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Taylor Andrew Loy

**Anarchy in Critical
Dystopias: An
Anatomy of Rebellion**

Taylor Andrew Loy
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2008

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Milgram Knapp, Dr. James H. Collier, Dr. Robert B. Siegle
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Abstract

This paper is a cross-genre pilot study in Anarchist thought experiments. It is not an attempt to produce an encyclopedic review of the emergence or function of anarchism in critical dystopias. My objective is not so ambitious; my aim is to plot the evolution of each rebellion within its own context. In the end, I hope to broaden an understanding of Anarchy and Anarchism: not an understanding that congeals and grows more rigid, but rather an understanding that expands and flows, nearing a point of superfluidity. The primary focal points of analysis are Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *The Dispossessed*, the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, created by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, and the film *The Matrix*, written and directed by the Wachowski Brothers. These texts and film have been selected for this project because they each present disparate versions of anarchistic rebellions. Drawing from Thomas Hughes’s characterization of the evolution of large technological systems, I analyze the responses of the protagonist Anarchists in these works to the oppressive components of their respective technological infrastructures.

The aim of this paper is not to conclude definitively what Anarchism is but what it does, how it works within the boundaries of each thought experiment. Ultimately, each of these texts is a performance, an acting out of Anarchistic ideals embodied in each character’s response to the demands of their environment.

Foreword: Understanding Anarchy

The fact that the Anarchist movement for which I have striven so long is to a certain extent in abeyance and overshadowed by philosophies of authority and coercion affects me with concern, but not with despair. It seems to me a point of special significance that many countries decline to admit Anarchists. All governments hold the view that while parties of the right and left may advocate social changes, still they cling to the idea of government and authority. Anarchism alone breaks with both and propagates uncompromising rebellion. In the long

run, therefore, it is Anarchism which is considered deadlier to the present regime than all other social theories that are now clamoring for power.

~Emma Goldman from “Was My Life Worth Living?” (1934)

Anarchism is like Christianity; it’s never really been practiced . . . [but] it is a necessary idea.

~Ursula K. Le Guin from An Interview (1990)

While researching and writing this paper, I began paying more attention to how my colleagues *used* the concept of Anarchy in discussions. After witnessing consistent misappropriations and abuses of the term, I came to realize that I needed to do more than offer an introduction to Anarchy; what I needed was a brief archaeology of these misconceptions.

Too easily Anarchy and, by implication, Anarchism are associated with mindless violence, random acts of destruction, and utter chaos. For a key example of this sort of automatic association, one needs to look only as far back in recent memory as the Centennial Olympic Park bombing in 1996 when the term “pipe bomb” entered the national vocabulary. As a result, *The Anarchist Cookbook* (1971) received a great deal of media attention because it contained instructions for building a pipe bomb. Since then, those who did not already have pre-judged notions were offered a simple equation: Anarchy=terrorism.

Two decades before, in 1976, Anarchy gained cultural currency in the burgeoning counter-culture of punk rock. In large part, this was due to the Sex Pistols’ international hit song, “Anarchy in the U.K.”¹ Therefore, instead of terrorism and bomb planting, Anarchy carried the cultural baggage of disaffected youth engaged in rampant property destruction and self-destructive behavior. This was certainly

¹ In his film *Sid and Nancy*, Alex Cox laments this reckless corruption of Anarchy through the words of a methadone clinic worker (addressing the character of Sid Vicious as played by Gary Oldham): “Smack is the great controller, keeps people stupid when they could be smart. You guys got no right to be strung out on that stuff. *You* could be selling healthy anarchy. Long as you addicts, you be full of shit.”

balance embodied in the technological infrastructure of the Matrix — in other words, he out-sources their present problems to the future generations of Zion.

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V for Vendetta ends after the rebellion. Moore leaves the future of New London open. Will Evey/V be able to sustain a state of “permanent revolution” in the city’s ruins? Or, will another state institution fill the void of the fascist regime? The character of Evey/V does not promise a certain future; “new life” never does. It only offers a hope, a mere possibility, that freedom can be built and sustained for as long as we can will it so. On the final page of the graphic novel, Detective Eric Finch comes across Mrs. Helen Heyer huddled with some displaced “louts” next to a fire. She entreats him to help her “salvage something” that “given time we could build a small army. We could restore order” (265).⁴⁵ In other words, she desires to reestablish a government that can enforce conduct through the strength of its “small army” and restore the strict, inflexible “order” of fascism. Finch, however, is through with fascism; he pushes her away. The last panel is Finch walking down a deserted highway. Even though we do not know what he is walking toward, we do know what he is leaving behind.

The gross irony of the ending of *The Matrix* is the fact that “the world where anything is possible” — where one might, for instance, fly around like Superman — exists only within the Matrix. In this film, the audience is not permitted access to the *Holy Land* of Zion, the ultimate destination of those freed from the Matrix. Therefore, a viewer cannot discern the state of political affairs in this society. However, in the later films, the Wachowski Brothers backpedal on this promised “world without rules and controls.” At the end of *The Matrix: Reloaded* Neo mysteriously develops telekinetic powers in the world of Zion, outside the Matrix. Even so, his newfound powers are limited by the constitution of his physical body, which does not seem to be the case for his virtualized avatar-self. In light of Neo’s dependence on the technological infrastructure of the Matrix-world, his anarchism never extends beyond the scope of the present rebellion. Despite its clever title, *The Matrix: Revolutions* ends with Neo’s martyrdom precisely because he fails to achieve a state of “permanent revolution.” Instead, he *chooses* to preserve the power

⁴⁵ Mrs. Heyer’s sincerity is undercut by the fact that she calls Detective Finch “Edward” (265).

not the heart of the punk rock movement, but, for many, it was its face.

Prejudiced and distorted conceptualizations of Anarchy are not recent phenomena. Nearly a century ago, Emma Goldman bemoaned this same tendency: “as the most revolutionary and uncompromising innovator, Anarchism must needs meet with the combined ignorance and venom of the world it aims to reconstruct” (48).² The simple act of invoking Anarchism as a possible solution for social problems baffles many people because it is understood as a paradox: Anarchy is seen as an inherently flawed social state, not as a way of solving social problems. How many times have you heard some variation of derisive statements such as: “that couldn’t work; it would be complete *anarchy*”?

So, then, if it is not a philosophy of chaos, what is Anarchism? Peter Kropotkin³, a prominent Russian Anarchist who lived from 1842 to 1921, writes in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910):

Anarchism [is] the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government — harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being. In a society developed on these lines, the voluntary associations which already now begin to cover all the fields of human activity would

² In fact, Goldman was drawn to Anarchism because she felt that the Anarchists prosecuted for the Haymarket Riot bombing were unjustly accused (“Was My Life Worth Living?”). Her own affiliation with Anarchism began as a response to what she believed to be an unjust profiling of the Haymarket Anarchists.

³ Stephen Jay Gould writes in a parenthetical note in “Kropotkin Was No Crackpot,” “We must shed the old stereotype of anarchists as bearded bomb throwers furtively stalking about city streets at night. Kropotkin was a genial man, almost saintly according to some, who promoted a vision of small communities setting their own standards by consensus for the benefit of all, thereby eliminating the need for most functions of a central government.”

take a still greater extension so as to substitute themselves for the state in all its functions. (*Anarchy Archives*)

A state of Anarchy, then, would not be chaos. On the contrary, it would require a thoroughly articulated network of social and political relationships in order to effectively provide services and protections currently rendered by state governments. Whereas Kropotkin defines Anarchism in terms of an Anarchistic society, my focus in this paper will be the role of individual Anarchists attempting to generate and sustain such a society.

Another difficulty I have faced in appealing to and understanding Anarchy is that ideologues of democracy have hijacked its most alluring features. For instance, Lewis Mumford asserts that “democracy consists in giving final authority to the whole, rather than the part; *and only living human beings, as such, are an authentic expression of the whole, whether acting alone or with the help of others.*” (emphasis added) (1).⁴ Here, Mumford claims for democracy what Paul Goodman or Emma Goldman may have just as easily attributed to an Anarchistic system.⁵ Proponents of democracy will claim that the large democratic governments as we know them are natural extensions of groups of individuals — endowed with final authority — “acting alone or with the help of others.” I would argue that Mumford’s equivocation on “the whole” indicates a cognitive dissonance characteristic of some “liberal” Cold War rhetoric; one can get away with invoking the ideas of socialism, communitarianism, or even Anarchism if one calls it, or subordinates it to, “democracy.” However, this ideological turf war is a topic for another (much longer) paper. My present aim is to offer a brief introduction to the difficulties of engaging Anarchism as a serious and legitimate ideology — one that

⁴ That I am using this piece as an example of how democracy has appropriated the virtues of Anarchism is ironic because Mumford begins it with an attempt to clarify what “democracy” means. Mumford claims “democracy” is “now confused and sophisticated by indiscriminate use, and often treated with patronizing contempt” (1). This is precisely my concern for “Anarchy.”

⁵ For instance, Emma Goldman writes in the same article quoted above: “my faith is in the individual and in the capacity of free individuals for united endeavor.”

