Shevek's mother Rulag in the closing chapters of the novel is (to repeat myself) one that I, personally, approve of.

In Western literature, and in the Western imagination since Freud, the position Rulag fills in the chain of signifiers that makes up the experience of *The Dispossessed* has usually been filled by a man—by the Father. It is the Father whom the son must overcome. It is the Father who stands for society. Le Guin goes to great lengths to reduce Rulag's "motherhood" to pure symbol, for as Rulag herself declares, the real relation of mother and son she and Shevek share is practically biological accident. Le Guin then places her, as symbol, in the position so frequently filled by the Father.

Two things subvert this otherwise laudatory enterprise of revising our modern symbology. The first I can only mention; the other I shall discuss. First, there already exists a symbolic category to receive the cold, tradition-bound mother (the Great Bitch Mother, which encompasses both *Cinderella's* Wicked Stepmother and *Cuckoo's Nest's* Big Nurse) which informs our reading of all such fictive characters. The category is contoured by the economic, the sociological, and the historical pressures that, in Western society, have frequently supplied different motivations to men and women. Even though these pressures are not in evidence on Anarres, the category is still part of our readerly apparatus; and it posits a very different reading for all such mothers, even in a situation, like Anarres's, which by implication has a different economic, social, and historic organization. To accomplish such a symbolic revision, the author would have to confront such economic, social, and historic pressures head on, rather than by implication. With such an undertaking, leaving the revised pressures in the implied universe almost assures fictive defeat.

But what undercuts Le Guin's purpose even more than this ready-made symbolic category—or rather what plays totally into its grasping hands—is that Rulag is so seldom anything *more* than symbol. This is the point we shall examine.

At the beginning of the book, we only hear of her: She has been assigned to another work area. Her partner Palat explains that (p. 24/21)

she “has a great work to do”—though we hear no more of it than that, one way or the other, accomplished or failed. We never even discover what it concerns. Some great dam or irrigation project to be built? Some system of mines to be organized? If we did know what it was, and if we knew whether she had been successful at it or not (or if, perhaps, it is still going on), we would have a focus around which to organize the little, other information we have about her. More than a dozen years later, when Rulag, for the first time, suddenly visits Shevek in the hospital, she is all handsomeness and control, poise and dispassion—which Shevek reads as an obvious sign of inner despair and need. Again, his reading is far too literary, and it is hard not to suspect that, since her exterior is so much like his, he might be more likely to assume that exterior contained similar doubts and self-disciplines to his own.

Rulag offers to befriend her son. He refuses the offer. After she leaves, he breaks out crying.

Again, what keeps this from coalescing for me into an affecting readerly experience is, first, a thinness to the writing; second, Shevek’s reaction contravenes too much of what I have observed; again, it is too much “literature.”

A parent who goes and comes over the years, who vanishes for six months, shows up for three weeks, then disappears again only to arrive a year later for a four-month stay, each time bringing tension, causing scenes, upsetting family routines and frequently precipitating economic difficulties—such a parent who makes an offer of friendship to an older child newly on his/her own may well encounter such a reaction as Shevek’s: hostility, upset, rejection.

But I know three instances of parents, separated from the family before the children were three years old, who did not materialize again until after the children were grown.

In all three cases the initial response of the children to the new parent was excitement and enthusiasm that certainly lasted through the first weeks of the relationship—even though in one case it involved a perfectly respectable twenty-three-year-old Englishwoman discovering that she was illegitimate. In one case, a son and a mother, the relationship became very close and has continued so over at least eight years. In the other two cases, after a few months spent largely in one another’s company, the relations cooled into an amicable acquaintanceship: children and parents simply did not share that many interests.

The intensely affective cathexis that Le Guin’s description of Shevek’s response invokes is always, in the real world, a manifestation of

what the parent does *with* and *to* the child—not what the parent does away from the child. And while I would be willing to believe the Anarresti society might cool the enthusiasm and excitement that to me seems natural to Shevek's situation, I see no factors that would, *sui generis*, produce Shevek's response as Le Guin gives it. For that we would need a society that placed intense importance on having parents from birth on, a society in which the parentless child was cruelly and repeatedly ostracized even more than in our own society.

