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Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin

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It is easy enough to locate anarchist themes in the science fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin. Her frequent critiques of state power, coupled with her rejection of capitalism and her obvious fascination with alternative systems of political economy, are sufficient to place her within the anarchist tradition. She has, from time to time, explicitly embraced that tradition. Le Guin is, among other things, a popularizer of anarchist ideas. The political philosophy of anarchism is largely an intellectual artifact of the nineteenth century, articulated in England by William Godwin, in France by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and in Russia by Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin. Yet this vibrant intellectual tradition remains largely invisible to ordinary people in the early twenty-first century. By describing anarchist ideas in a way that is simultaneously faithful to the anarchist tradition and accessible to contemporary audiences, Le Guin performs a very valuable service. She rescues anarchism from the cultural ghetto to which it has been consigned. She introduces the anarchist vision to an audience of science fiction readers who might never pick up a volume of Kropotkin. She moves anarchism (ever so slightly) into the mainstream of intellectual discourse.

Yet Le Guin, like many whose anarchist views developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, also seems to recognize that this is not enough. Like classical Marxism, modern anarchism developed within the specific political, economic and intellectual environment of the nineteenth century. In that context, it made perfect sense for anarchists to focus their critical powers upon the twin sources of oppressive power in the age of the Industrial Revolution: capital and the state. By the late twentieth century, however, this traditional anarchism had become dangerously outdated. During the 1960s in particular, political activists throughout the western world added critiques of ethnic power and gender power to the list of anarchist concerns. In the intellectual world, Michel Foucault identified and criticized the disciplinary power that emerges in schools, hospitals, military barracks, psychiatric clinics and families, while Jean Baudrillard articulated a radical symbolic critique of the semiotic system that dominates the contemporary world. Meanwhile, Guy Debord and others argued that citizens of the late twentieth century lived in a world dominated by the spectacular mass media, a world in which consumerism has found its way into every aspect of people's lives, a world in which the traditional forms of political action (and perhaps even the political subjects who might perform such action) have become dangerously fragmented. In such a world, the anarchist critique cannot afford to remain trapped within the modern, industrial mode of thinking. Anarchism must become more flexible, more fluid, more adaptable. In a word, it must become postmodern. Along with Todd May and Saul Newman, I have tried to describe the approximate contours of such a postmodern anarchism (see May, *Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*; Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan*; and Call, *Postmodern Anarchism*).

An analysis of Le Guin's science fiction will be helpful to this project. Yes, Le Guin dreams of utopian worlds and moons, free of the inequalities of capitalism and the injustices of state power (just as Kropotkin did before her). More importantly, however, Le Guin develops new forms of anarchist thinking, forms that are urgently needed in the United States and other post-industrial societies. The crucial foundation for this new postmodern anarchism is to be found in three remarkable novels that Le Guin wrote in a five-year period between 1969 and 1974. This period — which marks the culmination of both the radical social movements of the 1960s and the poststructuralist and postmodernist movements in the intellectual world — represents a vitally important historical moment in the anarchist tradition. This is the moment when anarchism took its "postmodern turn." And Le Guin was instrumental in bringing about this remarkable transformation in anarchist thinking. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Le Guin subverted the traditional binary concept of gender identity, to promote an *anarchy of gender*. In *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), she told the story of a psychiatric patient whose dreams literally redesigned the world, thus creating the possibility of an *ontological anarchy*. And in her 1974 masterpiece *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin made two major contributions to the philosophy of postmodern anarchism. She created a fictional anarchist language called Pravic, which underscores the importance of linguistics for any contemporary anarchist project. And she developed an equally radical concept of time, creating the possibility of a *chronosophic anarchy*. The existence of an explicitly anarchist society on the moon of Anarres has led many critics of *The Dispossessed* to focus only on the traditional anarchist themes of this novel. Yet the truly radical legacy of this novel (and of Le Guin's other major works from the late 1960s and early 1970s) is that these works transgress the boundaries of conventional anarchist thinking to create new forms of anarchism that are entirely relevant to life in the postmodern condition. Le Guin updates the conventional anarchist project and positions anarchism to move into the third millennium.