The most important lesson that Hughes’s framework teaches Anarchists, and *experimental* Anarchists, is a simple one: the more momentum a technological system has the greater the effort required to re-direct it. System intervention is most effective when a system is less integrated, less redundant, and still young. Technological momentum should always be tempered with flexibility. If Anarres was not closed off to immigration under the Terms of the Settlement, the violent clash between the A-Io government and the post-Settlement Odonians might have been prevented. If the Norsefire government had not systematically blocked and controlled virtually every public forum, then V may have never turned his back on Lady Justice. If humanity, prior to the Matrix, had treated artificially intelligent machines more equitably, allowing them greater freedom, the machines may never have revolted in the first place. By way of closing, I will now offer brief retrospectives on each of these thought experiments.

In the final pages of *The Dispossessed* the reader is not permitted to witness Shevek’s return “home.” However, Le Guin is kind enough to offer a stand-in: Ketho, the Hainish ship officer. Through Ketho — the first non-Anarresti to step beyond the “wall” — the reader is invited to participate in this Anarchistic way of life, but not on the surface of Anarres. Access to “permanent revolution” is granted by way of Ketho’s refusal to accept another’s experience as his own, his autodidactic dedication to a self-governed life: “my race is very old. . . we have been civilized for a thousand millennia. We have tried everything. Anarchism, with the rest. But *I* have not tried it. They say there is nothing new under any sun. But if each life is not new, each single life, then why are we born?” (*Dispossessed*, 385). Le Guin seems to reassure her readers sympathetic to Anarchistic ideals, that if millennia of Hainish exploration and civilization cannot eliminate the Anarchistic desire for self-actualization, self-governance, and freedom, then nothing ever will.

⁴⁴ Even though Cypher offers an argument that Morpheus limited his free will by taking him out of the Matrix, I consider his discontent to be rooted in his own self-loathing, the resentment he holds against himself for choosing the red pill and not a desire for the lost *freedom* of “ignorance.” Such a freedom is antithetical to the freedom of self-determination offered by Anarchism.

Conclusion

More than any other idea, [Anarchy] is helping to do away with the wrong and the foolish; more than any other idea, it is building and sustaining new life.

— Emma Goldman (49)

A child free from guilt will grow up with the will to do what needs doing and the capacity for joy in doing it. It is useless work that darkens the heart. The delight of the nursing mother, of the scholar, of the successful hunter, of the good cook, of the skillful maker, of anyone doing needed work and doing it well — this durable joy is perhaps the deepest source of human affection, and of sociality as a whole.

— from the writings of Odo (247)

The critical dystopia genre is particularly suited for exploring the ideology of Anarchism. Due to the prevalence of internal debate and open-ended conclusions, these works offer no clear answers. Instead, they offer heuristics for seeking our own conclusions. Furthermore, these works, as thought experiments, share an important quality of scientific experimentation: replicability. Each reader (or moviegoer) who follows the voyage of Shevek, considers the evolution of V, or traces the path of Neo replicates and recapitulates in a vital way the conceptual trappings of the thought experiment.

In the interest of not sounding like Neo, I will admit that the path of Anarchism does have a desired *end*: the proliferation of means. The greater the means we have at our disposal, the more adaptable we will be to a changing environment, increasing our chances for evolutionary success. Furthermore, any measure of evolutionary success will depend on environmental constraints and exigencies. This is precisely why the Divlab computers are necessary for Anarresti life, i.e., that they expand their capabilities without limiting free choice. This is why V turns off the cameras in dystopian London. This is why Neo's mind is freed from the Matrix.⁴⁴

is at least, as Le Guin suggests in the above quotation, as serious and legitimate as Christianity.⁶

Though my objects of inquiry are literary (and, in one case, cinematic), I want to be clear that I am reading and analyzing them as thought experiments for a world not generally receptive to the implementation of Anarchistic ideals. This is the secondary objective of this paper: to reclaim and validate Anarchism. However, the primary objective is to map the emergence and evolution of Anarchy in the specific contexts and genres characteristic to each text.

The first major hurdle in this analysis is that both *V for Vendetta* (the graphic novel) and *The Matrix* resonate with some of the prejudiced expectations of Anarchism associated with terrorism and punk rock. To refer to V as anything other than a terrorist would be intellectually dishonest and extremely difficult to defend. Alex P. Schmid, in his essay in *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature*, an often-cited reference, defines terrorism as:

an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-)clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby — in contrast to assassination — the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought. (28)

⁶ Of course, there are Anarchists, such as Jacques Ellul, whose political philosophy is rooted in Christian theology.

V's activities match this definition exactly. I would hope that it goes *without saying*, but it should be noted that acts of "terrorism" and even the "terrorist" label are much more morally ambiguous than recent use, in America at least, would suggest. In fact, it would not be a semantic stretch to define many of the acts instrumental in liberating colonial America from British rule, such as The Gaspée Affair,⁷ as "terrorist acts" and the so-called Sons of Liberty as "terrorist." Therefore, it would seem that any moral significance of "terrorism," and by extension any moral judgment made on "terrorists" themselves, depends a great deal on the context of the "terrorist" acts. By mapping out V's Anarchism as embodied in his terrorist acts, I hope to make this indispensable context evident. At first glance, the Wachowski Brothers seem to have created *The Matrix* as a cyberpunk artifact. How well this label fits the movie is arguable. In the very least, it does manifest some of the broader characteristics of the genre. Cyberpunk is an independent and idiosyncratic manifestation of punk counter-culture marked by actors/actresses who are alienated by the "system" and engaged in technologized rebellion and cybernetic self-redefinition. As such, *The Matrix* carries the burden of punk's destructive, anti-social reputation. Early in the movie, Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, exhibits a propensity for reactionary anti-authoritarianism, but throughout the movie he develops a more sophisticated and intentional anti-authoritarian attitude. While punk ideology is a broad enough cultural movement to embrace both extremes, Anarchism, I would argue, is not. Neo may begin *The Matrix* as "just" a cyberpunk, but by the end he has also become a self-governed Anarchist. These, of course, are not mutually exclusive labels: Anarchists can be punk, but not all punks are Anarchists.

The other literary text included in my analysis is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. Instead of resonating with common misconceptions of Anarchism, it invokes a mode of Anarchy founded on non-violence, social responsibility, and mutual aid. The Anarchism of the central protagonist, Shevek, is more recognizable as such to the readers of Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, and Paul

⁷ For more information on the 1772 burning of the HMS Gaspée, visit gaspee.org

The Matrix: A World Where Anything is Possible

After Morpheus guides Neo through the painful process of realizing and understanding that his entire life to that point has been part of a computer simulation, he begins his "training." The training process entails uploading skills and abilities directly into his brain.⁴² Neo's prodigious ability to assimilate all this data into his brain is implicitly linked to his hacking prowess. However, in his final test — leaping a great distance from the roof of one skyscraper to another — he fails, or falls, rather.

It is not until he understands "the spoon isn't really there"⁴³ that he fully understands: neither is his body. With this new self-awareness, Neo finds that not only can he make gravity defying leaps, but he can also dodge bullets. During his final showdown with Agent Smith, his "major technological transformation" is marked onscreen by a point-of-view shot from Neo's perspective in which he sees the green scrolling characters that signify the structure of the Matrix. Once he "sees" the Matrix, he realizes that he can manipulate it just like a computer program.

Neo and Trinity's violent assault on the building where the Agents are torturing Morpheus for information is nothing more than a cinematic smokescreen, a diversion from the true revolution. Had Neo continued to rely on what Ursula K. Le Guin calls "the mindless yell of weaponry, the meaningless word," he would have been killed (301). Once he becomes aware of the seams in the system, he can transcend his own bodily projection to interfere with the efficient integration of the system components and, as a result, the efficacy of the entire system.

⁴² Marked by that imminently quotable line, "I know Kung-Fu!"

⁴³ This quotation comes from the Neo's conversation in the Oracle's apartment with the young boy bending the spoon with his mind.

figuratively by stealing the Voice of Fate, Lewis Prothero.⁴¹ The next evening's broadcast by The Voice of Fate, Prothero's replacement, sounds queer to the ears of the people of London. They begin to doubt the omniscient, determining guidance of Fate.

It is implied that before the events of the graphic novel, V has insinuated himself into every component of the technological infrastructure — most notably the city surveillance cameras and the citywide PA system. Later in the story, the reader learns that V has accomplished all this by having his own proprietary access to Fate, the central computer system that controls all of London. He uses his limitless access to the departments of the Head to strategically plant bombs in key buildings. In one fell swoop, V disables the Head's surveillance systems.

In the prologue to *Book 3: The Land of Do-as-you-Please*, V has taken control of The Voice of Fate to tell the people of London of their recently acquired freedom:

The date, of course, is the 5th of November 1998, one year after V destroyed the Parliament building and almost 400 years after Guy Fawkes's failed attempt. So begins Book 3, Chapter 1: "Vox Populi," the voice of the people. V takes the Voice of Fate so that the voice of the people can be heard. Given the circumstances, this is not the dawning of a new age of democracy — or even Anarchy; it leads, instead, to a state of "Verwirrung." Chaos.

