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Worlds Apart: Ursula K. Le Guin and the Possibility of Method

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.¹

Despite this disclaimer, printed on the copyright page of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, the novel has almost always been regarded as an account of the promise and problems of an anarchist society.² In many of the critical and political responses to the novel there has, that is to say, been a conflation between the world of the text and the world in which that text is written—between what the anarchist theorist Paul Goodman called the *written* and the *unwritten* worlds³—one that makes the former stand in for the latter, undermining or simply ignoring the value of the legal claim made at the outset of the novel. In this moment of tension between the disclaimer and the conflation we see both the complexity of the relationship between Goodman's two worlds—how the distinction between them is less clear cut than some would have us believe⁴—and the problem of utopia in political theory: either the disclaimer is embraced, and the two worlds are seen as entirely separate, with utopia becoming little more than a thought experiment with minor import for our everyday lives; or it is ignored, and the utopia is seen as a detailed blueprint for a future society. In either case, something important in the way of critical reflection is lost. In her creation of two fully realized literary worlds, Anarres and Urras, Le Guin's novel shows us a way out of this binary opposition, one that taps into a long tradition in political thought—stretching all the way from Thucydides to John Rawls—of juxtaposing realities as a source of critical insight. In this instance, however, Le Guin's work offers us a doubly critical perspective: one that forces the reader not only to consider her world and the way that she lives, but also to reflect upon the possibility of utopia itself and its role in political thought and analysis. In this, *The*

Dispossessed offers us not the limited opportunities of a specific critique or thought experiment, but something much more valuable: the experience and the demonstration of replicable critical method.

That *The Dispossessed* is concerned in some way, shape, or form with anarchism cannot be denied. The description of life of the Anarresti population is remarkably close to the accounts of ideal societies in anarchist theory: "Members of a community, not elements of a collectivity, they were not moved by mass feeling; there were as many emotions as there were people. And they did not expect commands to be arbitrary, so they had no practice in disobeying them" (1: 4). Similarly, Shevek describes himself—albeit somewhat ironically—as an "anarchist" (1: 25) in his early encounters with the Urrasti. Even more tellingly, Le Guin, who has described anarchism as "the most idealistic, and to me the most interesting of all political theories," declared that her purpose in writing *The Dispossessed* was to embody anarchism "in a novel, which had not been done before."⁵ In this context, the disclaimer that precedes the novel begins to look like an ironic form of *occupatio*, the rhetorical device by which one announces that one is not going to talk about a subject as a means of doing precisely that. It is an approach which is, of course, common to much fiction. No matter how fantastic the written worlds of literature, they must bear at least some resemblance to the unwritten world in which they are disseminated and published, otherwise we readers would not be able to make sense of them; as Wittgenstein observed in another context: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him."⁶ Despite the legal disclaimer that prefaces the novel then, the written world of fiction must stand in some relationship to the unwritten world to the extent that the resemblance of events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead must be something more than "coincidental." Consciously or unconsciously, written world situations, events, and characters are constructed for the purpose of reflecting upon the unwritten world: they are ways of exploring, amongst other things, the politics, relationships and emotions of the unwritten world under different conditions. We might think, for example, of the Ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*, which is used to illustrate the alleged consequences of removing the fear of sanction from human behavior.⁷

The use of the literary as a realm of alternate possibility is especially common in the genres of science fiction, speculative fiction and utopian literature. Margaret Atwood draws a distinction between the first two categories when she declares that science fiction deals with "technologies we don't yet have, other universes," whereas speculative fiction is concerned with "this planet. It doesn't use things we don't already have or are not already developing."⁸ In its acceptance of relatively easy travel between planets, *The Dispossessed* seems to belong quite clearly to Atwood's first category of science fiction. However, in its concern with the unwritten world theory of anarchism, and in the tension on Urras between A-Io and Thu—a tension which clearly corresponds to the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union in the period that the novel was written—*The Dispossessed* might also be regarded as speculative fiction: exploring the pos-

