NO GOOD UTOPIA: DESIRING AMBIGUITY IN *THE DISPOSSESSED*

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The concept of utopia is not merely the idea of a good place, nor is it simply to be thought of as the no place of imagination. It is instead an ambiguous site of revolt, creating infinite change by challenging the status quo, and landing most frequently in dystopia. In utopia, then, is dystopia, separate but linked elements that revolve around each other in an endless dance of disillusion and inspiration. Utopia is not simply good, but contains within it the ambiguity of hope and despair because of this connection to dystopia. This thesis sets out first to understand these concepts, reviewing recent scholarship in the field of utopian studies and proposing a comprehensive definition with which to approach utopian literature. Establishing a definition of utopia that focuses on the function of utopian desire itself, it then explores Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* as an exemplary text in which to find not only the relationship between utopia and dystopia, but also the necessary ambiguity that so colors each. This exploration centers not on what the utopia of *The Dispossessed* looks like so much as it considers how the notion of utopia itself threatens the present by connecting it to the future, moving it out of inertia and into the momentum of constant revolution. What Le Guin's novel most importantly reveals through critical inquiry is not a template for social change, but a template for social questioning. This social questioning, in turn, reveals itself not as unique to Le Guin or *The Dispossessed*, but as a hallmark of speculative fiction which serves to mark the genre as the ideal locus of utopian literature. Defining speculative fiction reveals to be a difficult task, as its subgenres have historically been concerned with their distinctions, rather than their similarities. In their shared exploration of possibility, however, they emerge as more similar than not, united in their ability to express the desires so essential to utopia, either optimistically or not, upholding the concept of ambiguity as a whole.
To Pattie, my aunt, my friend, my advisor, my mentor, my colleague, and my confidant—in no particular order.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER I. TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF UTOPIA</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those Who Walked Away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Community and Singularity of Scholarship About Utopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The (No)Where and (No)When of Utopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER II. DESIRING CHANGE AND CHANGING DESIRES: READING</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTOPIA IN <em>THE DISPOSSESSED</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis of <em>The Dispossessed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Desire for Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odo's Endless Utopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dystopic Realization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unequal Equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcing Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Journey is Return: Traveling Toward Utopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity as the Key to Utopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER III. LOCATING UTOPIA IN SPECULATIVE FICTION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Yet I confess there are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia which I wish our own country would imitate—though I don’t really expect it will. —More, Utopia

The notion of ambiguity permeates utopian discourse even in its first inception. Any notion of the perfect place must bring with it a realization that this place is not here, not now, but is always displaced from us. In turn, this displacement prompts a question: must we seek utopia only in the no-where and the no-when? Can the present moment never be utopia? Such thoughts will also bring with them the accusation of dystopia: if we read the good place of utopia as that which is not now, not here, we might in turn label our present dystopia. And yet utopian moments do intrude on our present: each time we recognize that which the present lacks and reach for it, expressing our desire for utopia, we connect the present dystopia with the imagined utopia. We become at once dystopians and utopians, marked by our present and our future, ambiguous, caught between idealism and pragmatism. And out of this relationship, this dialectic between have and could have, we produce change, moving us to claim a new present and imagine new futures.

Utopia has concerned scholars for hundreds of years, reaching back to before Sir Thomas More gave us the term for such a field of study, yet is has perhaps garnered its most critical and widespread attention since the mainstream recognition of science fiction and fantasy as distinct genres. These two, more than, perhaps, any other genre that may be considered under the label of speculative fiction, set themselves apart by creating worlds—and sometimes worlds within worlds—that express desires, fears, fantasies, and ideas so vividly that the characters who inhabit
these worlds become, not aliens or trolls, angels or demons, but tangible metaphors for ourselves. Speculative fiction is literature of us, displaced in time, displaced in place, displaced in character, but not in spirit. It is our spirit, imagined, critiqued, and distorted by the author that populates speculative fiction and so each story becomes, in a way, a utopian or dystopian portrait of us—what we could be, where we could be, what we could have been, where we could have been. Utopian literature, at its very core, is speculative fiction with a purpose: to challenge, to inspire, to lament, to caution.