This is the reason that the closing of this chapter remains for me mere melodrama; and that Shevek's tears obliterate even the hazy image of Rulag I was able to form.

When, twenty years later, Rulag turns up again as Shevek's most articulate opponent in the Syndicate, I can't help think how much more affecting the conflict would have been if a rich and believable relation had already been established between them. As it is, Rulag appears only as a list of reasons why communication should not be established with Urras, placed in a symbolic mouthpiece—even though I respect what the symbol is supposed to be accomplishing.

The strongest image I actually have of Rulag as a person is when Shevek, on Urras, after having purchased his suit and shoes by phone, tries them on and turns "away from the mirror, but not before he had been forced to see that, thus clothed, his resemblance to his mother Rulag was stronger than ever" (p. 118/107).

## §9

Some people may wish to argue that the sum of all these fictive thinnesses (easiest to discuss in terms of differences with our own experience) can be deconstructed into a political template at odds with the surface form of Le Guin's apparent political sympathies. But that is beyond the scope of this treatment.

Shevek's brief homosexual affair is far more affecting than his traditional heterosexual one—not because it is unusual but because it involves Shevek in intellectual change (their initial political disagreements) and leads to action (the establishment of the new Syndicate) as well as emotional support. In the portrayal of the book's major heterosexual relation, all aspects of Takver's personality or intellect that might cause conflict and thus promote intellectual change and growth in either her or Shevek have been relegated to the same mysterious

space as Anarresti contraception methods. The heterosexual relation is merely supportive—and supportive, when all is said and done, of some of Shevek's least attractive characteristics. Some people may wish to argue that all this follows a tradition so old and so pervasive in Western literature that it currently threatens to leach all interest from the precincts of fiction itself. Such an argument is also beyond our purpose.

Such templates and such traditions are primarily statistical entities. To argue such positions rigorously would demand an analysis and comparison of many, many works in even greater detail than we have exercised here. And to make such a larger criticism, when all is said and done, is only to say that Le Guin's novel suffers from the same failings as practically every other contemporary, mundane novel (as well as most nineteenth-century ones).

If these failings are highlighted in *The Dispossessed*, one general highlighting factor is the structural focus peculiar to science fiction; for these failings *are* structural tendencies that the overall textus of Western fiction has, unfortunately, incorporated into itself. The second highlighting factor is that Le Guin has taken for her central subject much of the socioeconomic material to which these structural tendencies, in mundane fiction, are a response. That she has found, in the alternating chapters, an aesthetic form that reflects the technological underpinnings of her tale is admirable. If, however, she had found a form that reflected the socioeconomic underpinnings, which are even more central to it, she would have written one of the great novels of the past three hundred years.

I suspect I am at odds even with most sympathetic contemporary critics of SF in my feeling that science fiction, precisely through the particular quality of inmixing unique to it and the rhetorical postures available to it, has the greatest chance of overcoming, first by individual efforts and finally as a genre, precisely these fictive problems. The steps we have made in this direction are certainly small. But when we have gone a great deal further, Le Guin's novel may well hold its place among the earliest such steps.

The critic criticizes by dramatizing a difference with an implied or explicit set of experiences. Quite possibly the writer—and particularly the writer of science fiction—writes by dramatizing a difference with her own experience, but all we are prepared to discuss here is that attendant analysis of those experiences which is, I would hazard from introspection, the more accessible part of the process. The science-fictional restructuring in which one's own experiences are broken down and re-

assembled within the framework of a given fictive future presupposes a far greater amount of analysis in the creative act itself, whether conscious or unconscious, than in the act of creating a mundane fiction. Indeed, this analysis *is* the creative aspect of that emphasis on structure that critics such as Robert Scholes have already noted for the genre.

In this sense, Le Guin's successes are successes of analysis (as her failures are failures of analysis) of her fictive material. Because of the unique nature of the inmixing that is science fiction, these successes of analysis manifest themselves not as didacta, but as emotional densities, verbal life, and an underlying psychological recomplication in the material, all of which invests the text with life and energy. The failures of analysis manifest themselves as a discrepancy between those same fictive densities and the didactic enterprise that runs through the work—and that, indeed, any fictive work (but especially science fiction) can always be reduced to (if it is not overtly manifest in the text) if we choose to make such a reduction.