sibilities and implications of ideologies and political problems that we already have. In this alone, *The Dispossessed* might seem to be disqualified from the genre of utopian literature altogether. Resting on a Latin pun, the word utopia as coined by Thomas More suggests both no place and a better place, one that is divorced from current political formations. In the words of David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, "utopian space is unbounded, unfixed to any particular location, a place that can only be reached by breaking out of, or being liberated from the bonds of a prevailing social order."⁹ If this is indeed the case, it is little wonder that Francis Bacon complained in *The Advancement of Learning* that, "As for the philosophers, they make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths, and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light because they are so high."¹⁰ It is, however, precisely this notion of utopia that *The Dispossessed* calls into question, leading us back to an older tradition of social and political thought. It is a tradition that forces us to recognize the connectedness of utopia to the political context in which it is written, with critical leverage and theoretical insight emerging from the juxtaposition of the written world of utopia with the political problems of the unwritten world from which it springs.

For the Greeks, *Theoria*, the root of the modern word theory, was primarily connected to the noun *theoros*, meaning an "observer" or "spectator." As such it was inextricably associated with the theater: an alternative space in which, as many studies have shown, the Greeks addressed their most pressing social and political issues in comedic or tragic form.¹¹ Additionally, however, *theoros* had the implication of someone who travels to see other cities and places: an ambassador or official envoy sent by the city to other places to witness and testify on their actions. It is against this background that we should consider Shevek's oft repeated claim that he is a "theoretician" (3: 86) concerned with "theoretical work" (12: 366). Shevek's role in the text is precisely that: one who travels between worlds to reflect on them both. This was certainly the role of the theater in Greek political life, with the citizens acting as spectators, reflecting upon the world depicted on stage, and then returning, potentially transformed, to their quotidian and political worlds. The aim of the exercise was not, of course, simply to repeat that which they had seen depicted on stage in their own lives—had they done so Greek life would have been as bloody as that of the Romans—but rather to incorporate that which they had seen into their lives by synthesizing the world of the theater with the world of politics and that of their daily existence. It was, on a much smaller scale, an opportunity for ordinary Greek citizens to engage in the epic tradition of journey and return that marked Homer's *Odyssey*.¹² The dual notions of journey and return, and of synthesizing dueling perspectives are central to Shevek's life, and indeed, to the Odonian philosophy by which he attempts to live.

The connection between Odonian philosophy and the notion of homecoming—or what the Greeks called *nostos*—is evidenced by the inscription on Odo's tomb, the latter part of which reads "*true voyage is return*" (3: 84). Shevek, we are told, "would always be one for whom the return was as important

as the voyage out. To go was not enough for him, only half-enough; he must come back" (2: 54). Indeed, one of Shevek's final observations in the novel is that "True journey is return" (13: 386). There is, nevertheless, something of a tension between the journey and the return. For Shevek is aware that the place to which he seeks to return will no longer be the same, revealing the implicit connection between the Greek *nostos* and nostalgia: longing for what is lost. We are told that Shevek believed that although "the very nature of the voyage, like a circumnavigation of the globe, implied return. You shall not go down twice to the same river, nor can you go home again" (2: 54). Shevek's theoretical work is, perhaps, an attempt to compensate for this nostalgia. "You *can* go home again, the General Temporal Theory asserts, so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been" (2: 55). In this, Shevek's work might be seen as belonging to the tradition of Epic Theory, what Peter Euben called "the attempt to redeem in thought what is denied in practice."¹³ By seeking to reconcile the journey with the changed location of the return, Shevek's theoretical work might be thought of as the attempt to overcome the disconnect caused by the journey or to ameliorate the profound sense of loss that generates feelings of nostalgia. An alternative and more forward-looking response to such loss is, however, to embrace it, and to seek to reconcile the journey with the loss through critical reflection and the recognition of the transfiguration of self that produces the loss. Indeed, this second response seems to be a better account of Shevek's experience in the novel. The text appears to be profoundly concerned with the transfiguring nature of the journey between worlds, with the insight generated by the disorientation and unfamiliarity of travel. Many aspects of *The Dispossessed* echoes Plato's *Republic*; Shevek's travel reverberates with the allegory of the cave.