Few authors have garnered such widespread attention for their forays into speculative fiction as Ursula K. Le Guin. Her career, spanning over fifty years, has reaped great praise and scathing critique, and yet it has never seen fit to rest, to stagnate into one form or one message, instead constantly evolving to address new purposes. The greatest recognitions were accorded to Le Guin's fiction of the 1970s, when she emerged as one of the strongest female writers and also one of the strongest speculative fiction authors of the decade. In particular, her novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* served to draw attention not only to the real-world political analogues of her fictional countries, but also to the notion that utopia is never simply perfect, never simply static, never simple. Utopia, as Le Guin portrays it, is a gray, murky beast, occasionally flashing glimpses, not of perfection, but of something better than that in which we dwell, inspiring, coaxing us to take a step in whatever direction we may to reach it. As we journey toward utopia, searching for a reference point around us, we realize that the dystopia we left behind is not dark, nor is the place we seek clear and shining. If, following this, we read utopia as ambiguous, and dystopia as a reflection of utopia, we realize that life itself is ambiguity. We cannot classify it as distinctly good or bad; all we can do is try to recognize what is around us and attempt to move toward some place, some time that is, hopefully, better.
What Le Guin's novel most importantly reveals through critical inquiry is not a template for social change, but a template for social questioning. It moves us less toward embracing the anarchy and communism espoused through the voice of the protagonist and more toward understanding the need for change. The ground Le Guin covers in *The Dispossessed* has been well tread by scholars since it was first published in 1974. And yet new discoveries, new landscapes are unveiled. Four new critical volumes on Le Guin have been published in the last decade, one of them entirely devoted to a utopian analysis of *The Dispossessed*. Yet this new writing does not seek to foreclose further discussion of the subject, revealing instead the possibilities for new paths to be forged, new questions to be raised, and new answers to be proffered. If utopia and, by extension, life are ambiguous, then so too must we acknowledge is our exploration of such subjects. What this thesis intends to do is not to dictate a firm and stable ideology of utopia, *The Dispossessed*, or even speculative fiction, but to realize a new path to understanding these concepts, to explore possibility, by focusing on what utopia, any utopia, may do to those who envision it. Taking Le Guin's text as a manifestation of utopian thought, this thesis looks not at what utopia is, but what it does, what it holds within it the power to do, and thus encourages reading other utopias in terms of their potential for change.

We live in dystopia. Every day we are confronted with images of the present that consider themselves solid, definable, immutable. But we also live in utopia, glimpsed furtively in hope, in the expression of desire, in attempts at change—in realized change. These two states do not war with one another, but exist cyclically, one spawning the other endlessly. This process of becoming in the present is all too easy to forget in a linear account of time. It is important to remember, however, and this thesis seeks to show that in Le Guin's concept of speculative utopia the present is not fixed and that change is as much a reality of the present as that which we seek
to change in conceptions of the future. This thesis presents a comprehensive understanding of utopian scholarship up to this point, then applies such an understanding to the portrayal and function of utopia in *The Dispossessed*, and ends with a reflection on the suitability of speculative fiction as the vehicle to present new utopias. This thesis is about hope—not for any one particular utopian expression, but for realizing that utopia does exist.

Scholars continue to seek a firmer understanding of the usefulness of utopia. The importance of what any particular utopia looks like has diminished as we come closer to accepting that the very notion of utopia is itself a powerfully transformative social tool. In that vein, I will establish a comprehensive understanding of the notion of utopia. The focus here is on how utopia functions in a social and historical context. Much has been written connecting utopia to the genre of speculative fiction (though numerous attempts to classify utopian literature as its own genre have certainly been made). What this particular project intends, however, is to place the notion of utopia in a more accessible context so that we might understand its appearance in speculative fiction, not as mere imagining, but as a critically reflective tool that allow us to examine ourselves more clearly than could a more "conventionally" framed analysis; in other words, the creation of a speculative utopia is uniquely suited to critiquing, analyzing, and understanding ourselves.