While not exactly depicting an "internal debate," the adjacent panels illustrate the semantic tensions and misrecognitions that make understanding "Anarchy" difficult. Evey questions V about the frantic voices coming over the police scanner falling into the common misconception of Anarchy as a state of Chaos. From V, the reader has already learned the difference between Justice and Anarchy, and now he offers a pithy lecture on the difference between Anarchy and chaos.

Goodman than to readers whose sense of Anarchy stems from its current cultural currency.

By invoking Anarchy and Anarchism, the authors and protagonists in these works are fighting a war on two fronts. Just as Shevek struggles to reconnect Anarres to a vital Anarchistic struggle of inter-planetary proportions, Le Guin engages the general ignorance of authentic Anarchism by challenging her readers' pre-judged conceptions. In *V for Vendetta*, Alan Moore and David Lloyd have to contend with what has become a major hot-button issue, terrorism. That is not to say that terrorism had not been a significant issue prior to the September 11th terrorist attacks in 2001, but that discussing terrorism, at least in America, has become increasingly difficult.⁸ An American reading *V for Vendetta* in the eighties would have had a qualitatively different experience than a reader from our current post-September 11th era. Also, by *playing into* the misconception that Anarchy=terrorism, a general reader may find it difficult to imagine how Evey's role as V, whose identity she adopts at the end of the novel, could be anything other than a terrorist.

The conceptual burden of *The Matrix* is much lighter. The "punk rock" label was a commercial success throughout the 1980's and 1990's. As a result of punk rock's commodification, its counter-cultural tensions have relaxed into little more than a counter-cultural image, a mere façade of a counter-cultural movement. Punk has effectively become a phase of adolescence rather than a mode of social (dis)engagement.⁹ Because punk has been divested of its more dangerous elements, an audience is, perhaps, more likely to identify with or consider a punk character's point-of-view; however, an agent of terrorism, such as V, may come across as more suspect. *The Matrix* franchise has capitalized heavily on cyberpunk's counter-cultural image. Therefore, it is unclear how seriously, or sincerely, we should take Neo's closing promise of liberation, and, as some have noted, the credits' track, "Wake Up" by Rage Against the Machine.

⁴¹ Prothero was also, consequently, the former Commander at the Larkhill "resettlement camp."

⁸ One disappointing feature of the *V for Vendetta* film adaptation is that it failed to effectively confront the obfuscation of "terrorism," in American political discourse.

⁹ If you have gone to a number of punk rock shows in the past decade, you may have noticed that the average age of the crowds have been slowly converging to thirteen.

The aim of this paper is not to conclude definitely what Anarchism *is* but what it *does*, how it works within the boundaries of each thought experiment. Ultimately, each of these texts is a performance, an acting out of Anarchistic ideals embodied in each character's response to the demands of their environment. Through the charting of these violent and non-violent rebellions, we will see how successful our Anarchists are at "[propagating] uncompromising rebellion."

Introduction: *An Anatomy of a Thesis*

The planner, the builder of castles in the air, the novelist, the author of social and technological utopias is experimenting with thoughts; so too is the hardheaded merchant, the serious inventor and the enquirer. All of them imagine conditions, and connect with them their expectations and surmise of consequences: they gain a thought experience.

— Ernst Mach (136)

There is something inherently puzzling about milking real knowledge from unreal cows, and this something is the principal explanatory challenge for any account of literature as an instrument of inquiry.

— Peter Swirski (6)

I would include in Mach's "[builders] of castles in the air" both screenwriters and movie directors, and I would expand their products to include dystopias as well. My primary focal points of analysis will be Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*, the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, created by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, and the film *The Matrix*, written and directed by the Wachowski Brothers. These texts have been selected for this project because they each present disparate versions of anarchistic rebellions. The narratives are substantively different in two important ways: (1) the settings are

V for Vendetta: The Land of Do-as-you-Please

[editor's note: graphics in original not included here]

Despite an almost fatal trial-and-error process, Shevek finds, in the Terran embassy, a political venue for satisfying his desire, the way *unblocked*. V, on the other hand, exists in a very different world — a world without embassies, a world without political asylum, a world without the possibility of justice. This New London is a society governed by the cold hand (and Voice) of Fate. It too, like Anarres, was established in the hopes of ensuring survival in the face of a harsh and uncertain future. However, its order is maintained by surveillance, violence and threats of violence, imprisonment, and oppression. The cultural tyranny of the Anarresti society pales in comparison to the Norsefire regime.

In Book 1, Chapter 5: "Versions," a reader is offered two *versions* of "freedom" in New London. An internal monologue from the mind of Adam Susan, the "first version," is juxtaposed with the schizophrenic theatrics of V, the "second version," as he addresses the statue of Lady Justice atop the Old Bailey. One immediately obvious contrast is the silence attendant on Susan's procession into his command center versus V's dramatic vocal performance. This difference is brought into dynamic tension in each version's closing panels: Susan's monologue is punctuated by turning on Fate; V's is concluded with an explosion that demolishes the statue of Lady Justice.

This terrorist attack signifies that Justice, the "basic social structure" for balancing right and wrong, has become "blocked" under the fascist regime. In other words, the determinacy of Fate has trumped the intervention of Justice. In this context, V's Anarchistic terrorism becomes a *justified* mode of resistance.

From the beginning of the graphic novel, V is already aware of the intimate machinations of The Head. In fact, his primary goal is pedagogical in nature. By exposing the soft underbelly of the beast, he hopes to show the people of London how it can be killed, how enforced order can be brought to an end. He does so literally and

ill-fated public demonstration of a group of so-called post-Settlement Odonians in A-Io. In direct contrast with his previous speech, where Le Guin provides her readers with *only* the audience response and the newspaper reports, Shevek speaks for three uninterrupted paragraphs. Before the audience even has time to cheer, military helicopters of the government of A-Io begin

firing into the crowd. Shevek manages to barely escape this heinous act of stateorchestrated mass murder. Fearing for his life, with virtually every other path closed to him, he seeks political asylum at the Terran embassy on A-Io.

Once at the embassy, Shevek explains his plan to disseminate his Theory of Simultaneity to the ambassador. “Do you not understand that I want to give this to you – and to Hain³⁹ and the other worlds – and to the countries of Urras? But to you all! So that one of you cannot use it. . . to get power over the others, to get richer or to win more wars. So that you cannot use the truth for your private profit, but only for the common good.” The Terran ambassador responds, “In the end, the truth usually insists upon serving only the common good.” Shevek replies, “In the end, yes, but I am not willing to wait for the end. I have one lifetime, and I will not spend it for greed and profiteering and lies. I will not serve *any* master” (*The Dispossessed* 345–346). Because Simultaneity Theory would make possible the development of an *ansible*⁴⁰ device, which would allow for instantaneous communication between any two points in space, it would revolutionize interplanetary communication and interplanetary politics. By sharing Simultaneity, Shevek takes the first steps toward creating a technological system to seamlessly *connect* distant societies across the farthest reaches of space.

distinct: in *The Dispossessed*¹⁰, dystopia is difficult to locate because it exists in suspension between the planets of Anarres and Urras; in Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta*, the dystopic setting is a post-nuclear war London that has fallen under fascist control;¹¹ dystopia in *The Matrix* exists on the virtual level of the Matrix itself and the level of bleak reality that is outside it. (2) The narratives themselves are embodied in inherently different mediums: a novel, a comic book, and a film.¹² Another interesting difference between these texts is that they were published/released in three different time periods: *The Dispossessed* was published in 1974; *V for Vendetta* was published as a ten-part series from 1982–1988; *The Matrix* was released in 1999.¹³

This paper is a cross-genre pilot study in Anarchist thought experiments. It is not an attempt to produce an encyclopedic review of the emergence or function of anarchism in critical dystopias. My objective is not so ambitious; my aim is to plot the evolution of each rebellion within its own context. In the end, I hope to broaden an understanding of Anarchy and Anarchism: not an understanding that congeals and grows more rigid, but rather an understanding that expands and flows, nearing a point of superfluidity. At this point I will explicate two key concepts in my analysis: thought experiment and critical dystopia.

Peter Swirski’s opening quotation for this section is drawn from his recent work *Of Literature and Knowledge*. In it he investigates how “time and again narrative fantasies dramatically prove their power to encroach on our real-life existence” (4). He refers to some of the more speculative and hypothetical “narrative fantasies” as

³⁹ The Hain are one of the oldest races of people. Because their starship technology is at an advanced stage of development, they are responsible for the majority of interstellar travel.

⁴⁰ Ursula K. Le Guin’s “ansible” shows up elsewhere in science fiction literature, such as Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* (1985).

¹⁰ Some editions of Le Guin’s text include the subtitle *An Ambiguous Utopia*. While *The Dispossessed* certainly defies any clean categorization, another ambiguity lies in the term “utopia” itself. As such, I have chosen to classify these works as “critical dystopias,” a term in which this ambiguity is made more explicit.

¹¹ Moore speculated that nuclear disarmament in England would protect the island nation from attack in a nuclear war.

¹² Alan Moore believes the term “graphic novel” is a contrivance of DC Comics that serves as a marketable euphemism for “big expensive comic books.”