Plato's *Republic* is, of course, a text that is replete with references to journey and return, from the Philosopher Kings who separate themselves from the ideal city, only to return in order to rule; to the Er who dies, goes down to the underworld, and returns with a message to the living. It is, however, in the allegory of the cave that we can see the strongest parallel between Le Guin's work and Plato's text. Shevek parallels Plato's cave-dweller who is dragged upwards into the light and who, as a result of his journey, experiences a profound sense of disorientation and discomfort. The first chapter of *The Dispossessed*—which, like Plato's *Republic*, begins in a port, traditionally a place for the influx of new ideas into a community—deals specifically with Shevek's debilitating sense of disorientation caused by the journey from Anarres to Urras. It is a disorientation caused by the experience of space travel itself, one that emerges from the inversion of his traditional perspective on his own world. "This blackness" we are told, "reversed the whole picture, made it negative. The real stone part of it was no longer concave and full of light but convex, reflecting, rejecting light. It was not a plain or bowl but a sphere, a ball of white stone falling down in blackness. It was his world. 'I don't understand,' he said aloud" (1: 6). It is a disorientation

which affects Shevek physically: his mental state reflecting his geographical position. "His arms and buttocks ached from injections; he ran a fever that was never quite heightened to delirium but left him in a limbo between reasons and unreason, no man's land" (1: 9). As with Plato's traveler, Shevek gradually becomes adjusted to his new circumstances—even if he is never entirely comfortable on Urras—and, again, like the figure from Plato's text, decides that he must return. However, the disorientation caused by the journey makes Shevek an exile in both contexts—Urras and Anarres—and it is for this reason that he can no longer ever really go home again.

The connection between critical theory and exile is a strong one, both in the history of political thought and in Le Guin's text. Shevek recognizes that "he came from a self-exiled society" (3: 89), and, upon visiting the monument to Odo on Anarres, Shevek has a profound moment of realization. We are told that for "the first time in his life he comprehended" that "Odo was an alien: an exile" (4: 101). The very nature of exile makes one a spectator. It is this existence as a spectator—one who lives between worlds but never fully part of either—that generates the strong possibility of critical insight: we should think of Aristotle the Macedonian writing on Athens, Tocqueville the Frenchman writing on America, Marx the German writing on England, or Dante, whose political theorizing began only upon his exile from the actual practice of politics. It is, however, in the allegory of the cave that we once again find the strongest parallel between Shevek and the history of political theory. Having returned to the cave, the figure in Plato's allegory would, Socrates tells us, be mocked by those who had never left their posts, and they would deny the need to go upwards towards the light of knowledge. So hostile would be their response, says Socrates, that were they not still chained to their posts, they would probably try to murder the traveler. The traveler on the other hand would, we are told, undoubtedly benefit from this experience. For, upon hearing opinions that differed from his own, he would not reject them outright, but would be forced to consider whether they came either from ignorance or from a brilliance greater than his own.¹⁴ He would, that is to say, be opened up to the existence of conflicting perspectives, and with it, the possibility of dialectic.

Dialectic, according to Stanley Fish, is an experience that forces people into a "rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by."¹⁵ His definition draws heavily on a reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, in particular the discussion of the distinction between the good and bad lover. The bad lover, according to Socrates, merely flatters the object of his affections, intent solely on satisfying his most immediate and fleshy desires. The good lover, on the other hand, offers up criticism in the hope that the object of his affections might become more perfect.¹⁶ It is in this possibility of being challenged—of being faced with the unfamiliar and unexpected—that the possibility of dialectic lies, for the object of the critic's affections must seek to reconcile the criticism with its aim. He must find, that is to say, a new way to think. Doing so, however, can be a profoundly disorienting

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experience: what we might refer to as the discomfort of dialectic. This is precisely what we see in Shevek's journey between worlds, and indeed, with his concern with dualist perspectives, and his attempts to reconcile them throughout the text.