The Debate: Critical Awareness of Le Guin's Anarchism

Le Guin's masterpiece *The Dispossessed* drew a tremendous amount of critical attention after it appeared in 1974, but the critical reception of Le Guin's work remained remarkably orthodox during the late 1970s and 1980s. Critics of this period did acknowledge that Le Guin's work was strongly influenced by anarchism, but they persisted in reading that anarchism in purely modern terms. Thus David

L. Porter argued that by the mid-1970s Le Guin had "moved to a much richer social critique and explicit anarchist commitment" (Mullen and Suvin 273), while John P. Brennan and Michael C. Downs read *The Dispossessed* "as a penetrating critique of all utopian experience, even that of anarchism" (117). At this time criticism generally failed to recognize the postmodern aspects of Le Guin's writing. A notable exception was Fredric Jameson, apostle of the postmodern. In 1975, Jameson noted in passing that the General Theory of Time described in *The Dispossessed* employs a "vocabulary of a subversive reason, which has therefore had first to pass through the false, nonreasonable and by themselves non-cognitive expressions of parareason" (Mullen and Suvin 266). Jameson was one of the first to recognize the truly transgressive nature of Le Guin's fiction, namely its ability to call into question the forms of scientific, technical and instrumental reason that have come to dominate the modern West. But criticism was slow to adopt Jameson's position. As late as 1986, Tom Moylan was arguing that the utopia of *The Dispossessed* was locked into a series of binary oppositions, and that the text thus "expresses the continued closure of the current social formation" (114). Remarkably, Moylan found Le Guin's work to be insufficiently postmodern.

It was only in the 1990s that some feminist critics began to embrace the postmodern reading of Le Guin. In 1993, Marleen Barr argued that "reading Le Guin . . . sometimes involves encountering an alliance between humanism and antihumanism," which resembles Christopher Butler's version of the Lacanian position (155). Here Barr has identified the *anarchy of the subject* that is such a crucial part of the postmodern anarchist project. Subjectivity, for the postmodern anarchist, cannot be understood solely in the coherent, rational terms of the Enlightenment. Instead, subjectivity must be viewed as perpetually provisional, deeply contextual, and powerfully psychological. This is certainly the type of subjectivity found in Le Guin's work, particularly *The Lathe of Heaven*. This type of subjectivity recognizes that the subject of Enlightenment discourse is implicitly statist, and acknowledges that a meaningful anarchist politics will require a radical reconceptualization of that subject.

The recently published collection of essays on *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin*'s *The Dispossessed* features three essays that deal specifically with Le Guin's anarchist politics. Dan Sabia correctly notes that the inspiration for Le Guin's Anarres is the "anarchist communism" of Peter Kropotkin (Davis and Stillman 112–113), with its emphasis on mutual aid (114) and decentralization (120). However, Sabia also argues that "not even anarchist communism can reconcile completely the ideals of individualism and community" (125). For Sabia, then, Le Guin remains trapped within the basic dilemma that has haunted political theory at least since Rousseau: the problem of reconciling the specific needs of the individual with the broader social needs of the community. This is, however,

a specifically modern political problem, which can be resolved through the attainment of a postmodern perspective. In the same volume, Mark Tunick interprets Le Guin's project as Hegelian (129). Tunick thus joins a long line of critics who have identified the form of Le Guin's thinking as dialectical (see, for example, Donald F. Theall's argument in Mullen and Suvin 286–294; see also Widmer 44ff). I find the dialectical interpretation of Le Guin difficult to sustain, and the specifically Hegelian form of that interpretation even more so. Certainly any attempt to describe Le Guin's thinking as Hegelian must address the disturbingly statist nature of Hegel's political philosophy; more urgently, the attempt to describe Le Guin as a dialectical thinker must find a way to account for the sustained assault on binary thinking that is such a fundamental feature of her work. Finally, Winter Elliot approaches *The Dispossessed* from the perspective of individualist anarchism. For Elliot, an authentic anarchism must always be an interior personal anarchism (such as that of Shevek, the novel's protagonist). By advocating individualist anarchism in this way, Elliot is certainly going against what we might describe (with appropriate irony) as the "mainstream" anarchist tradition — i.e. the tradition that emphasizes the importance of community and collective social action. Yet by emphasizing the autonomy of the unique individual, Elliot shows that she has this much in common with mainstream anarchism: she remains trapped within the modern.

This, then, is the current state of scholarship on the subject of Le Guin's political philosophy. With a few notable exceptions, critics tend to read Le Guin's narratives in dialectical and/or utopian terms. They understand her anarchism primarily as a conventional challenge to state power and capitalism. In short, these readings of Le Guin remain relentlessly modern. It is particularly striking that these modernist readings of Le Guin's anarchism remain so prevalent today, some 35 years after Le Guin initiated a major postmodern move in her science fiction. Clearly, the modern does not give up without a fight. Yet it is imperative for today's critics to move beyond their fascination with modernism, particularly if they wish to understand the depth and significance of Le Guin's anarchism. That anarchism cannot simply be understood as an updated version of Kropotkin's utopian dreams. Rather, Le Guin's postmodern anarchism is a sustained challenge to conventional modes of radical thinking. This is an anarchism that rejects teleologies, explodes traditional concepts of subjectivity in general (and concepts of gender identity in particular), proposes radical new cosmologies, and embraces the anarchistic possibilities inherent in the creation of new languages. It is, in short, an anarchism for the twenty-first century, and it is time for criticism to recognize this.