¹³ The second and third installments, *The Matrix: Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions*, were both released in 2003.

“thought experiments.” The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines thought experiments as “devices of the imagination used to investigate the nature of things.” However, the encyclopedia entry focuses almost entirely on thought experiments in science and philosophy dealing with inquiries into physics, quantum mechanics, and cosmology. Little attention is given to Swirski’s conception of literary thought experiments, which inquire more intimately and directly into *human* nature, that of human beings who are storytellers and as receivers of stories, than into the nature of *things*.

In an attempt to assay “the cognitive purity” of thought experiments as separate from a general class of literary fictions, Swirski outlines five criteria: clarity, coherence, relevance, informativeness, and projectability (108–9). Clarity is gauged by how cleanly the dependent and independent variables are defined in the fictional work. For the purposes of this paper, dependent variables are system components directly affected by a protagonist’s actions, and independent variables are system components that function beyond the range of a protagonist’s free agency. In an effective thought experiment protagonists follow clearly laid out decision trees in which most of their choices have definite consequences. Coherence is, roughly, a measure of believability. We have all read books or watched movies in which the characters, the settings, or the scenarios were not believable. We accept the *trueness* of the fiction when our experience of the narrative flows seamlessly from its premises. Relevance is a measure of how closely the fictional world resembles what its audience identifies as reality. Informativeness, however, goes beyond mere correspondence; it is a measure of the contemporaneous vitality of a work’s theoretical presuppositions. To draw an example from *The Dispossessed*, informativeness would be derived from how accurately Shevek’s scientific reasoning resonated with the state of theoretical physics and the philosophy of time in 1976.¹⁴ And finally, the criterion of projectability turns the thought experiment on its head in order to critically examine features of the audience’s reality rather

¹⁴ Laurence Davis argues in “The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia of Ursula K. Le Guin” that Shevek’s temporal inquiry echoes Friedrich Kümmerle’s “Time as Succession and the Problem of Duration,” published in 1968.

During the virulent debates preceding Shevek’s departure, Le Guin offers particularly cogent discussions on Odonianism and Anarchy. While communicating with the Urrasti, Shevek and his Syndicate discover that there are “post-Settlement Odonians” on Urras who want to immigrate to Anarres. By proposing that some Urrasti be allowed in, they are accused of behaving “with total irresponsibility towards the society’s welfare,” which is exactly how “archist critics always predicted people would behave in a society without laws” (355).³⁸ Then Rulag, a vocal critique of The Syndicate, invokes the “Terms of the Settlement”: “No Urrasti off the ships, except the Settlers, then, or ever. No mixing. No contact. To abandon that principle now is to say to the tyrants whom we defeated once, The experiment has failed, come enslave us!” (356). It is then that Shevek proposes that an Anarresti be allowed to travel to Urras.

By broadening the horizons of Anarresti culture, Shevek hopes to increase their ability to adapt to an uncertain future. Also, by allowing information to flow out of and into Anarres, he believes that other worlds may be positively influenced by their example. However, the crowning achievement of his rebellion is offering The Simultaneity Theory freely to all worlds.

Shevek’s first major attempt to reach beyond the walls of Anarres, beyond even Urras, to the interplanetary community is a speech he delivers before the Council of World Governments soon after his arrival on Urras. It is “a plea for free communication and mutual recognition between the New World and the Old,” and it is completely ineffective (84). In the words of Ellul, Shevek finds the avenue of direct diplomacy “blocked.” Moreover, his access to the Urrasti public is “blocked” in that none of his speech is quoted in any newspaper. Some of the more “respectable weeklies” go so far to describe the speech as a “disinterested moral gesture of human brotherhood by a great scientist” (84). For Shevek to reach his goal, he clearly must find another way.

His second attempt at communicating his Anarchistic message to a broader audience is met with violence. He is co-opted into an

³⁸ The harshest criticisms against Shevek invariably came from Rulag, his estranged mother.

Jacques Ellul writes in *Autopsy of Revolution*: “for *revolution* to be *necessary*, two conditions are requisite: first, man must sense to some degree that he cannot endure life as it is, even though he may not be able to explain why; secondly, the basic social structures must be blocked, that is, incapable of acting to satisfy express needs or of providing access to that satisfaction” (239). He goes on to clarify that this second condition exists in the structures of “technology and state” (239). The structures, or components of the system, which are “blocked,” represent independent variables, sites where a protagonist’s actions are entirely ineffective. This immediately brings to mind Hughes’s seemingly irresistible “soft determinism” of large technological systems that have gained a good deal of “momentum.” Rebellious against these systems is symptomatic of revolutionary desire, but rebellion does not *become* revolution; for a true “permanent revolution” to emerge, an Anarchist must dispense with rebellion. Or, in other words, rebellion must cease to be a means and become an end. Revolution, then, is equivalent to Goldman’s “propagating uncompromising rebellion.”

The Dispossessed: The Syndicate of Initiative

Laia Asieo Odo, 698–769

“*To be whole is to be part; true voyage is return.*”

— Epitaph on Odo’s tombstone (*The Dispossessed*, 84)

Shevek rebels against the social mores of the Anarresti people because he wants Anarres to open its borders to an inter-planetary exchange of information. Until Shevek and his Syndicate of Initiative built a station to exchange radio communication with the inhabitants of Urras, no one had ever *openly* sought discourse with the Urrasti beyond what was necessary for import/export exchanges. And, again, Shevek boldly defies convention, as embodied by the PDC, by leaving Anarres and traveling to Urras.

than the fictionally constructed reality of the work. In Swirski’s words, “projecting themselves into the lives and motives of narrative agents, readers can fathom their own *hypothetical* beliefs and desires, and project them back to better understand the fiction” (118). I will draw from the framework of critical dystopias, because these criteria, outlined above, are to some extent already intrinsic to the genre. The exceptions to this are clarity and informativeness. For this study, little attention is paid to informativeness because it is peripheral to my present aims. However, the criterion of clarity is more useful; in outlining variables and establishing cause and effect relationships, the *experimental* structure becomes more evident.

My working definition for “critical dystopia” is drawn from the work of Lyman Tower Sargent:

a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian [sic] enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced by eutopia [sic]. (“US Eutopias,” 222)

Where a character locates this utopian enclave can be particularly significant. In the case of *The Dispossessed*, rebels on Urras might consider Anarres to be such an enclave. However, there are others on Urras who view Anarres as a wholly undesirable place. For many Anarresti, the critical dystopian map is turned on its head, and Urras is perceived as a dystopian world inhabited by greedy proprietarians and profiteers. The utopian enclave in *V for Vedetta* is almost hermitic; V and Evey are the sole inhabitants of The Shadow Gallery for almost the entirety of the graphic novel. In *The Matrix*, the utopian enclave appears to be the underground rebel hideout of Zion; however, from the point of view of the character Cypher, true utopia is found in a prelapsarian state of “ignorance” *inside* the Matrix.¹⁵

¹⁵ At one point in the movie, Cypher agrees to betray his companions on the Nebuchadnezzar if Agent Smith will plug him back into the Matrix and wipe any memory of the world of Zion.

Another distinguishing feature of a critical dystopia, according to David Seed, is that the “text includes a dimension of debate, by characters and within the narrative structure itself, about the values and directions of its future society” (*Dark Horizons*, 69). This is true to varying degrees of each work in this analysis.¹⁶

An important key to understanding a critical dystopia is in its appeal to contemporaneous readers. This appeal is roughly congruent with Swirski’s criteria of coherence, relevance, and projectability. In order for readers to view a society as “worse” than their own, there must be points of contact. It is at these points of contact that the classification of these works as thought experiments gains traction. The brute facts of human existence such as eating, working, copulating, etc., along with higher-level sociopolitical realities such as police, war, law, technology, etc., all get filtered through an ideological matrix of dystopian/utopian thought. At the same time readers identify the dystopian elements that are “worse” than contemporary life, they also acknowledge the “better” features of the utopian enclave. In other words, the utopian and dystopian elements of the narrative form a triad with a reader’s own world. Because critical dystopias provide a continuum of possibility — from utopia to dystopia — they serve as thought experiments, a testing grounds for potentially revolutionary ideas. If the narratives resonate strongly with our reality as readers, then they may affect how we choose to live our lives.

Another marker of the critical dystopia genre is that it leaves both the protagonist and the reader with an open-ended conclusion. This is in stark contrast to the bleak endings of other dystopian works such as Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, George Orwell’s *1984*, and many others. As a result of this open-endedness, the internal debates in critical dystopias are left unresolved. Instead of functioning as cautionary tales, critical dystopias allow for the possibility of hope.¹⁷ By leaving inquiry open, both to

makes for a convenient black-and-white morality, which helps to justify the continually escalating level of violence in the film.

The Rebellion: The Seed of Revolution

Anarchism is not, as some may suppose, a theory of the future to be realized through divine inspiration. It is a living force in the affairs of life, constantly creating new conditions. *The methods of Anarchism therefore do not comprise an iron-clad program to be carried out under all circumstances. Methods must grow out of the economic needs of each place and clime, and of the intellectual and temperamental requirements of the individual.* (Emphasis added)

— Emma Goldman (63)

Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice — the power of change, the essential function of life. The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind.