A writer of mundane fiction works with difference in the following way. The first *analytical* question must be: What is the easiest way to express my material in fictive terms? With this as basis, the second analytical question is: But what is my material *really* like? The difference between the two gives the text all its energy, life, and significance—whether it be in the discourse of the senses presented as foreground, or the discourse of psychosocial analysis presented as *récit*. In such a text, a discrepancy between what registers as felt and what registers as didactic is best handled by excising the didactic—from the sensibility and the text.

The writer of science fiction deals with difference in the following way. Again the first analytical question must be: What is the easiest way to express my material in fictive terms? With this as basis, the second question becomes: What have I experienced, and in light of that experience, what *could* what I want to express be really like? The difference between the easiest expression and the actual text again lends the text its brio. But in the situation of the science-fiction writer, a discrepancy between what registers as felt and what registers as didactic is best handled by integrating the didactic through a further exploration and analysis of one's own experiences: by dramatizing the didactic points in a foreground in which is perceptible some structural syntagm that can be reduced to the required didactum—and as frequently several more besides.

The science-fiction author most generally associated with the problem of didacta is, of course, Heinlein. With Heinlein, the argument runs:

The didacta in Heinlein are frequently absurd and are bearable, if at all, only because of a certain rhetorical glibness. If the foreground vision and the didacta were integrated, the foreground vision would change in such a way that it would no doubt be insupportable even to the author. With Le Guin, the argument runs: The didacta are frequently admirable, but as frequently clumsily put. If the foreground vision and the didacta were integrated, the foreground vision would be far stronger, livelier, more interesting, and relevant. Both, in their underlying assumptions, though, are still the same argument.

The actual talk of “integration” that appears in much of the sympathetic criticism we have had on Le Guin’s work to date seems to me to do the author a disservice. The “social integration” cited as one of *The Dispossessed*’s accomplishments is too frequently a manifestation of its failures of analysis, of questions not asked. And the signs of it in the text are the lack of science-fictional integration between the didacta and the novelistic foreground.

Though it is certainly not Le Guin’s fault, I am afraid the “integration” being sought for by this criticism is a kind of critical nostalgia for signs of an older fictive naiveté.

Certainly science-fiction novels are reminiscent of older genres. The progress of the young hero in Van Vogt’s *The Weapon Shops of Isher* from the provinces into the social machinations of the city recalls the plots of how many Balzac novels (even to the gambling incident in *Père Goriot*); and the deployment of the City of the Game and the various pastoral locations on Venus in *The Pawns of Null-A* creates a geofictive syntagm practically congruent with that of Paris, Combray, and Balbec in Proust’s great novel. Indeed, the alternating chapters of *The Dispossessed* suggest nothing so much as a development on the form so favored by Proust’s near-contemporary, Edgar Rice Burroughs, who employed a somewhat similar alternating-chapter format in Tarzan novel after Tarzan novel. But the very fact that Van Vogt recalls Proust while Le Guin recalls Burroughs is to say that the interest of the observation is exhausted with its statement. What is reminiscent in science fiction of older forms is only of minimal interest—or at any rate it is of the same order of interest as those elements in Shakespeare’s plays which recall the chronicles, tales, and older plays from which he took his plots: To keep critical proportion, the relation must be discussed in terms of difference rather than similarity.

Here is the place to note that this analysis of the writer’s own experience must not be confused with the critical analysis of the science

fiction text into recognizable syntagms and unusual signifiers spoken of in §7. The analysis of experience I speak of leaves no explicit signs *in* the text. Rather, it becomes with recombination and inmixing the text itself. Indeed, all the text can explicitly sign is its lack: and *one* such sign is the split between didacta and foreground. To repeat: the inmixing of syntagm and signifier is an essentially inadequate discourse to signify the process unique to science-fiction discourse (a process not definable, only designatable) that allows that science-fictional materia that is both analysis and language to transcend both ideology and autobiography.

Just over fifty years ago Lukács wrote: “The novel is the only art form where the artist’s ethical position is *the* aesthetic problem.” Very possibly in the same year, Wittgenstein recorded the observation in the notebook which was to become the basis for the *Tractatus*: “Ethics is aesthetics.”

That science fiction novels *are* novels is to say Lukács’s observation still applies. But to be fully aware that they *are* science fiction is to be aware of the extended range of aesthetic technique SF has at its disposal to solve the problem.