The Novels: Le Guin's Postmodern Anarchism

In both structure and content, Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a postmodern masterpiece. The novel is relentlessly experimental and fragmented. It has no narrative center. It alternates between two radically different points of view: that of a Gethenian called Estraven, and that of Genly Ai, a diplomat who is visiting the planet Gethen as a representative of the interstellar Ekumen. While such fluctuations in viewpoint might produce some interesting cognitive effects in the audience, one could argue that their radical potential is limited. A novel that depended upon the binary alternation between two points of view could easily fall victim to the kind of back and forth, either/or thinking that characterizes the modern mentality in general and its dialectical form in particular. And so Le Guin must go further. The novel's two main viewpoints are supplemented with a host of other narrative forms. Some chapters are extracted from fictional bureaucratic reports that circulate among the officials of Genly Ai's Ekumen. Others are drawn from the myths, legends and poems of Gethen. The cognitive effect of this radical narrative strategy is disorienting, destabilizing . . . and also remarkably satisfying. The discourse of *Left Hand* can never become totalizing or totalitarian, for such a fate would require far more unity and stability than the text actually possesses. Le Guin's novel refuses the comforts of binary thinking and closed, orderly narrative. *Left Hand* is thus a self-deconstructing text that cannot arrive at any ultimate teleological destination.

This narrative form is entirely appropriate, given the topics Le Guin addresses in this remarkable work. We learn a good deal about the political structure of the Ekumen, the star-spanning polity that is such a prominent feature of Le Guin's Hainish Cycle. No one familiar with Le Guin's basic political perspective will be surprised to find that the internal politics of the Ekumen are essentially anarchistic. Indeed, James Bittner has argued persuasively that Le Guin's Ekumen represents an anarchist alternative to the imperialist "Galactic Empires" so common in late twentieth-century science fiction (110). Genly Ai observes that "the Ekumen is not essentially a government at all. It is an attempt to reunify the mystical with the political, and as such is of course mostly a failure; but its failure has done more good for humanity so far than the successes of its predecessors" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 136–137). So the Ekumen is anarchist, and not merely in the traditional sense, for the Ekumen introduces a spiritual component into its anarchism. The dimensions of this spirituality are approximately Taoist; *Left Hand* thus foreshadows the strong Taoist element of later works such as *The Lathe of Heaven.* Intriguingly, the premodern anarchism of the Taoist tradition thus serves as a starting point for Le Guin's postmodern anarchism.

The novel's major contribution to postmodern anarchism is to be found in its philosophy of gender. The inhabitants of Gethen are human, but they do not have the binary gender system that characterizes most human societies. Gethenians spend most of their lives in an androgynous state, neither male nor female. However, they periodically enter into an active reproductive state known as *kemmer*. While in kemmer, a Gethenian body will acquire either male or female characteristics. On Gethen, gender identity is therefore provisional, temporary and arbitrary. In many ways, then, Gethenian gender corresponds to the postmodern gender theories developed by anti-essentialists such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway. For Gethenians as for postmodern feminists, gender is no absolute category, but rather something that must be viewed as flexible and fluid.

Le Guin uses the character of Genly Ai to describe what the Gethenian gender system might look like to an outside observer. Because he is a permanently male human from another planet, Ai can never be a part of Gethen's unique system of perpetually changing gender identities. Yet he clearly appreciates the significance of this system. Ai speaks admiringly of the ways in which gender operates on Gethen: "There is less coding, channeling, and repressing of sex there than in any bisexual society I know of. Abstinence is entirely voluntary; indulgence is entirely acceptable. Sexual fear and sexual frustration are both extremely rare" (177). Remarkably, Ai is able to set aside the prejudices of his "bisexual society" (at least to a certain extent) and recognize the great benefits that Gethenian androgyny has to offer. A Freudian would be well pleased; indeed, Ai's description of a world without repression reminds us of the "erotic utopia" proposed by the radical Freudian Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (see Marcuse, especially chapter ten).

Nor is the lack of repression the only remarkable feature of Gethenian society. Ong Tot Oppong, a member of the first Ekumenical landing party to visit Gethen, was careful to note that on Gethen "There is no unconsenting sex, no rape. As with most animals other than man, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise it is not possible" (94). The sexual practices of the Gethenians, then, could be described as both feminist and anarchist. The concept of consent is, after all, a crucial theoretical aspect of both traditions. Feminists use consent to draw clear ethical boundaries around sexual practices. Anarchists use consent more broadly, to distinguish ethical political actions from unethical ones. Clearly, the concept of consent holds vast significance for the people of Gethen; they are, in effect, practicing anarcho-feminists.