— Ursula K. Le Guin from *The Dispossessed* (333)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

— from “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats³⁷

¹⁶ *The Dispossessed* has the most sophisticated internal debate of the three, followed by *V for Vendetta*, and then *The Matrix*. I think a good deal of this difference can be chalked up to the virtues and vices of their mediums.

¹⁷ For a deeper look at the “critical dystopia” genre, read Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan’s introduction to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*.

³⁷ V quotes most of these words on page 196. A disembodied narrator voices the final line, “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,” as the authority of Norsefire rule dissolves into its final *climax*.

fast-paced action sequence. Another reverse salient that becomes important in the second and third *Matrix* movies is Agent Smith himself.³⁴ The Oracle is another major reverse salient, as she exercises her autonomy from the system programming of the Matrix by aiding the rebellion. She has also taken into her care exceptional children who are candidates for removal from the Matrix. Because they are young, their minds are not as ingrained with the Matrix reality and will be more likely to accept the revealed “reality” of the outside. And, lastly, those who have been unplugged from the Matrix and rescued by the rebels of Zion represent a significant system liability to the perpetuation of the Matrix.³⁵ Only those who have been unplugged from the Matrix are able to jack-in to rescue others; freeborn citizens of Zion do not have the implants required to interface their consciousness with the Matrix.

Inside the Matrix, artificial intelligence programs, called Agents, try to prevent infiltrators, such as Morpheus and his crew, from freeing more minds. Agents have the ability to possess the virtual bodies of anyone hardwired into the Matrix. Once an infiltrator is located, agents often call for backup from the local police forces. Presumably, they can accomplish this easily by manipulating and controlling police communications. Because anyone in the Matrix can be possessed and/or controlled, there are no innocent bystanders.³⁶ This

³⁴ The first indication of this is when he is interrogating Morpheus while not wearing his characteristic Agent ear-piece. In the later movies he goes rogue and eventually possesses the entire Matrix in an attempt to destroy Neo once and for all.

³⁵ Of course, this analysis gets turned on its head during “the Architect” scene near the end of the second movie, *Matrix: Reloaded*. In that scene, Neo and the audience codiscover the fact that Zion and the “One” are all part of the machines’ greater scheme of system control. In fact, this is the sixth Matrix programming cycle. On all subsequent cycles the “One” chooses to sacrifice Zion in order to maintain a core of humanity to rebuild, thereby, starting the next cycle of the Matrix. This “One,” whom we have grown to love, chooses to keep fighting a seemingly unwinnable battle.

³⁶ Morpheus teaches Neo this lesson in a local simulation of the Matrix. A beautiful woman in a red dress distracts Neo, and Morpheus gets his attention. Then, Morpheus tells him to look again. Instead of the woman, there is an agent training a gun on Neo.

their characters and their audience, they function as thought experiments par excellence. In this way, the audience of critical dystopias are invited into the laboratory and encouraged to fiddle with the experimental apparatus.

The paper is divided into three main sections: (1) The Anarchist, (2) The Infrastructure, and (3) The Rebellion. The first section serves as an introduction to the protagonists: Shevek, V, and Neo. The second section is a characterization of the technological infrastructures that perpetuate dystopian power relations in their respective worlds. Also in this section, I introduce my primary analytical framework derived from Thomas P. Hughes’s analysis of the evolution of large technological systems. In the third and final section, I discuss how the protagonists resist these deeply entrenched technological infrastructures.

The Anarchist:

Perhaps due to a common tendency to misunderstand Anarchism as outlined in my foreword, both *V for Vendetta* and *The Dispossessed* contain explicit explorations of Anarchism’s many faces — even its false ones. Even though there is no explicit invocation of Anarchism in *The Matrix*, Neo’s anti-authoritarian behaviors and attitudes coupled with his closing speech touting “a world without rules or controls” suggests an Anarchistic interpretation of the film. As such, I intend to let the texts and the film — or, more specifically, their characters — speak for themselves. Also, throughout the paper, I will draw from a number of Anarchist theorists — including Jacques Ellul, Peter Kropotkin, Paul Goodman, and Emma Goldman — who were definite influences on Ursula K. Le Guin’s “new utopian politics.”¹⁸ Even though I stress the unique engagement of Shevek, V, and Neo within their distinct environments, I think there are important points of resonance and contact between them.

¹⁸ Whether Alan Moore or the Wachowski brothers are familiar with the primary works of these Anarchists I do not know for certain. However, the influence of these thinkers on the development of Anarchistic ideals is certainly enough to justify their use.

Shevek

In *The Dispossessed*, Anarchism is contained in the tenets of Odonianism, the world religion of Anarres.¹⁹ As do most Anarresti, Shevek devotes himself to a way of life inspired by Odo's writings. Much of the internal debates, characteristic of a critical dystopia, are framed around discussing these texts.

Despite having been dead for over 200 years, Odo is a surprisingly active character in *The Dispossessed*. Shevek first *meets* her when he arrives in the Anarresti center, Abbenay, and visits a park cultivated with trees from Urras. The encounter is described so vividly that upon my first reading I was confused momentarily before I realized that Odo was simply a *statue*:

Some ways before him, down the darkening path, a person sat reading on a stone bench. Shevek went forward slowly. He came to the bench and stood looking at the figure who sat with head bowed over the book in the green-gold dusk under the trees. It was a woman of fifty or sixty, strangely dressed, her hair pulled back in a knot. Her left hand on her chin nearly hid the stern mouth, her right held the papers on her knee. They were heavy, those papers; the cold hand on them was heavy. The light was dying fast but she never looked up. She went on reading the proof sheets of *The Social Organism*. Shevek looked at Odo for a while, and then he sat down on the bench beside her. (101)

Clearly, Le Guin intentionally gives life to Odo's statue. At the risk of taking the episode too literally, I understand it in two ways: (1) Odo is a *living* part of Anarresti society, and (2) Shevek's response

¹⁹ To better understand Odonianism, I offer a brief gloss on Anarresti history: approximately 200 years before the events in the novel take place, there was a rebellion on Urras orchestrated by the followers of Odo. To satisfy the revolutionaries, the authorities on Urras agreed to facilitate the colonization of their sister planet, Anarres, by the rebellious faction. Although Odo herself never reached Anarres, her anarchistic writings served as the foundation for the new Anarresti civilization.

of this mess. You already know that, Leader." The Leader replies: "Indeed I do, Mr. Finch. You have expressed such sentiments before. That you are still alive is a mark of my respect for you and your craft" (30). The Nose is the investigative branch — a Central Intelligence Agency, if you will — and Finch is the most talented and top investigator. It is his job to learn to think like V in order to find him and stop him.

V, for all intents and purposes, is the most significant reverse salient within the infrastructure of New London. While at Larkhill, he was simply another component of the system, which, in many ways, helped Prothero and the others run the camp effectively. After he escapes, he becomes the system's greatest liability.

The Matrix

The common system goal of the Matrix is the generation and maintenance of the power source of "the Machines," human body heat.³³ This is why the idiomatic nickname "coppertop," as in Duracell™ batteries, is applied to those still plugged into the Matrix. To sustain life and maximize heat output, the Machines had to introduce a simulated reality to occupy their minds. Near the end of the film, we learn from Agent Smith that an earlier version of the Matrix failed because it was too perfect and was rejected by the human hosts. The Machines learned that they could not simply generate *any* surrogate reality; they had to simulate one containing the full spectrum of human experience from fear to love, from pain to pleasure, and everything in between. Therefore, the Machines decided to model the simulated world of the Matrix on an actual historical period, the late 20th century.

It is also important to note the reverse salients inside the Matrix. When Neo thinks he has déjà vu because he sees the same cat walk by twice, Trinity is quick to inform him that this "out of phase" experience is indicative of Agents changing something in the Matrix; cue

³³ Such a power source became necessary after humans had successfully blocked out sunlight in a last-ditch effort to cut the machines off from solar power. This clearly had serious, unintended consequences.

They are luxuries. I do not believe in luxuries” (Moore, 37). So, the common goal of this system is to ensure survival of the “Nordic race” by strictly controlling the lives of its citizens. Because its early development is marked by atrocities such as concentration camps and high-risk medical trials on human subjects, it would seem that the architects of the Norsefire government will resort to any means they deem necessary to maintain their brand of ironclad fascism. V’s violent terrorist acts can be seen as an equal and opposite reaction to these atrocities.

The Finger is the police; “Fingermen” are police-officers. They are highly feared and corrupt. Our first introduction to Fingermen comes when Evey is caught trying to sell her body for the ostensible purpose of being able to feed herself. They inform Evey, “you’ll do anything we want and then we’ll kill you. That’s our prerogative” (Moore, 11). The Finger has an advantage over the other members of The Head because they are directly feared by the people, a fear maintained through unchecked aggression and violence.