If Le Guin is to move her work into the area so frequently cited for it, where its successes are notable in terms of its difference from the run of mundane fiction—a run that takes in the best with the worst—she must, first, galvanize her style. It does no good to tell an author, much of whose language sentence by sentence is pompous, ponderous, and leaden, that her writing is lucid, measured, and mature. The tones of voice that many of her sentences evoke belong, under control, within quotation marks in the dialogue of characters, or, if outside quotation marks, in their reported thoughts. They do not belong in the auctorial voice.

If this stylistic galvanizing occurs, the result, I suspect, will be that her language, besides becoming far cleaner, sharper, and more exact, will also become far more “science-fictiony”—that is, it will show many more of those magical combinations of words that, simple and uncluttered, are still the language by which we recognize the alien world.

In an interview with the Eugene Women’s Press Le Guin has suggested one possible way to bring about the refocusing that must go along with this stylistic refinement:

In public situations when people ask me, Why do you write about men . . . I say, because I like to write about aliens. It’s very flip; it’s also true. I’m fascinated by this attempt to get into the Other. I’m terribly fond of my women, it’s just that they are me. It’s too close. Now maybe what I ought

to do is try to write about a woman who isn't at all like me. I've never done it. I've really never done it.

One wants to jump for joy at this suggestion!—though one pauses right after jumping to proffer a reminder only applicable to science fiction: The mundane fiction writer need only analyze what she sees to glean the materia which, by whatever transformations, will become her art. The science fiction writer must analyze as well the way it is seen, and how and why it is seen in a particular way. This does not mean any deep and profound searching among the inner, mythic mysteries; only a clear vision of the economic, social, and technological biases and influences which organize our individual responses to the world. It demands a clear vision of the web of psychological expectations and social benefits (precisely *who* benefits) that exist for *every* idea and attitude taken as part of the social syntagm. For this is the materia which, by whatever transformation (including those peculiar to science fiction), we render an art which must so frequently project women and men who not only see and experience new things, but see and experience them in new ways because their entire fictive lives have been radically different from ours all along. In science fiction, unlike mundane fiction, there is no implicit limit on the distance from the self to the Other (be it woman, man, or alien) to contour the fictive reality. There is only the perspicacity of the analysis of the self and the self-surround into the materia out of which an image of that Other, the selfhood of that Other, and that Other's self-surround are structured. To address Le Guin's comment directly: In science fiction unlike mundane fiction, short of one's analytical limits, there *is* no limit on how different these Other women may be from the author; and *this* is the reason that, in science fiction, not to explore them seems such a fictive failing.

The writer, during the actual work on her own text, has privileged access to its signified and its signifiers. If the new signified created does not please, the writer is free, in the light of that so-important analysis, to expand, cut, excise and replace signifiers throughout the web of the text. And in science fiction, there is, practically speaking, a far greater number of replacement points, and certainly a far greater number of signifiers to choose replacements from. We have already pointed out how, in her treatment of Anarres' ergotic space, Le Guin has taken the familiar syntagm we daily encounter in the proportions of women and men and replaced, as it were, some of the men with women. The inmixing that occurs *is* the readerly experience of the Anarresti labor division

and the experience of its implications as they spread into other aspects of the society. A final point on the subject of didacta: Once the didactic concern has been analyzed and integrated, this leaves the rhetoric of didacta free to point, emphasize, and underline what is *in* the foreground far more subtly and ironically; and leaves it, in general, an aesthetically more interesting tool.

## §10

*The Dispossessed* has excited many readers. For the second time Le Guin has taken both Hugo and Nebula awards for best science fiction novel of the year; and the bestowal of both fills me with pleasure. Some years ago at the University of Washington at Seattle, I had the privilege of teaching for several days with Le Guin at the Carion West Science Fiction Writers' Workshop. She has one of those individual and amazing minds which, so fortunately, seems to be the hallmark of, rather than the exception among, our genre's practitioners. The experience was, frankly, thrilling.

A study of a genre that includes only a description of books must be a limited one. Any full exploration must cover the impact of those books on readers and writers. That alone would assure Le Guin's novel a substantial place in any study of contemporary SF; no derogation I might make here could deny it that place. And, as I hope I have indicated, there is much more to the book than those things that strike me as its flaws.