Speculative utopia indicates utopian writing that focuses explicitly on the creation of a utopian landscape that generates possibilities of change; it differs from the traditional utopia in that it does not seek merely to provide a template for reform, but instead, by showcasing the potential for utopian development, critiques the extant society out of which it arises and reduces the importance of how it might come to be in favor of questioning its possibility for existence. Working with the distinctions between abstract and concrete utopias asserted by Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, Ruth Levitas acknowledges that it is often difficult to divorce content and form fully from the
function of a utopia. An abstract utopia is one whose form and content cannot be rendered onto our present society, whereas a concrete utopia could serve as a blueprint for a cultural revolution. In other words, abstract utopias are imaginative and distant from the present in time and space, whereas concrete utopias are those that are envisioned in the context of a reconfiguration of the world based on the realities of the present culture. I agree with Levitas' assertion that the value in examining utopias lies in exploring the desires they express; therefore, my analysis does not concern itself with the functional application of a particular embodiment or imagining of utopia to the present. In this regard, my thesis about Le Guin's speculative utopian vision ultimately makes no discernible distinction between concrete or abstract iterations. Speculative utopia blends the possibility for change within the present with an abstract imagining of different possibilities for reframing the apparent limitations of a future that may be determined by the present. Speculative or abstract utopias then become metaphorical iterations of the concrete potential for change in the present. For, as Levitas writes, "the suggestion that unrealistic images […] are less worthy of our attention and consideration than realistic ones […] is not generally [true]." Instead, "speculative utopia" refers to those utopian iterations made specifically through the use of the genre of speculative fiction. By thus differentiating speculative and non-speculative utopias, it is my hope that the value of speculative fiction as a reflective, analytic tool might more clearly emerge.

After asserting specific definitions of utopia, dystopia, and anti-utopia in Chapter one of this thesis, Chapter two applies my working definition of these terms to analyze Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*. Chapter three then discusses why speculative fiction situates itself as an ideal genre for utopian expression. This discussion is foregrounded by the realization that a speculative utopia cannot be understood in full if approached from the mindset of pure

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2 This is not to claim that there is no potential value to be found in the application of a utopian vision to the present reality; such a claim requires a more evaluative understanding of utopia than this project intends.
practicality; that is, the power of a speculative utopia exists not in its mechanical usefulness, but in its ability to reflect, enlarge, and creatively distort a given social reality so that both the utopian desire exemplified and the dystopian society out of which it arises might be better understood as theoretical, ideological, and even emotional constructs.

Abstract and concrete utopias share the same process of desire and expression, yet it is in speculative utopias, showcased through speculative fiction, that we are able to consider this desire as separate from its results. To conflate the desire for change with the actual change it produces is to overlook the artistry and the essence of utopia. Both critiques, of course, have their place, as many utopian scholars have striven to understand concrete utopias that concern themselves not with articulating their desires but with enacting the change they espouse in very real ways. Speculative fiction allows us the chance to acknowledge desire, to consider its impetus, and to walk away, less concerned with what form change must take, but at least certain that change is possible and, indeed, inevitable.

In such an approach, however, Levitas again provides a useful warning, writing that the "function [of utopia] is differently represented by different authors" and that, should scholars too readily seek to provide their own context for utopia, "there is a danger of researchers in the area making arbitrary and subjective selections of material; or, even if they are clear and methodical in their own use of the term, using it in an idiosyncratic way and talking past each other." 4

Keeping this advice in mind, I will first establish my understanding of utopia and dystopia, drawing heavily on the work of other utopian scholars in the hopes of directly communicating with their work and directing the attention of further study toward the goals of my larger project.

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4 Ibid., 5, 4.
CHAPTER I. TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF UTOPIA

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing.
—Oscar Wilde

Those Who Walked Away

Ursula Le Guin's short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," presents a seemingly perfect and prosperous society, the members of which go about their lives with an unmistakable happiness. This city of Omelas is neither rural and rustic nor modern and commercialized; it is every city just as surely as it is no city. Their community could easily be envisioned as our own, should we take away deprivation and lack with one hand, excess with the other. They have achieved balance in all things; this image of balance is linked both to the sustainability of such a society and to the happiness of its people; as Le Guin writes, "Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive."¹ Yet "theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness," for it rests on the eternal and horrendous suffering of an innocent child.² This child, a representation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's and William James' concept of the scapegoat, bears the suffering of an entire society so that others may experience peace.