They also appear to be anarcho-pacifists. Oppong goes on to note that Gethenians "have never yet had what one could call a war. They kill one another readily by ones and twos; seldom by tens or twenties; never by hundreds or thousands. Why?" (96) Perhaps the peculiarities of Gethenian gender identity make

warfare unnecessary, or even impossible. Again, the Freudian reading is tempting here. One can read warfare as a destructive sublimation of the basic instinctive impulses. Historically, warfare in our world has been primarily a masculine enterprise, carried out by armies of men who often operate under conditions of ongoing sexual repression. Gethenians, on the other hand, lack the repression that may be a necessary psychological precursor to war. And although any Gethenian may become provisionally masculine, that gender identity will not endure long enough to permit major military action. Because principles and practices of masculinity cannot dominate Gethenian culture as they have dominated our own, there is much more room on Gethen for the articulation of an alternative feminine principle. In an important commentary on *Left Hand* entitled "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1987) Le Guin identifies this feminine principle as fundamentally anarchistic. "The 'female principle' has historically been anarchic; that is, anarchy has historically been identified as female. The domain allotted to women — 'the family,' for example — is the area of order without coercion" (*Dancing at the Edge of the World* 11–12). This is what the Gethenians have attained: a well articulated, orderly society, which they have organized without recourse to military coercion.

These few examples illustrate the basic fact of Gethenian culture, which is that it represents a profound challenge to the type of binary thinking that has so thoroughly dominated the modern West. Ong Tot Oppong notes that "the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter [Gethen]" (94). The Gethenians, then, are Le Guin's answer to the Cartesian philosophy and its descendents. Like *Left Hand* itself, the Gethenians are self-deconstructing. They occupy no fixed subject position. The very structure of their identity is anarchistic in the postmodern sense. And this identity clearly represents a major threat to the fixed gender concepts that characterize our patriarchal culture. To make her critique of realworld gender categories as explicit as possible, Le Guin introduces us to the Gethenian concept of perversion. Genly Ai speaks: "Excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance toward the male or the female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormals — normals, by our standard. They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies. The Karhidish slang for them is *halfdeads*. They are sterile" (64). Passages like this produce what Darko Suvin might call a radical effect of cognitive estrangement (Suvin 8). The function of such passages is to confront the reader with a system of values and standards that is radically Other. On Gethen, permanently male or female individuals receive treatment quite similar to that which real-world gays, lesbians, transsexuals and kinksters must endure. This

radical inversion of values calls into question those cultural discourses that privilege hetero-normative and "vanilla" forms of sexual behavior. The Gethenians suffer from heterophobia, a profound fear and distrust of fixed, binary gender distinctions. This heterophobia is certainly no more irrational than real world homophobia. And it performs a vital function for Le Guin's real-world audience, by undermining certainty and challenging the very concept of the normal. By inverting real-world gender codes, the Gethenians also subvert those codes, thus initiating a remarkable anarchy of gender.

Some critics of *Left Hand* have argued that there are serious limitations to Le Guin's androgynous society. According to Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith, for example, the Gethenian Estraven is formally androgynous, but within the narrative of *Left Hand*, he is typically described in masculine terms (226). For her part, Le Guin has admitted that "the Gethenians seem like men, instead of menwomen" (*Dancing at the Edge of the World* 14). She attributes this to her use of masculine pronouns to refer to Gethenians (15), and she acknowledges that "the Gethenian protagonist, Estraven [was cast] almost exclusively in roles that we are culturally conditioned to perceive as 'male'" (15). But perhaps Le Guin is too quick to endorse these criticisms of her work. If Le Guin chose to use masculine pronouns when speaking of the Gethenians, that is simply because the language in which she was writing (American English) offered her no clear alternatives. And if Le Guin's audience perceives the activities of Prime Minister Estraven as "male," that says more about the audience than it does about Estraven. The concept of gender articulated in *Left Hand* was as radical as Le Guin could make it in 1969. What some critics have described as limits to Le Guin's philosophy of androgyny are really limits of the largely patriarchal, heteronormative culture of the United States in the late twentieth century. Le Guin's work attempts to challenge and transcend those limitations. To be sure, she could not hope to overcome the entire history of binary gender thinking in a single novel. Nonetheless, The *Left Hand of Darkness* remains a major contribution to postmodern feminism, and to the anarchist theory with which that thinking is closely allied.

Le Guin's next major contribution to postmodern anarchism was *The Lathe of Heaven*, which appeared in 1971. Here Le Guin's Taoism, already evident in *Left Hand*, was given full expression. *Lathe* describes an encounter between the Western scientific ideology that holds that knowledge and reason can be used to shape the world for the good of humanity, and a very different Taoist perspective, which holds that the attempt to shape the world through human willpower is futile and potentially destructive, both to the world and to those humans who would mold it. The connection between Taoism and anarchism is well established,

and has been noted by writers working in both traditions.[1] Yet few commentators have recognized the powerful connections between the delightful premodern philosophy of Taoism and late twentieth-century critical theory. By insisting that human rationality can never succeed in its quest to dominate, Taoism provides a powerful critique of the form of reason that was of such great concern, for example, to the Frankfurt School. Marcuse called it the logic of domination (111); it is the controlling rationality that governs the West. In place of this, Le Guin offers us the spontaneous joys of world creation. *Lathe* teaches us that if we would truly make the world a better place, we must abandon all pretense towards rational control. We must renounce all distinctions between ourselves and the rest of the world. Only when we know ourselves to be inseparable from the world can we dream the dreams that will change it.