Another component in the system is the Voice of Fate, Lewis Prothero. Each day Prothero reads the report from the central computer over the citywide PA. The first page of *V for Vendetta* provides a vivid example of this ritual, exuding the cold logistics of fascist management:

[editors note: graphic not included. . . see first page of *V for Vendetta*]

Take particular notice of the precise weather reports. Because these reports are never wrong and are empirically confirmable by everyone, Fate would appear to be either omniscient, because it *knows* what the weather will be, or omnipotent, because it *causes* the changes in the weather. Fate’s unimpeachable record on its weather reports lends even greater credence to its authority on resource management. Later on in the novel, the reader learns that the people of London believe that the Voice of Fate *is* the voice of the computer. V, of course, uses this belief to his advantage, as we shall see in the next section.

The Nose is under the leadership of Eric Finch, who is the only possible “nice guy” in the Head. He says early on: “I don’t go much for this ‘New Order’ business. It’s just my job, to help Britain out

to the statue signifies his intimate relationship with Odonian Anarchism. While there may be other, deeper readings of this passage, this simple interpretation provides a salient touchstone in understanding Anarresti society, in general, and Shevek, in particular.

Odo’s extant works, as referenced in the novel, include *Analogy*, *Prison Letters*, and *The Social Organism*. Occasionally these works are quoted directly, but, more often, they are only paraphrased or briefly referenced. Odo did not intend for her words to be “[parroted] . . . as if they were laws,” but, as Shevek’s friend Bedap argues, that is what Odonian education has become (168). Because Odonianism is the cornerstone of the social technologies that maintain the Anarresti way of life, it will be explored more in depth in the following sections on the technological infrastructure and the rebellion. While Shevek shares a common Odonian education with all other Anarresti, he possesses a singular intellectual prowess — surpassing some of the greatest minds on Anarres, Urras, and beyond. Even at a young age, Shevek stands out from his peers as having a keen scientific mind for physics and math. Early on in his intellectual development, he sets his mind to developing a “theory of the General Field in temporal physics,” or, in short, “the Theory of Simultaneity.”²⁰ However, his ultimate goal of sharing his theory freely and equally among all the worlds is not made evident until the end of the novel.

Life on Anarres does not remotely resemble the easy-going existence in more traditional utopias. Even though Shevek has a brilliant mind for math and physics, he has done his share of hard, physical labor. During a particularly arduous “afforestation project,”²¹ he resents the work because “people who had chosen to work in centrally functional fields such as physics should not be called upon for these projects and special levies. Wasn’t it immoral to do work you didn’t enjoy?” (*The Dispossessed*, 48). However, he volunteers simply because “[it] needed doing” and no one else was taking up the responsibility (48). During ordinary work rotations every tenth

²⁰ This is Le Guin’s Anarresti version of a *Theory of Everything*.

²¹ “The afforestation of the West Temaenian Littoral was one of the great undertakings of the fifteenth decad of the Settlement of Anarres, employing nearly eighteen thousand people over a period of two years” (*The Dispossessed*, 46).

day, as opposed to special long-term large-scale projects, Shevek had “always volunteered for the ‘heavies,’” because he was “proud of his strength” (48). Doing what is necessary — that is, responding to exigencies — is for Shevek his social responsibility.

V

V is an enigmatic, shadowy figure. His home, which turns out to be part of an underground complex of the abandoned subway system, is literally called “The Shadow Gallery” (18). The reader discovers early on that he does not even “*have*” a name, but he requests that Evey “call” him “V” (26). His most distinguishing *feature* is a Guy Fawkes mask, which he is never seen without.²² The significance of the mask cannot be understated. Guy Fawkes’s claim to infamy was the Gunpowder Treason, which ended in his capture moments before he was able to set off the explosives to destroy the British Parliament building on November 5, 1605. In England, he is perhaps the most infamous terrorist in history — so infamous, in fact, that the British celebrate Guy Fawkes Night every 5th of November. The celebrations include not only mirth and revelry, but also large bonfires built around the Guy Fawkes effigies that were the inspiration for V’s character design. Moore’s British audience would be extremely familiar with this iconography.

Another mysterious feature of V’s *modus operandi* is that he communicates almost exclusively in quotations, literary allusions, theatrics, and allegory. He also sings and plays music, which serves as a kind of soundtrack for the graphic novel. Many of his allusions and references are idiosyncratically British, and have a good deal more resonance within their national context, such as the hymn “Jerusalem,” which was derived from a William Blake poem (48). Other references have a more pop culture appeal such as “Sympathy for the Devil” by The Rolling Stones (54). Many of his references and allusions throughout the novel are unrecognizable to most other characters in the comic because the sources of such information have

²² Although, twice in the novel other characters “see” him without his mask.

and are lotteryposted to serve on PDC from abusing their power. Even though Bedap, in moments, sounds like a conspiracy theorist, Shevek cannot deny his own frustrating experiences.

After learning Iotic, the language of A-Io, and reading smuggled copies of Urrasti scientific works, Shevek discovers that Sabul is little more than a plagiarist. As he explains to Bedap, “I read the sources. They’re all Urrasti ideas. Not new ones, either. [Sabul] hasn’t had a thought of his own for twenty years” (163). Moreover, Sabul “appropriated,” as his own, the only book-length manuscript Shevek produced in his three years studying in Abbenay. The mechanisms in place to allow Shevek to engage in unfettered scientific inquiry are clearly dysfunctional. Shevek’s access to a community of scientific practitioners — a system component necessary for scientific inquiry — is severely stifled both on Anarres and Urras. Therefore, the PDC appears to be a significant reverse salient, out of phase with Odonian thought.

However, classifying system components as reverse salients in *The Dispossessed*, proves to be much more difficult than either *V for Vendetta* or *The Matrix*. Depending on where one stands — be it on Anarres, Urras, a Hainish starship, or on Terran soil at their embassy — any system-level perspective will be skewed. Furthermore, as Shevek comes to understand, how one understands a system in respect to its position on the temporal continuum of the past-present-future will also greatly affect what one considers to be out of phase.

V for Vendetta

The Norsefire government is called “The Head” and is composed of The Finger, The Mouth, The Eye, The Nose, and The Ears. “The Leader,” Adam Susan, administers all of them and coordinates the Head’s efforts with the unerring guidance of Fate, the central mainframe supercomputer. The directors of each department report directly to him. The Leader’s goal is to “lead the country that I love out of the wilderness of the Twentieth century. I believe in survival. In the destiny of the Nordic Race. I believe in Fascism. . . I will not hear talk of freedom. I will not hear talk of individual liberty.

precious metals for its survival and the Anarresti rely a great deal on the importation of Urrasti items to maintain their way of life and standard of living, their relationship is decidedly unbalanced. However, Shevek discovers that these material exchanges between the planets are not the only points of contact.

Shevek moves to Abbenay in order to progress in his studies of theoretical physics and math. Through his professor, Sabul, he learns that the ships involved in importing and exporting often carry clandestine communiqués between Anarresti and Urrasti scientists. The Anarresti had long ago hermetically sealed off their borders. The Port of Anarres, where the import/export operations take place, is a closely monitored gateway in the “wall” between the planets; since the first-generation settlers were transferred to Anarres, no one else has been allowed to pass beyond the port. The literature exchanges function as unofficial technology transfers and act as an intellectual trading zone between the worlds. This trading zone is controlled and managed by the PDC, and Sabul acted as the consultant concerning communiqués to physicists.

Shevek’s greatest hurdle both in his scientific work and in his socio-political efforts — which to Shevek are one and the same — is “the network of administration and management” known as PDC, Production and Distribution Coordination. Shevek explains its function to Oiiie, an Urrasti, as follows: “they are a coordinating system for all syndicates, federatives, and individuals who do productive work. They do not govern persons; they administer production. They have no authority either to support me or to prevent me. They can only tell us the public opinion of [our Syndicate of Initiative] — where we stand in the social conscience” (76). As the mouth-piece of public opinion, the PDC functions as a crypto-governmental entity, Shevek’s friend Bedap argues, in a society that supposedly has no leaders. The above quotation from Bedap concerns the efforts of Sabul and the PDC to oppose Shevek’s scientific inquiry into temporal physics by preventing him from publishing his work. Shevek has apparently taken the maxim “publish or perish” much too literally as he admits to Bedap that he has “thought of suicide. A good deal” (164). What follows is an argument over the legitimacy of PDC and the checks and balances in place to prevent those who volunteer for

been declared contraband by the fascist state government, “Norse-fire.”

The reader of the comic is led to believe that V’s vast repertoire is entirely selftaught. However, we are offered fleeting glimpses into V’s autodidactic regimen via David Lloyd’s illustrations. In a couple of panels (on pages 9 and 18) the titles of some of the many books on V’s shelves are clearly visible: *Utopia*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Capital*, *Mein Kampf*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Essays of Elia*, *Don Quixote*, *Hard Times*, *French Revolution*, *Arabian Nights*, *Faust*, *The Odyssey*, *V*²³ (Thomas Pynchon), *Iliad*, *From Russia with Love*, *Ivanhoe*, *Shakespeare* (two volumes), *Golden Bough*, *Divine Comedy*, and *I Am Legend*. While there are a few non-fiction political works and histories, it is interesting to note that no texts specifically relate to Anarchism. Because V continually refers to Anarchy throughout the comics, it seems Alan Moore may have wanted to paint him as a first-generation Anarchist, inspired more by literature and a general political education than by any specific theory of Anarchism.