The notion of competing perspectives dominates *The Dispossessed*. In only the second paragraph of the novel we are told about the dual nature of the boundary wall of the Port of Anarres. "Like all walls" we learn, "it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended on which side you were on" (1: 1). Later, in the same chapter, Shevek responds to the suggestion that he has been locked up to keep others out of his quarters with the observation "To lock out, to lock in, the same act" (1: 11). Similarly in a passage that echoes Nietzsche's characterization of his genealogical project—seeing things as if from another planet¹⁷—Shevek observes that the "... way to see how beautiful the earth is, is to see it as the moon. The way to see how beautiful life is, is from the vantage point of death" (6: 190). Nor is Shevek the only character who experiences—consciously or unconsciously—this dualism. As a young boy at the Northsetting Regional Institute of the Noble and Material Sciences, Shevek is the participant in the following conversation between two of his classmates:

"I never thought before," said Tirin unruffled, "of the fact that there are people sitting on a hill, up there, on Urras, looking at Anarres, at us, and saying, 'Look there's the Moon.' Our earth is their Moon; our Moon is their earth."

'Where then is Truth?' declaimed Bedap and yawned.

'In the hill one happens to be sitting on,' said Tirin. (2: 41)

Journeying between worlds as a source of different perspectives and potential critical insight is, perhaps, the central theme of the novel. In this instance the theme is somewhat tritely presented, hence Bedap's yawn, but the shifting of perspectives as a source of critical insight permeates even the structure of the novel, with each alternate chapter moving back and forth geographically and temporally to offer the reader an experience similar to those undergone by the characters in the text. That the final two chapters juxtapose the period immediately before Shevek's departure for Urras with his return from it, suggests that we have experienced, at the level of literature, something of what Shevek's General Temporal Theory seeks to achieve in space and time travel: some notion of synthesis or dialectic.

Dialectic occurs then when some way is found to reconcile two apparently conflicting positions, by locating some third position that both accounts for and explains the apparent conflict in such a way as to make the conflict disappear. Scientifically speaking, successful dialectic produces what Thomas Kuhn calls a "paradigm shift"¹⁸: a new way of looking at the world that allows us to do more than the previous way of conceiving of reality could. It is precisely this that Shevek is seeking in his General Temporal Theory; hence his exchange with Dearri, the Urrasti physicist:

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"You can't assert two contradictory statements about the same thing," said Dearri, with the calmness of superior knowledge. "In other words, one of these 'aspects' is real, the other's simply an illusion."

"Many physicists have said that," Shevek assented.

"But what do you say?" asked the one who wanted to know.

"Well, I think it's an easy way out of the difficulty. . . . Can one dismiss either being, or becoming as an illusion? Becoming without being is meaningless. Being without becoming is a big bore. . . . If the mind is able to perceive time in both these ways, then a true chronosophy should provide a field in which the relation of the two aspects or processes of time could be understood." (7: 224)

Or, more succinctly, it is later said about Shevek that: "To him a thinking man's job was not to deny one reality at the expense of the other, but to include and connect. It was not an easy job" (9: 284-85). In this instance, as with many others, Shevek's quest for a scientific theory that will incorporate and synthesize apparently conflicting positions runs parallel to the political aspects of Le Guin's novel. Far from presenting a simple depiction of the promise and problems of anarchism as a political theory, the novel offers us instead a method for critical reflection. It is a method that reflects a perennial tradition in political theory: that of offering dualistic accounts as a way of prompting ongoing critical thought and generating dialectic. In so doing, the tradition seeks to change *how* we think, not just what we *know*. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to the way in which literary works, utopias among them, are often read in political contexts: as the written world depiction of simple lessons or maxims to be applied unmediated to the unwritten world. Such maxims, as Plato tells us in the *Republic*, can easily become platitudes and, as such, the enemy of genuine critical thought.