To be fair, it is as much the excitement as it is the excitement's object that has impelled me to this lengthy examination. I only hope that my method, by displaying its biases clearly, invites its own refutation. At least this is what I have tried for.

The nature of this excitement may be what makes it so easy to lose hold of one truth we must never mislay if we are to keep our analysis rigorous: The science fiction novel—*The Dispossessed*—is a structure of words; any discourse it raises is raised by its words.

I have already discussed one moment, between Shevek and Bedap, when two sentences, artfully ambiguous, have produced a striking synthesis with affective intelligence. There are many more such moments—most at places, be they finely or faultily written, where the language is doing something it can *only* do in science fiction.

We shall close our discussion of *The Dispossessed* with a look at several examples of uniquely science-fictional language in the text.

We are with the old, Urrasti physicist Atro:

My eyes get so tired these days. I think that damnable magnifier-projector-thingy I have to use for reading has something wrong with it. It doesn't seem to project the words clearly any more. (p. 128/116)

This recalls the type of language we discussed using the example of the Heinlein sentence—with the difference that this one works nowhere near as well. Why? The analogic commentary it suggests on the cliché of old people forgetting names of things and their self-deceptions about their failing eyesight is not sufficiently intruded on by the new signifier (“magnifier-projector-thingy”) to re-form it into any new structure we can respond to with insight. As well, the external structure of “magnifier-projector-thingy” does not particularly connect it with anything else mentioned of the Urrasti society/technology; it is not reinforced by anything; it does not reinforce. At best, it is merely cute.

On Anarres, however, where (through an incident on Urras) we know that the populace are vegetarians who eat some fish (we have seen the fishbones left over at Shevek's party) and that fish breeding (and fish genetics) is a modern profession, we find a description of a snowfall at night:

“At each crossing the dim streetlight made a pool of silver, across which dry snow flurried like shoals of tiny fish chasing their shadows” (p. 144/131). This works not only as a striking visual description, which it might well do in mundane fiction; it also lends an equally striking sense of coherence to the whole apprehension of Anarresti culture and consciousness; such reflections of consciousness and culture occur, of course, in the metaphors of mundane fiction, but seldom with such pointed effect.

At another point we see Shevek with his infant daughter:

He would sit the baby on his knee and address wild cosmological lectures to her, explaining how time was actually space turned inside out, the chronon being thus the everted viscera of the quantum, and distance one of the accidental properties of light. (p. 220/200)

Besides portraying Shevek at his most believable and human, the sentence takes the signifiers of the book's major scientific themes and reduces them to a purely abstract and verbal dance, where they strike us as a tiny reflection of the whole object of our consideration, seen far off in a spherical mirror. By extension, it humanizes these scientific concerns for us to see that they have some aspects—if only the sounds of the words on an enthusiastic physicist's tongue—that can please a baby.

At another point, the entire cosmological conceit of the novel is used to inform a simile for sex between Shevek and Takver after a long separation: They “circled about the center of infinite pleasure . . . like planets circling blindly, quietly, in the flood of sunlight, about the common center of gravity . . . ”(p. 283/258). The point here is not the overwriting, but the invocation of the two actual planets in the fictive universe of the novel.

In the last chapter, when Shevek is returning to Anarres on the interstellar ship *Davenant*, neither of Urras nor Anarres, we read:

Very late on the following shipnight, Shevek was in the *Davenant's* garden. The lights were out, there, and it was illuminated only by starlight. The air was quite cold. A night-blooming flower from some unimaginable world had opened among dark leaves and was sending out perfume with patient, unavailing sweetness to attract some unimaginable moth trillions of miles away, in a garden on a world circling another star . . . (p. 340/310)

This charming image is a metaphor that touches on every relationship in the novel: It speaks mutedly of biological force, spiritual desire, political ambition; as well, it signs the existence of an aesthetic neither Urrasti nor Anarresti, yet necessarily extant in the universe of the novel—necessary to hold a critical counter up to both worlds we have been examining.