All the reader is allowed to know about V’s past is that he was created by medical experiments at Larkhill concentration camp. As an effect of his treatments, he develops superhuman strength, speed, and intelligence.²⁴ These abilities effectively grant him immunity from state-enforced violence. He uses his freedom to set into motion a meticulously crafted plan to enact vengeance on his captors from Larkhill and to destabilize the authoritarian regime that created it.

There seems to be no limit to V’s capabilities. He is an expert demolitionist, an electrical engineer, a chemist, an illusionist, and a computer hacker, with an uncanny gardening prowess. In fact, his green-thumb makes possible his escape from Larkhill. V receives special privileges because his skillful cultivation of the garden allows the camp to be self-sustaining. He exploits his access to fertilizer to make the explosives that he uses to flee the camp. In a sense, V

²³ Later in the series (64) V is reading Thomas Pynchon’s *V* when Evey confronts him about killing the Archbishop. He then quotes the novel: “There is more behind and inside V than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she?”

²⁴ It is unclear what his capabilities were before Larkhill.

is the apotheosis of the anarchistic struggle against the state and state-orchestrated violence because he has the capability to readily adapt and respond to virtually any exigency. However, he is limited in one very important way: he has chosen to become an agent of violent rebellion and, as such, he cannot adapt beyond this apparent need. Near the end of the novel, V orchestrates his own demise in order to pass the torch to Evey, who has little appetite for death and destruction. This seems to be a tacit acknowledgement in the novel that not only is a state of violence unsustainable, but also the agents thereof run the risk that their expertise at destruction will no longer be necessary.

Neo

In *The Matrix*, Neo, the central protagonist played by Keanu Reeves, is a computer hacker.²⁵ Presumably, his hacking abilities have drawn the attention of Morpheus and his cadre. They have been watching him and waiting for the right moment to *free his mind*. However, Morpheus considers him to be much more than simply a valuable ally in the war against the machines. He believes Neo to be the “One” foretold by the Oracle: the prophesied savior of Zion.

From early on in the film, Neo exhibits the knee-jerk anti-authoritarianism of cyberpunk counter-culture. By day, he is a computer programmer for a large technology firm, slaving away on the cubicle farm; by night, he engages in illicit dealings, hacking computer systems and selling viruses. Since he does not seem to want or need the money and his character seems to be generally apathetic about life,²⁶ it appears that he does illegal things simply because he can. Later on in the film, when Morpheus tells him he’s the “One,” he refuses to accept it. And then, when the Oracle tells him that he is,

The Anarresti people understand that their freedom, their anarchistic way of life, depends on maintaining their infrastructure. This maintenance can also be understood as the common system goal: the perpetuation of conditions required for the survival of “a very high civilization,” on an inhospitable planet. A new township that is not connected to the Divlab network cannot let others know what help is needed or what help they have to offer to others. Survival on Anarres depends on cooperation and integration. This fact has been known since the earliest stages of colonization. In order to maintain “high civilization” there are necessary evils. The first city of Anarres is named “Abbenay,” which means “mind” in Pravic, the native tongue:

There had to be a center. The computers that coordinated the administration of things, the division of labor, and the distribution of goods, and the central federatives of most of the work syndicates, were in Abbenay, right from the start. And from the start the Settlers were aware that that unavoidable centralization was a lasting threat, to be countered by lasting vigilance. (Le Guin, 96)

Furthermore, the relative autonomy of life on Anarres is bought at a steep cost; Anarres is functionally a mining colony for Urras. They export precious metals and imported “fossil oils and petroleum products, certain delicate machine parts and electronic components” — in other words, all the necessary commodities they cannot produce themselves. Because this deal works out to the advantage of both Anarres and Urras, it has remained stable despite occasional arguments in Anarresti assemblies. This stability does not prevent Anarres from looking like little more than an Urrasti mining colony. As Shevek’s friend Tirin remarks, the truth of the matter may depend on which “hill one happens to be sitting on” — and, more to the point, on which planet (41).

The mining relationship between the planets complicates this system-level analysis. A reasonable argument can be made that the Anarresti society is merely a component in the Urrasti market system. Since Urrasti society does not depend on the importation of

²⁵ This, of course, is not Mr. Reeves’s first foray into a role of a computer hacker. In 1995, he played the central role in *Johnny Mnemonic*, directed by Robert Longo and written by William Gibson, who is considered one of the progenitors of cyberpunk.

²⁶ How much of this is the “character” of Neo or an artifact of Keanu’s Reeves’s acting is unclear.

of the social being are never made alone,” and Shevek decides to take a job assignment where his help is most needed.

Shevek’s sense of duty is established in Chapter 2. This chapter consists of eight episodes from Shevek’s life presented in rapid succession, beginning with his infancy and ending in his late teens the night before he leaves to study in Abbenay. That night at his going away party, after most of the party-goers have gone off to copulate or to sleep, Shevek kicks off what some might call a bull session: “Suffering is a misunderstanding. . . . We can’t prevent suffering. This pain and that pain, yes, but not Pain. A society can only relieve social suffering, unnecessary suffering. The rest remains. The root, the reality” (60). What follows is a meandering discussion of love, pain, brotherhood, and mutual aid. In the end, Shevek concludes that brotherhood “begins in shared pain” (60). By sharing *necessary* pain and reducing *unnecessary* pain, individuals in a society can approach the Odonian ideal of brotherhood. The trouble is, as Shevek discovers through his contact with the Urrasti, the Hainish, the Terrans, Anarres does not have the market cornered on necessary pain. In other words, Anarres’s isolation is maintained only by denying its responsibility to an inter-planetary brotherhood, to the Council of World Governments, and, most importantly, to its own past, embodied in the planet Urras.

Anarres is a world ill-suited for colonization. Despite 200 years of intensive cultivation and work, it remains a difficult place to live:

On arid Anarres, the communities had to scatter widely in search of resources, and few of them could be self-supporting, no matter how they cut back their notions of what is needed for support. They cut back very hard indeed, but to a minimum beneath which they would not go; they would not regress to pre-urban, pre-technological tribalism. They knew that their anarchism was the product of a very high civilization, of a complex diversified culture, of a stable economy and a highly industrialized technology that could maintain high production and rapid transportation of goods. (Le Guin, 95)

in fact, not the “One,” he ultimately rejects her ruling as well. It is not until Neo chooses to be the “One,” near the end of the movie, that he exhibits the qualities of a convinced Anarchist sophisticated enough to deliver his closing lines:

I know you’re out there. I can feel you now. I know that you’re afraid. You’re afraid of us. You’re afraid of change. I don’t know the future. I didn’t come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it’s going to begin. I’m going to hang up this phone, and then I’m going to show these people what you don’t want them to see. I’m going to show them a world. . . . without you. A world without rules and controls. Without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.

These lines are delivered as a voice-over addressing an ambiguous audience. It can be understood as a message to the AI controlling the Matrix, the people still trapped within, and, on a meta-level, as a direct address to the movie audience. Not only does this statement clearly refer to an Anarchistic world, it is also a useful general description of the telos of Anarchistic rebellion: the perpetual generation of change and revolution without constraints.

The fact that Neo, Shevek, and V embody Anarchy so disparately should be no surprise. Anarchistic methods depend on the context within which they emerge and the individual characteristics of the agents who wield them. What these characters share is an ability to identify exigency and a passion for responding to it. This awareness and flexibility is part and parcel of the truly adaptive Anarchist.

Due to their aptitudes for technical work, they are each able to respond to the exigencies of their environments and intervene in the technological infrastructures of their worlds. Just as these technological systems are contingent creations, bound to the social and material conditions from which they emerge, so too is the Anarchist’s response. In the next section, I look more directly at the unique characteristics of these infrastructures. Then, in the final section, I discuss how our Anarchists challenge them.

The Infrastructure:

Anarchism does not stand for military drill and uniformity; it does, however, stand for the spirit of revolt, in whatever form, against everything that hinders human growth.

— Emma Goldman (63)

Political power is legitimized and reified through many channels. In highly structured utopian and dystopian worlds, these pathways of power are often intrinsically bound within a technological infrastructure. By necessity, the physical artifacts that are traditionally thought of as “technology” constitute the core of any such infrastructure. However, I will use technology in a much broader sense. Technology is not limited to materiality and is not simply what people *do*; it is a generative doing, a working at, working on, working with, and so on. Also, as in the case of *The Matrix*, technology can function with apparent autonomy from human agency. But, even in this extreme scenario the “machines” still depend on humanity to supply their energy needs. The object of this stage of analysis is to locate and identify specific technologies — both material and social — which are institutionalized or co-opted into the governing apparatus. This dissection will be of crucial importance in evaluating the infrastructural repercussions of acts of rebellion. In knowing how something is put together, one better understands how to dismantle it — and, ultimately, how it ought to be rebuilt.