The first book of Plato's *Republic* famously begins with Socrates systematically working his way through the then contemporary platitudes about justice: giving what is owed, or helping one's friends and hurting one's enemies, or simply the will of the stronger. The counter-arguments that Socrates offers to these positions are, of course, notoriously weak.¹⁹ John Seery, amongst others, has suggested that what we are witnessing in this first book of the *Republic*, is Plato, the author of the text, appealing over the heads of his characters to alert us the readers to the ways in which ill-thought-out conceptions, or simply the rote repetitions of platitudinous positions, are easily defeated by even the simplest and most wrong-headed of counter-arguments.²⁰ Against this background, Seery suggests, we might think of Socrates' shocking proposals for the Just City in the *Republic* as an attempt to generate critical political thought in the reader. On this account, it is the juxtaposition of the Just City with the Athenian polis, rather than the outlining of a literal blueprint for an Ideal City, that is central to the text.²¹ Seery's argument is that what we are witnessing in the *Republic* is *Platonic* irony: a way of generating uncertainty in the reader, an

uncertainty that disrupts the platitudes of everyday life, and paves the way for genuine critical thought. In *The Dispossessed* we see a similar relationship between Odonian philosophy as it is practiced on Anarres and Shevek's journey to Urras. For all the individual liberty promised on Anarres, it becomes clear that by Shevek's time the society has stagnated. In the words of Victor Urbanowicz: "Its prolonged isolation has made it xenophobic towards Urras, quite against anarchist ideals of human cooperation and solidarity across political boundaries; the administrative syndicates have developed informal hierarchies, hardening into bureaucracies and clinging to powers acquired during long-past emergencies; custom has made most persons ashamed to refuse postings even when acceptance means being separated for years from a mate or from one's chosen work."²² Indeed, we see the strongest criticism of the Anarresti society in an intense exchange between Shevek and Bedap where the latter declares: "You can't crush ideas by repressing 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!" (6: 165) Later, in the same exchange, Bedap notes how Odonian philosophy has, like the Greek conceptions of justice depicted in the *Republic*, become simply platitudinous. "Kids learn to parrot Odo's words as if they were *laws*—the ultimate blasphemy!" (6: 168) Most tellingly, perhaps, from a theoretical viewpoint—given the genealogy of that word and its meaning to the Greeks—we see the stagnation of Anarres in the role of the Theater in its society.

Whereas the various arts taught on Anarres "served largely as elements of architecture and town planning" (6: 156-57), we are told that "only the theater stood wholly alone, and only the theater was ever called 'the Art'—a thing complete in itself" (6: 157). Indeed, there appears to have been a thriving theatrical community on the planet:

There were many regional and traveling troupes of actors and dancers, repertory companies, very often with a playwright attached. They performed tragedies, semi-improvised comedies, mimes. They were as welcome as rain in the lonely desert towns, they were the glory of the year wherever they came. Rising out of an embodying the isolation and communality of the Anarresti spirit, the drama had obtained extraordinary power and brilliance. (6: 157)

As such, the claim that critical thought or reflection had stagnated on Anarres might be thought to be overstated. With a thriving theatrical community, the opportunities for *Theoria* on Anarres might seem to have been positively bountiful, until that is, one examines the *type* of plays that were presented on Anarres, plays that were said to be the "embodying [of] the isolation and communality of the Anarresti spirit." Turning again to Plato's *Republic*, we might recall the sort of poetry that Socrates advocates in his Ideal City, poetry that celebrates the virtues of the city at the expense of that which calls its central values