The novel's protagonist is George Orr, a man whose dreams literally redesign the world. Orr's "effective" dreams — dreams that radically revise reality — represent an intriguing new anarchist possibility. Because these dreams change everything, they do much more than simply alter a political or economic system. They alter the structure of the universe, thus creating what I call *ontological anarchy*. When it is challenged on the terrain of politics or economics, hierarchical thinking retreats to the level of ontology: here, at least, there must always be fixed structures, law and order. Yet Orr's dreams challenge the final recourse of statist thinking. His dreams mean that nothing is permanent and everything is provisional. From a perspective of power, such a position is intolerable. And so the hierarchical system must try to recapture Orr's dreams, to harness them and put them to use for its own purposes. It does so in the person of Dr. Haber, Orr's psychiatrist. Haber is the model scientist: orderly, disciplined, rational and progressive, in a purely technocratic way. He is confident that if Orr dreams under his direction, then all the world's ills can simply be wished away. But Orr recognizes how hopeless Haber's quest is. "You're handling something outside reason. You're trying to reach progressive, humanitarian goals with a tool that isn't suited to the job. Who has humanitarian dreams?" (86) Here Orr rightly raises the specter of the id. If dreams give us access to the deep structure of the world itself — the thesis is Freudian, or even Lacanian — then that implies that this structure can never be susceptible to reason, for the dream world is one where logic has no place. Naturally, Haber attempts to refute the Freudian argument. "Your unconscious mind is not a sink of horror and depravity. That's a Victorian notion, and a terrifically destructive one. . . Don't be afraid of your unconscious mind! It's not a black pit of nightmares" (88). Haber is right to be afraid of Freud,

[1] See, for example, Watts 43, Marshall 53–60 and Rapp. In 1998, Le Guin published her own English language version of Lao Tzu's classic Taoist text, *Tao Te Ching*.

for Freud was one of the few psychiatrists to see that the Western attempt to dominate the earth through science might carry a heavy price.[2] Of course, Haber is a different sort of analyst, one who is unshakably convinced that science has the power to cure the world. He cannot understand the Taoist George Orr. An irritated Haber confronts Orr: "You're of a peculiarly passive outlook for a man brought up in the Judaeo-ChristianRationalist West. A sort of natural Buddhist. Have you ever studied the Eastern mysticisms, George?" Orr replies: "No. I don't know anything about them. I do know that it's wrong to force the pattern of things. It won't do. It's been our mistake for a hundred years" (82–83). If anything, Orr is guilty of understatement. The attempt to force the pattern of things — to coerce the world into a rigorously rational framework — has been characteristic of Western thought at least since Descartes, and possibly since Plato. Against this, Orr invokes the Taoist principle of wu wei or "actionless action." He refuses to force the world down a path charted by human reason. In this way he acts as a good Taoist, and also as a good postmodern anarchist.

Orr consistently refuses the comforting but restrictive binary logic that characterizes the modern Western mode of thought. Naturally, Haber finds this incredibly frustrating. "Where there's an opposed pair, a polarity, you're in the middle; where there's a scale, you're at the balance point. You cancel out so thoroughly that, in a sense, nothing is left" (134). Haber says this as if it's a bad thing, and of course from his perspective, it is. Orr is the living embodiment of deconstruction. He can have no teleology. He can never arrive at a final position. The text constantly emphasizes that he is in the middle. "There was a singular poise, almost a monumentality, in the stance of his slight figure: he was completely still, still at the center of something" (68). Because Orr is the node through which all reality must flow, he himself cannot succumb to any fixed discourse, any ultimate interpretation. His ontological anarchy is thus postmodern in its orientation. It is supremely ironic, then, that Orr, who renounces the rationalist attempt to control the world, is actually the only person in the novel who does have power over that world. Orr attains this special status precisely because he has come to understand himself as an integral, organic part of the universe, rather than an autonomous Cartesian subject at war with his environment. Orr can change the world only because he is the world. In this sense, what he does is no different from the actions of any other human, animal, vegetable or mineral. "Everything dreams. The play of form, of being, is the dreaming of substance. Rocks have their dreams, and the earth changes" (161).

This is the radical message of *Lathe*. The modern model of revolutionary change presupposes the existence and efficacy of rational, independent political actors.