The stability of these societies is contingent on the perpetuation and maintenance of a technological infrastructure. It is only when protagonist actors are aware of the contingent and fragmentary cohesion of an infrastructure’s apparent ‘whole’ that they are able to challenge that system. However, all rebellions are not created equal; only those actors with a broad awareness of the technological forces at work — and the technical competence to intervene — can ever hope to overthrow a thoroughly reified regime. Because of the high level of integration and redundancy of large technological infrastructures, they can be extremely difficult to topple without a

frowning. These days nobody took double helpings. Shevek stared frowning back and said nothing. He had gone eighty-odd hours now on two bowls of soup and one kilo of bread, and he had a right to make up for what he had missed, but he was damned if he would explain. Existence is its own justification, need is right. He was an Odonian, he left guilt to profiteers. (261)

Just as the serving boy is free to disapprove, Shevek is free to meet his needs as he sees fit.

Only in rare cases, when an individual’s actions are *perceived* to be pathologically dysfunctional and incongruent with the greater social welfare, will a local group of Anarresti band together to shame the offender. This shaming comes in the form of a “public reprimand,” where “everybody comes to your syndicate meeting and tells you off” (169). Even on Anarres the *many* can still wield authority over the *few*. This fact, as Bedap argues and Shevek comes to understand, is the primary component of the social mechanism that is out of phase. This “government by the majority” exists as a reverse salient for a technological system founded on Odonianism.

Ursula K. Le Guin depicts Anarres as a society struggling for survival under the burden of self-sacrifice and shared labor. Efficiently coordinating their shared labor is paramount. During the initial settlement of Anarres, the early settlers established a worldwide-networked computer system that is primarily responsible for the distribution of labor assignments and other logistical matters. However, Divlab, as it is called, has a distinct advantage over the super-computer in *V for Vendetta*, called Fate; Divlab offers a choice.

In one particular instance, Shevek’s partner Takver has been assigned to work at an isolated marine research station, but Divlab has no job openings for Shevek in the same area. He has to make a judgment call: “[The clerk] awaited his decision. It was his to make; and the options were endless. He could stay in Abbenay and organize classes in physics if he could find volunteer students. He could go to Rolny Peninsula and live with Takver though without any place in the research station. He could live anywhere and do nothing but get up twice a day and go to the nearest commons to be fed. He could do what he pleased” (Le Guin, 269). “But the choices

marked by dotted lines, on Anarres; Urras has about a dozen. The most notable countries on Urras are A-Io, a capitalist society and the seat of the Council of World Governments, and Thu, a socialist state.³⁰

Perhaps the most striking feature of Anarresti society is the absence of personal property; in fact, in Pravic, the Anarresti language, the singular genitive case is used rarely and only for emphasis.³¹ “Little children might say ‘my mother,’ but very soon they learned to say ‘the mother’ . . . to say ‘this one is mine and that’s yours’ in Pravic, one said, ‘I use this one and you use that’” (58). In this way, the Anarresti language establishes the primacy of function and use over personal possession. The only privacy generally afforded to an Anarresti is during copulation³²; otherwise, there are no locked doors unless the lock serves a purely utilitarian function, i.e., a lock on a moving truck to keep some one from falling out (34).

Every commodity is *distributed* as needed, but much is still left up to individual agency. For food, whether he or she worked or not, an Anarresti could still stop by a local commons each day. Even during a famine one could, as Shevek does in one particular instance, take a “double helping” (261). He arrives at the commons in Abbenay after being stranded without proper rations when the transport train he was on broke down:

Ravenous still from the journey, he took a double helping of both porridge and bread. The boy behind the serving tables looked at him

³⁰ Chifoilisk, a Thuvian, goes so far to suggest to Shevek that Thu and Anarres have much in common (135–6).

³¹ Le Guin deploys the singular genitive case as an important component of character development. The beginning of Chapter 2 shows an infant Shevek pushing another baby out of the way to claim a square of sunlight streaming into the nursery as “Mine sun!” (27). Later, in the same chapter, Shevek’s professor, Mitis, prepares him for his academic transfer to Abbenay under the tutelage of Sabul by telling him that “he will be *his* man” (58). Finally, in the debates surrounding Shevek’s radio communication with the Urrasti, Rulag begins her accusations against him by invoking the first person genitive: “*Your* Syndicate of Initiative” (Emphasis marked) (355).

³² This social arrangement resonates with another critical dystopia, *We*, by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1924). However, this resemblance is merely superficial; the socio-political frameworks in these novels are otherwise diametrically opposed.

sophisticated understanding of how the components are integrated. Otherwise, these rebellions are in vain.

As stated above, the worlds our Anarchists inhabit differ wildly. Even though *The Matrix* suggests deep philosophical tensions between reality and perception, its technological infrastructure is perhaps the easiest to characterize.²⁷ The infrastructure in *V for Vendetta*, on the other hand, is more multi-faceted. The setting in the graphic novel is a future version of London controlled by a fascist regime that maintains order through a veritable panopticon of surveillance systems. Outlining the governmental structure and the various ministries is a simple matter, but mapping how they interact and respond to the disruptions perpetrated by V is much more complex. Finally, because *The Dispossessed* spans two worlds, each with its own nuanced techno-political systems, I will focus most of my energies, as does Le Guin, describing the systems in place on Anarres.

As an analytical framework, I appeal to “The Evolution of Large Technological Systems” by Thomas P. Hughes. It is particularly well suited for the purposes of the paper because Hughes incorporates both material and immaterial artifacts in his characterization of technological systems. By way of defining technological systems, he writes:

Technological systems contain messy, complex, problem-solving components. They are both socially constructed and society shaping. Among the components in technological systems are physical artifacts, such as the turbogenerators, transformers, and transmission lines in electric light and power systems. Technological systems also include organizations, such as manufacturing firms, utility companies, and investment banks, and they incorporate components usually labeled scientific, such as books, articles, and university teaching and research programs. Legislative artifacts, such as regulatory laws, can also be part of technological systems. Because they are socially constructed and adapted in order to function in systems, natural resources, such as coal mines, also qualify as system artifacts.

²⁷ Again, this analysis largely disregards the convolutions of *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*.

He continues, outlining the interconnectedness and interdependence of a system's components:

An artifact — either physical or nonphysical — functioning as a component in a system interacts with other artifacts, all of which contribute directly or through other components to the *common system goal*. If a component is removed from a system or if its characteristics change, the other artifacts in the system will alter characteristics accordingly. (Emphasis added) (51)

The “common system goal” is what makes a system *systematic*. Defining this goal is key to understanding how the various components of the following technological infrastructures interact. In order to better understand Hughes's characterization of large technological systems, I will briefly discuss how such systems *move*.

In the history of technology, Hughes is noted for cultivating the term “technological momentum” as a response to notions of technological determinism. Instead of jumping on the train of technological progress, he decides to investigate technological systems as if they were trains — generally speaking, the faster they move and the heavier they are, the harder they are to stop. Hence, a high level of technological momentum “often causes observers to assume that a technological system has become autonomous” (Hughes, 76). This gives rise to the illusion of technological determinism. Elsewhere, Hughes concedes that high momentum systems exhibit a “soft determinism,” which may be exceedingly difficult to challenge, but is ultimately not irresistible.

Another important feature of Hughes's analytical framework is his consideration of *reverse salients*, which he defines as “components in the system that have fallen behind or are out of phase with the others” (73). Furthermore, the reverse salient metaphor is significant because “it suggests uneven and complex change” (73). Therefore, identifying reverse salients is of the utmost importance because they are, most likely, a system's weakest components, its greatest liability.

The Anarchists in these stories play the part of what Hughes refers to as the “independent inventor.” “Psychologically they [have] an outsider's mentality,” writes Hughes, “they also [seek] the thrill of a

major technological transformation. They often [achieve] dramatic breakthroughs, not incremental improvements” (59). By operating outside the reified technological systems, these inventors have a unique ability to create not only alternate systems, but also radically different components that may revolutionize systems that are already entrenched.²⁸ These texts suggest that radical innovation is impossible without “an outsider's mentality.” As Morpheus tells Neo, “unfortunately, no one can be told about the Matrix. You have to see it for yourself” — and you can only see the Matrix for what it is from the outside. Independent inventors swallow the red pill.

The Dispossessed

You can't crush ideas by suppressing them. You can only crush them by ignoring them. By refusing to think, refusing to change. And that's precisely what our society is doing! . . . Change is freedom, change is life — is anything more basic to Odonian thought than that?

— Bedap discussing Anarresti society with Shevek (165)

The setting of the novel spans spatially from the planet Anarres to the planet Urras and temporally from Shevek's earliest memories to his return voyage to Anarres much later in life. A reader's first encounter with the planets of Anarres and Urras are black line drawings of the planets on pages sandwiched between the dedication and the title page. Immediately, it is clear that the planets are inversely related; the surface of Urras is predominantly covered with water, much like Earth;²⁹ whereas Anarres is covered mostly by land. Another noticeable difference is that there are no state boundaries,

²⁸ Hughes goes much farther in characterizing “independent inventors” than would apply to our Anarchists. Much of his discussion of these unique figures is couched within economic terms. While, on an abstract level, Shevek, V, or Neo might be classified as “inventor-entrepreneurs,” who are the key inventors in directing the evolution of large systems, the profiteering sense of *entrepreneur* would be antithetical to their respective projects.

²⁹ Urras is, in fact, “five-sixths water” (64).