into question. Such poetry serves only to reinforce the values of the city's rulers, without concern about artistic merit. We might think of the didactic art of the Soviet Union, or the thinly veiled moralizing of television's "after school specials." It is indicative of the conditions of life on Anarres were so dreary that even this form of stolid entertainment was so gratefully received, even to the extent of being regarded as extraordinarily powerful and brilliant. That plays on Anarres were actually of a drearily-didactic variety is indicated by the treatment handed out to the rather more transgressive theater of Shevek's contemporary, Tirin. We are told that his play "made trouble for him" (10: 327). The play, in which an Urrasti smuggled himself onto Anarres, echoes, of course, the plot of the novel and Shevek's role in it, even down to the failed attempt at copulation caused by conflicting social mores. Shevek, who did not care for traditional Anarresti theater, describes Tirin as "a born artist. Not a craftsman—a creator. An inventor-destroyer, the kind who's got to turn everything upside down and inside out. A satirist, a man who praises through rage" (10: 328). For such acts of creativity and critical reflection—for producing theater in the Greek tradition—Tirin is forced into therapy. We are told that "he was destroyed as a person" (10: 328), and that all he could do thereafter was to write the same play over and over again, his creativity reduced to the rote-like repetition that plagued the stymied Odonian philosophy of Anarres. Critical reflection was, we are to conclude, not welcome on Anarres, with Odonian platitudes replacing genuine political thought. In her depiction of the costs of this decline in critical thought for life on Urras, Le Guin the author seems to appeal over the heads of her characters—as, Seery argues, Plato does in *The Republic*—to alert us, her readers, to the dangers of such a decline in our own lives. Indeed, she appears to warn us against reducing her text to the simple lessons of Anarresti theater. In so doing, Le Guin avoids the self-defeating paradox or potential hypocrisy of making this warning itself a simple platitude. She does so by making the warning part of a critical *method*, one that demands that we her readers take part in the process to think and reflect for ourselves. She encourages us as readers, that is to say, to engage in a potentially transfiguring journey between worlds—written and unwritten—by constantly alerting us to the fictionality of her own enterprise.

In only the second chapter of the novel, Shevek, in an argument with Bedap about the respective values of Anarres and Urras, responds angrily to his friend's rhetorical use of a scientific analogy. "Oh, you can prove anything using the analogy, and you know it," he declares (2: 43). It is a warning we readers, especially those of us concerned with reading Le Guin's novel in a political context, would do well to take seriously. In using literature as evidence in our political arguments we too run the risk of arguing by analogy, of holding that the written world is sufficiently similar to the unwritten world in to make it good evidence for our arguments about unwritten world politics. Consequently,

readings of *The Dispossessed*, or indeed *any* novel, which reduce that text to simple lessons about anarchism, communism, or indeed *any* political theory, run the risk of the conflation of worlds identified at the outset. Just as the worlds of Anarres and Urras are similar but different, the written world of *The Dispossessed* is similar but different from the unwritten world in which Le Guin wrote her text. Neither the simple conflation of worlds which marks certain types of utopia reading or political-literary criticism—the sort which looks for political lessons or maxims in the text—nor the extreme disassociation of worlds—that which we see in the legal disclaimer that prefaces the text and warns us that resemblance to actual events is coincidental—captures the relationship between the worlds accurately. Nor indeed could either of these approaches do so.

For, just as we cannot summarize a poem—the question “what is it about?” asks about themes but misses something crucial to the poetic form—we cannot give a scientific or even a discursively stable account of the relationship between the written and unwritten worlds. Rather the relationship between these worlds is something to be *experienced*. Le Guin reminds of this not only by depicting the experience of moving between worlds in Shevek’s journey from Anarres to Urras and back again, but also by inviting us to experience it for ourselves as we read. She does so by a persistent baring of her device: drawing self-referential attention to the act of reading, and the problems of fiction as critical thought.