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[2] See, for example, Freud's argument in Chapter III of *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

But *Lathe* argues that we must not look to progressive technocrats or revolutionary vanguards of the working class for change. Instead, we must become the change we wish to see in the world, as Gandhi suggested. *Lathe* creates the possibility of an anarchism that will be highly spiritual, deeply personal and yet also intimately engaged with the world. Le Guin made this point explicitly in her 1973 essay "Dreams Must Explain Themselves":

> The Taoist world is orderly, not chaotic, but its order is not one imposed by man or by a personal or humane deity. The true laws — ethical and aesthetic, as surely as scientific — are not imposed from above by any authority, but exist in things that are to be found — discovered. (*The Language of the Night* 49)

Both anarchism and Taoism propose a model of social and ontological order that is consensual and ethical, one in which "laws" are not created by political elites, but rather derived through direct interaction between the individual and the world. Because this anarchism contains the crucial precept that the Western project of dominating the earth through scientific or technical reason is ethically and epistemologically bankrupt, it may also be described as postmodern.

The strongest and most direct statement of Le Guin's anarchist vision appears in her 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*. This novel describes a statist society located on the world known as Urras, and an anarchist society that is to be found on that world's moon, Anarres. Certainly Le Guin's Anarres has much to offer modern anarchists. Apart from her gender, the founder of Anarres, Odo, is largely indistinguishable from the nineteenth-century Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. The Odonians "have no law but the single principle of mutual aid between individuals" (*Dispossesed*, 300). *Mutual Aid* was the title of one of Kropotkin's most influential works, and this concept was a fundamental element of his anarchist philosophy. Le Guin even goes to the trouble of recreating the intellectual debates out of which Kropotkin's views on mutual aid developed, especially debates about evolution (see Kropotkin, *Evolution and Environment*, 117ff). The Urrasti favor the type of reductionist Darwinism that always drew Kropotkin's critical wrath. For them, "The law of existence is struggle — competition — elimination of the weak — a ruthless war for survival" (Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 143). Shevek, the Anarresti protagonist of Le Guin's novel, takes a very different view: "the strongest, in the existence of any social species, are those who are most social. In human terms, most ethical" (220). This is strikingly similar to the subversive reading of Darwinism that Kropotkin provides in his *Ethics*. Here Kropotkin argues that "Darwin explained the origin of the sense of moral duty in man by the preponderance in man of the feeling of social sympathy over personal egoism" (282). Much to the

delight of modern anarchists, then, *The Dispossessed* provides a clear, concise and accessible account of the major theoretical features of classical anarchism.

Yet the novel also recognizes the limits of modern anarchism. When Shevek visits Urras, he is surprised to find that its rulers do not censor him. "He talked pure anarchism, and they did not stop him. But did they need to stop him? It seemed that he talked to the same people every time: well dressed, well fed, well mannered, smiling" (144). Perhaps it is not enough to explain anarchist ideals in rational terms — especially when one's audience has been so conditioned by the dominant material and cultural system that they are essentially incapable of internalizing those ideas. Indeed, the problem of internalization is a significant one in *The Dispossessed*, and not just for the Urrasti. Shevek has a rather disturbing conversation with the Urrasti woman Vea at a party:

> "I know that you've got a — a Queen Teaea inside you, right inside that hairy head of yours. And she orders you around just like the old tyrant did her serfs. She says, 'Do this!' and you do, and 'Don't!' and you don't."
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> "That is where she belongs," he said, smiling. "Inside my head." "No. Better to have her in a palace. Then you could rebel against her" (219).

Remarkably (given the fact that she is the product of a statist society), Vea has made a postmodern anarchist argument, one that parallels those of Michel Foucault and Herbert Marcuse. This argument holds that power is to be found not only in the political and economic structures of the external world, but also internally, in the psychological structure of the individual. Shevek comes to recognize the importance of this point toward the end of the novel: "The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind" (333). An authentic, vital anarchism, then, cannot be content simply to reproduce the logic and the critiques of its founders. "Kids learn to parrot Odo's words as if they were *laws* — the ultimate blasphemy!" declares the Anarresti subversive Bedap (168).

If *The Dispossessed* is to make a major contribution to the theory and practice of anarchism, then, it must offer more than a popularized version of nineteenth-century radical philosophy. And indeed it does. For one thing, Le Guin's novel offers a remarkable form of *linguistic anarchy*. Building upon the postmodern insight that language is equivalent to power, Le Guin imagines what a truly anarchistic language might look like. The result is Pravic, the language of Anarres. Pravic is a fundamentally egalitarian language, and this is true at the deepest level of structure and grammar. Pravic avoids the possessive pronouns, even (especially?) in those cases where an English speaker might be particularly committed to the possessive form (as with family relationships). "The singular forms of the

possessive pronouns in Pravic were used mostly for emphasis; idiom avoided them. Little children might say 'my mother,' but very soon they learned to say 'the mother'" (58). Similarly, Pravic has no way to speak about property. When Anarresti wish to speak of the "propertied class," the must use the Iotic language of Urras to do so, for Pravic has no equivalent term (42). This means that ideas regarding the accumulation of private wealth or class divisions based upon such accumulation are quite literally unthinkable in Pravic. The implications are profound. The Anarresti cannot be capitalist, because they lack the vocabulary of capitalism.