One of the most striking moments of the book is the closing of Chapter Three. On Urras, alone in the Senior Faculty room of Ieu Eun University, Shevek, who has come to appreciate much of the surface opportunity available to him on this decadent world, muses on his situation. Outside the window, night is coming on. After his musings, we read:

The shadows moved about him, but he sat unmoving as Anarres rose above the alien hills, at her full, mottled dun and bluish white, lambent. The light of his world filled his empty hands. (p. 80/73)

Whether or not we find the diction a trifle strained, whether we find the dialogue the image sets up with the lietmotif of “empty hands” that symbolizes the Odonian philosophy fortunate or unfortunate, this is still the purest of science fiction, made reasonable by the implicit technology of space travel and made affecting by the human situation it describes and compels. It charges with near electric scintillation half a dozen other images to come, from Takver sitting among the moonthorn to Shevek in the moonlight through the window of his room on Anarres. With the evocation of this most charged moonlight complete, the next

chapter begins: "The westering sun . . ." which is breathtaking—for we are on another world (p. 81/74).

The orchestration of image here is simple and superb. The situation of those closing sentences is one that could only arise in science fiction: By extension, the only place we could find sentences doing *this* is in a science-fiction novel—*this* science fiction novel.

Yes, there are other unsteady points in the book: Given their comparative diets and general standard of living, we would expect the Anarresti after seven generations to be shorter than the Urrasti rather than taller; and the discussion of Anarresti jewelry in Abbanay, which does so much to relieve the bleakness of our image of Anarresti aesthetic life, might well have come in the first three, rather than the last three, chapters. But there are also many other strong points: As a scene, the boys playing at prison is superb; the way in which the author, by carefully dropped biographemes (to borrow a neologism from Barthes), makes long-dead Odo emerge so vividly is masterful. But at this point, to me the book feels read, absorbed, in both its weaknesses and its strengths. The ideas, associations, and memories it has called up in me feel well wrestled. That is a good place for a critic to stop. That is the best place for a reader to pause—then begin rereading.

There is an ideal model of writing which holds that a novel should begin with a moment of epiphanized intensity and never lose this energy from beginning to end. Nostalgically, we remember our early readings of the great works in our science-fiction canon—*More Than Human* or *The Stars My Destination*—as if they were exactly this. The model is, of course, illusory—if only because of the nature of writing itself. An image—such as the one discussed at the close of Chapter Three—is not only an image in a chain of images, it is a detonator dropped into a readerly imagination organized to a certain potential of response by previous effects and images—a response the new image releases. The efficacy of such images is as frequently measured by their inseparability from the rest of the text that prepares for them as it is measured by their own, inner energy: intrusion and inmixing are ubiquitous.

Something I feel science fiction as a genre is beginning to learn—and the general rise in critical sophistication within the field is as much responsible for it as it is an emblem of it—is that the competition in science fiction is not with the novels of the nineteenth century or even the mundane fiction of this second half of the twentieth. Because science

fiction *is* a genre, and is experienced through resonances set up in a vastly complex textus, contoured both negatively and positively by millions of words that include the finest of Sturgeon and the clumsiest of Capt. S. P. Meek, any attempt to write a science fiction novel generates an image of that book in some idealized way. The competition is with a writer-generated, idealized form of the science fiction novel itself.

At the resolution of incident and action (where we begin the overt reading of the political significance of a novel) whatever *The Dispossessed* does not happen to accomplish, the truth is that very little Western fiction does. But if we keep asking the text to do these things, we are only saying back to it full-voice things the text itself, from beginning to end, keeps whispering of. *The Dispossessed* whispers of these possibilities very strongly; and that is an aspect of its indubitable significance. Compared to *The Dispossessed*, much mundane fiction—much of the *best* mundane fiction—is simply silent.

*The Dispossessed* will excite young and generous readers—indeed, will excite any reader beginning to look at our world and us in it. And it will excite for a long time. The novel is orchestrated; it shows signs of intelligence on every page. And its real successes, as with every work of art, are unique to it.

Nevertheless, some of these excited readers who return to the text a handful of years later will find themselves disillusioned: What excited them, they will see, was the book's ambition more than its precise accomplishments. But one hopes—a year or so after that—such readers will arrive at another stage where they will be able to acknowledge such ambition for what it was and to value it; and to know how important, in any changing society, that ambition is.

NEW YORK  
APRIL 1976

*This page intentionally left blank*