The reference to reasoning by analogy is but one example of Le Guin’s exposing the device. Other more obvious examples are to be found in the book’s structure—which invites the reader to move back and forth in space and time and thereby to recreate for herself the *experience* of Shevek’s journey—and Le Guin’s multiple references to, and use of, reading analogies in her text. We see this when Shevek tries to explain his temporal theory, identifying the role of the agent in creating the experience:

“Well, we think that time ‘passes,’ flows past us, but what if it is we who move forward, from past to future, always discovering the new? It would be a little like reading a book, you see. The book is all there, all at once between its covers. But if you want to read the story and understand it, you must begin with the first page and go forward, always in order. So the universe would be a very great book, and we would be small readers.” (7: 221)

Similarly, early on in the text, in a passage reminiscent of the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, we are told that: “If a book were written all in numbers it would be true. It would be just. Nothing said in words ever came out quite even. Things in words got twisted and run together, instead of staying straight and fitting together” (2: 31). The inadequacy of words in this context reminds of the inadequacy of books as a form of knowledge, something that Shevek acknowledges when he says of a certain aspect of life on Urras, “you know, I had not ever un-

derstood that, in all my reading of Urrasti books" (1: 15). Life on Urras, like reading and indeed thinking, are, we are reminded, not things to be experienced second-hand. When Le Guin draws attention to the fictionality of her enterprise she does so in such a way as to remind the reader of the partiality and incompleteness of the picture presented in the text. She reminds us of the inadequacy of literature by itself to capture the totality of the experience of some non-literary reality and, as such, of the differences between the written and unwritten worlds. We are reminded, that is to say, to avoid the easy conflation of worlds which produces the trite lessons and maxims of reductive, politically motivated reading.

A particularly revealing example of Le Guin baring the device occurs in the second chapter with the introduction of an author footnote, the only one in the text. In this moment (2: 47), the narrative approach breaks down and the author collapses the fourth-wall to speak in her own voice about the literary world that she has created. In this footnote concerning the written-world word "*tadde*" and its relationship to the unwritten-world word "Papa," the information she imparts could easily have been incorporated in the text of the novel in numerous other ways; certainly Le Guin is not shy about having characters explain more complex concepts in longer passages of dialogue. That she chooses to incorporate the information in a footnote momentarily plucks us from the written world of the narrative back into the unwritten world of the writing of the text. In this moment, Le Guin reminds us that this written world is the construction of a particular author with a particular purpose. She also shows us just how pervasive in her work is the notion of travel between worlds as a source of insight. We are once again invited to travel between worlds, and journey not from Anarres to Urras and back with Shevek, but rather from the unwritten world to the written world and back again. Just as Shevek develops the critical perspective of *Theoria* from his travels, to develop the same, by using the written world of literature to reflect upon the unwritten world in which we live.

The claim that literature can be a source of insight into the way we live our lives—political and otherwise—is, of course, not new: we can see it in the work of thinkers as diverse as Matthew Arnold and Martha Nussbaum.²³ Le Guin's work, however, differs from this rather didactic tradition by showing us that the reduction of texts to simple lessons, be they about Empire, empathy, or anarchism, though easily done, is not the way to generate meaningful critical thought. It suggests that, in this process of generating critical reflection, the *journey* not the *play* is the thing. Le Guin illustrates that insight comes not from simply applying the lessons of literature to the world in which we live, but by using both worlds to reflect upon and consider the other. In a highly ironic moment in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggests that texts can only remind us of what we already know (even as that text seeks to transfigure and change our understanding of the act of reading)²⁴; and indeed, reading to confirm what we already believe to be the case is a

danger in all politically motivated approaches to literary texts. In this instance Le Guin's work might, however, be thought of as a *positive* reminder, not of the pre-existing concerns we bring to the text, but of an older tradition in the history and methods of political thought, one that juxtaposes realities as a source of insight. We see such an approach in such seemingly disparate works as Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, where the author juxtaposes the idealized Athens of Pericles' Funeral Oration with the dystopian Athens of the Plague in order to offer us a more rounded and complex vision of the city,²⁵ and John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, where the insights about justice gleaned in the Original Position are to be compared and contrasted with the agents' pre-existing moral intuitions in a process that Rawls refers to as "Reflective Equilibrium."²⁶ In each instance, the critical insight of *Theoria* emerges not from simply constructing another world and reading-off the lessons for our own, but rather by traveling between them and using the perspectives gained from evaluating both realities in tandem with the other.