Pravic problematizes the easy distinctions that English speakers make between "work" and "play" — and rightly so, from an anarchist viewpoint. The idea that "work" is something exploitative and alienating, done from strict necessity and redeemed only by leisure time, is fundamental to the capitalist mode of social organization. Pravic, on the other hand, uses the same word for "work" and "play" (92). A separate word, the eminently descriptive *kleggich*, is used to describe drudgery (*Ibid.*). Again, one is reminded of Eros and Civilization (see Marcuse 214ff). Andrew Reynolds is thus quite right to suggest that the Odonians have tried "to rehabilitate work in Marcusian fashion" (Davis and Stillman 87). The argument is clear: on Anarres, meaningful, authentic, creative work is indistinguishable from play. Such work may be done for its own sake, and need not (must not!) be inscribed within the alienating framework of a market economy.

Pravic clearly has much to recommend it. The Terran ambassador Keng speaks admiringly of the tongue: "I don't know your language. I am told that it's a most interesting one, the only rationally invented language that has become the tongue of a great people" (339). Yet here is Pravic's fatal flaw. Though it is light years beyond American English in terms of its social consciousness, its ethics, its sense of equality and justice, Pravic is still limited by the horizons of human rationality. Pravic was invented by an Odonian called Farigv, and "Farigv didn't provide any swear words when he invented the language, or if he did his computers didn't understand the necessity" (234). Here one is reminded of Dr. Haber, who proceeded from the best humanist intentions, but was doomed to failure by his rejection of the irrational. Language cannot be purely rational, for the humans who speak it certainly are not. Language must be able to express not only logical concepts but also emotions, even those that might be seen as undesirable from the perspective of social engineering. When Shevek needs to swear, he must switch to Iotic: "'Hell!' he said aloud. Pravic was not a good swearing language. It is hard to swear when sex is not dirty and blasphemy does not exist" (258). Ironically, the success of Odonianism sets the stage for its failures. Pravic is a fair language and a just one. It encourages egalitarian thinking and actively works against the establishment of hierarchy. Yet it remains dry and sterile. This brings us back to

the message of postmodern anarchism: the world cannot be saved through the articulation of a rational revolutionary philosophy, even if that philosophy does contain admirable elements.

Fortunately, *The Dispossessed* does contain one element that is truly revolutionary in the postmodern sense, and that is Shevek's General Temporal Theory. Shevek is a theoretical physicist; his term for his field of study is *chronosophy*. This gives us an important clue as to the nature and significance of his theories. What Shevek is working on is a *philosophy of time*. Le Guin's text makes it quite clear that this philosophy has radical political implications. The Urrasti physicist Oiie observes that "The politician and the physicist both deal with things as they are, with real forces, the basic laws of the world" (203). Naturally, Shevek rejects Oiie's statist formulation. And yet Shevek does accept Oiie's basic insight: that there is a politics of physics, and a physics of politics. Of course, for an anarchist like Shevek, politics and ethics are virtually coterminous. Thus Shevek acknowledges that "chronosophy does involve ethics. Because our sense of time involves our ability to separate cause and effect, means and end" (225). Thus, Shevek's attempt to articulate a General Temporal Theory is also, fundamentally, an attempt to create a viable and vibrant ethical theory.

Shevek's objective is to bring together two apparently contradictory fields of physics, known as Sequency and Simultaneity. Sequency deals with the linear concept of time, which has dominated the perception of history in the West. Simultaneity acknowledges and endorses the nonlinear, including in particular those philosophies that see time as cyclical or recursive. Shevek describes the two concepts of time: "So then time has two aspects. There is the arrow, the running river, without which there is no change, no progress, or direction, or creation. And there is the circle or the cycle, without which there is chaos, meaningless succession of instants, a world without clocks or seasons or promises" (223). Shevek's invocation of promises is interesting, for it recalls Nietzsche's definition of the human being as an animal with the right to make promises (*Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, section 2). Shevek even makes the Nietzschean element of his thinking explicit: "And so, when the mystic makes the reconnection of his reason and his unconscious, he sees all becoming as one being, and understands the eternal return" (Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 222). In this remarkable passage, Shevek acknowledges that the project he is pursuing in the physical sciences is parallel to the project Nietzsche undertook in philosophy. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche famously described his world-shaking vision of eternal return: "everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being" (217). In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche dreamed of a being who could not only accept the terrifying thought of

eternal recurrence but could actively embrace it, cherish it, celebrate it. He called this being Overman.

To a remarkable extent, Le Guin's Shevek completes the project outlined in *Zarathustra*. Shevek embraces the principle of eternal return embodied in the theory of Simultaneity. Remarkably, he is also able to continue thinking of time in linear or Sequential terms as well. He can do this only because, as Heidegger has argued, "the overman is the expressly willed negation of the previous essence of man. Within metaphysics man is experienced as the rational animal" (III 217). Shevek is a scientist, but he is not a rationalist. A purely rational science could not produce his temporal theory. To achieve this theory, Shevek must give up a great deal. He must abandon a restrictive rationalism, and with it the humanism that dominated the intellectual history of the West until Nietzsche (Heidegger's "previous essence of man"). In short, to achieve his goals in physics, Shevek must take a postmodern turn. Thus Andrew Reynolds is right to argue (albeit in a somewhat different context) that "*The Dispossessed* is equally the product of anarchism and Nietzschean postmodernism" (Davis and Stillman 88). As an Odonian, Shevek has already internalized the basic principles of modern anarchism. When he moves beyond rationalism and humanism to grasp a radically new concept of time, he takes his anarchism a step further. Ellen Rigsby is quite correct to note that by embracing the cyclical concept of time, Shevek challenges the entire mainstream intellectual tradition of Europe; thus "Shevek's thoughts move into an explicitly anarchist form" (Davis and Stillman 173). More precisely, by accepting Simultaneity as well as Sequency, Shevek becomes a postmodern anarchist.

I must therefore challenge the extensive body of literature that characterizes Shevek's reconciliation of Sequency and Simultaneity as an example of Le Guin's "dialectical thinking" (see, for example, Bittner 121). Most recently, Tony Burns has argued that Shevek "like his creator is a thoroughgoing 'dialectical' thinker" (Davis and Stillman 199) whose attitude towards time "demonstrates a tendency for him to think in terms of those 'binary oppositions,' such as that between the notion of 'Being' and the notion of 'Becoming,' which have been central to the Western philosophical tradition from the time of the ancient Greeks, and which are rejected by Nietzsche, postmodernism, and the 'academic left'" (201). Burns attempts to relate Shevek's theory to the Hegelian philosophical method, to show that *The Dispossessed* is a "modern" rather than a "postmodern" work, and that Shevek's views on science "fall firmly within the classical anarchist tradition" (203). There are serious problems with this approach. First and foremost, there is no dialectical reconciliation of Sequency and Simultaneity in *The Dispossessed*. Shevek develops the ability to think both thoughts together, but not in a synthetic way. The two thoughts remain separate and distinct. Rather than a synthetic

reconciliation of thesis and antithesis, Shevek's theory represents the perpetual embrace of two theories that are and remain contradictory. Shevek's experience of time is thus an experience of permanent cognitive dissonance. He is prepared to experience time as both linear and cyclical at every moment of his life, and he must never allow this experience to solidify into a stagnant synthesis.

Shevek's views on time must remain tentative, provisional, unresolved — in short, postmodern. He must abandon the false certainties of reason. His rewards for doing so are substantial. The major practical benefit of Shevek's theory is that it will permit the creation of the ansible, a device that will allow instantaneous interstellar communication. Thus Shevek's theory creates the opportunity for an infinite proliferation of discourse without resolution: a truly postmodern possibility. Indeed, this is more than a mere possibility. For the universe that Shevek made is the universe of Genly Ai's Ekumen: a community of worlds linked together in radically egalitarian, non-hierarchical fashion by the ansible. Thus the conclusion of *The Dispossessed* points back to *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This is a beautiful statement of time's circle, and a powerful structural assertion of the anarchistic possibilities that emerge when we embrace the contradictory aspects of sequential and simultaneous time.

Ursula Le Guin's writing shows a remarkable knowledge of — and a deep respect for — the classical anarchist tradition. It is hardly surprising, then, that her critics should focus mainly on the ways in which her work builds upon that tradition. Yet criticism must do more than this, for Le Guin certainly does. Le Guin's novels of the late 1960s and early 1970s offer anarchist possibilities that extend well beyond the horizons of the modern. In these novels, Le Guin experiments with androgyny, subverts rational ontologies, articulates anarchist languages, and proposes a radical philosophy of time. The themes of postmodern anarchism are clearly present in her work. So far these themes have remained largely hidden, but it is time to bring them to the surface. Modern anarchists need not fear this critical project, for the postmodern elements of Le Guin's anarchism do not oppose that philosophy's modern elements. Rather, the modern and postmodern aspects of Le Guin's anarchism are part of a permanent, ongoing, open-ended dialogue about the possibilities of anarchist thinking in the contemporary era. Such a dialogue can only enrich anarchist theory.

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