The subtitle of Le Guin's novel is *An Ambiguous Utopia*, whose meaning is, perhaps, as ambiguous as the utopia itself. The reading that has been offered here, however, suggests that we should read this subtitle as a reminder of the inherent ambiguity of the text—*any* text—as a source of insight into the political and that what we derive from the text depends crucially upon how it is read. In reminding us of this, however, and the role of the juxtaposition of realities in the creation of *Theoria*, Le Guin also offers us a method. It is one that has recently been revived in the work of Fredric Jameson, work in which Jameson, crucially and revealingly, cites Le Guin as an inspiration and an example. Jameson revives the argument that utopia is not simply a blueprint for a future but rather a method. What "utopian oppositions allow us to do, by way of negation," he writes, is "to grasp the moment of truth in each term. Put the other way around, the value of each term is differential, it lies not in its own substantive content but as an ideological critique of its opposite number."²⁷ Utopia, he suggests, should be seen as dialectical, not didactical. It is, he writes, "a negative dialectic in which each terms persists in its negation of the other; it is in their double negation that the genuine political and philosophical content is to be located."²⁸ In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin offers us a powerful illustration of this method, one that shows us a much richer way of understanding the role of literature in critical reflection, and indeed, the function of utopia in political thought than that identified at the outset of this piece. She offers us a replicable critical method, and in so doing she connects her work to a long tradition in the history of political philosophy. Indeed, it is a testament to the complexity of her approach that Peter Euben's summary of the work of Hannah Arendt seems equally applicable to Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. "What she teaches us," writes Euben of Arendt, "is as much a practice of reading as a set of doctrines or specific arguments."²⁹ Le Guin, in her complexity and nuance, offers political thinkers a similarly valuable gift.

NOTES

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), cited in the text by chapter and page to the 388-page Eos HarperCollins edition of 2001, copyright page.
2. See, for example, Victor Urbanowicz, "Personal and Political in *The Dispossessed*," *Science-Fiction Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 1978): 1–8.
3. Cited in Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2001). xiii.
4. "I find it more useful than the distinction between imagination and reality, or art and life, first, because everyone can think through readily enough to the clear-cut differences between the two, and second, because the worlds that I feel myself shuttling between every day couldn't be better described" (Roth, *Reading*, xiii).
5. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 232.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 223e.
7. Plato, *The Republic*, 359d–360c.
8. Mel Gussow, "Atwood's Dystopian Warning: Hand-Wringer's Tale of Tomorrow," *New York Times*, Tuesday 24 June 2003, B1–B5.
9. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, Introduction to *American Sacred Space*, ed. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 15.
10. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, II.20.1, quoted in Sheldon Wolin's *Hobbes and the Epic Tradition of Political Theory* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1970), 13.
11. See, for example, John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, *Nothing to Do with Dionysos: Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), especially the essays by Longo and Goldhill.
12. See Patrick J. Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory: The Politics of Departure and Return* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
13. J. Peter Euben, *Platonic Noise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 95.
14. Plato, *The Republic*, 518a.
15. Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 1.
16. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 239–40.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 117.
18. Thomas L. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
19. See, for example, Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
20. John Evan Seery, *Political Returns: Irony in Politics and Theory from Plato to the Antinuclear Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).
21. For a recent revival of the argument for the *Republic* as literal blueprint see George Klosko, *Jacobins and Utopians: The Political Theory of Fundamental Moral Reform* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

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22. Urbanowicz, "Personal and Political," 2.
23. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
24. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275.
25. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).
26. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
27. Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia." *New Left Review* 25 (Jan./Feb. 2004), 50.
28. Jameson, "Politics of Utopia," 50.
29. Euben, *Platonic Noise*, 41.

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