It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. […] The door is always locked and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes—the child has no understanding of time or interval—sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food

² Ibid., 230.
bowl and water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the [...] room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. [...] The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now [...] it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes. [...] It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually. ³

Starved, naked, filthy, beaten, unloved, unacknowledged, the child lives out its miserable life in a dark basement beneath the floorboards of paradise—and everyone knows this to be so. The citizens who allow this to endure know full well what atrocity they commit, rationalizing it only with the knowledge that such suffering is necessary for their prosperity. Further, they come to believe that they could not offer such a child any aid, for it would neither understand comfort, nor benefit from the ruin of society that would result were it freed, cleaned, loved.

The people of Omelas, in this resignation to their fate, accept their responsibility to prosper, to make the suffering of the child matter in their own happiness. They have reached the point farthest from utopia, idyllic though their society might be; they reject the notion that life could be better than what it is, accepting the status quo as interminable, as endless, the collapse of all possible futures into an endless present. And so the child suffers, far worse than any ill that might befall the people who keep it locked in its dark and lonely hole.

Yet this story is not a horror story, a tale of gruesome detail meant to frighten or caution. It is, rather, a call to awareness, for not all who learn of the miserable child remain in the city of Omelas. Some, either upon discovering the scapegoat in their youth, or later in life, when their reflections call to mind their complicity in the suffering of another, reject the idea that perfection can exist at the expense of another's pain. They reject this false paradise and strike out for a new land. It is their utopian quest, to leave behind paradise in search of something better. Le Guin carries this notion through much of her work; community is built on solidarity, on connection to.

³ Ibid., 229.
others, on a social brotherhood, and "[brotherhood] begins in shared pain."^4 Odo, the character who begins the anarchist revolution that splits the societies in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, is described as one who walked away from Omelas.^5 Appalled at the notion that some could look at prosperity and think not of those who suffer to sustain it, but only of the pleasure it offers to others, those who walk away from Omelas embody in every step they take the idea that utopia, the good place that is no place, means to seek for something better.

What does it mean to search for something better than paradise? I contend that it represents the expression of a limitless capacity to envision a better future, a utopian search for something beyond what is offered. By writing of Omelas as an ambiguous city, outside of place and time, Le Guin casts those who walk away from it into an uncertain spatial and temporal locus. Theirs may be read as the utopian quest, understanding the past, rejecting the present, moving toward the future—with no end imaginable. Only the journey exists, offering a way of reading utopia itself as a limitless journey that seeks not a resting point, but only to push on, always searching for a better existence. No, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is not a horror story. It is a provocation, an axiom, a map upon which we can locate the intolerable conditions of our present and chart a path away from this—toward whatever better world we might imagine.

The Community and Singularity of Scholarship About Utopia

A review of utopian scholarship reveals a community of writers engaged in a seemingly endless debate regarding the definition of their field. Ideas are bandied back and forth and for long periods seem to settle into accepted understandings of the term that allow utopians to

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engage in deep critiques of literature that ranges from political musings to calls for social action. Yet, inevitably, it seems that definitions fall out of favor and a new wave of scholarship rises to the task of reclassifying and recoding what utopia means. Until recently, many of these definitions seemed to present a closed, fixed concept of utopia, rigidly categorizing that which is and is not utopian. Upon reading such conflicting and evolving ideas, however, I have identified patterns that emerge on a fairly consistent basis, leading me to understand the consistencies of utopia that survive its constant redefinitions. To this end, I propose an understanding of utopia that works retroactively, uniting the various ideas of the past, which have delved so deeply into this subject, with a more modern understanding that seeks to preserve flexibility and encourage a wider analytical frame. Indeed, it is the notion of change, of mutability, that I identify as intrinsically linked to understanding utopia. The definition this chapter seeks to establish differs from the founders of utopian scholarship, yet also draws on them entirely for the fragments it unites; the understanding of utopia I set forth is an amalgam of the complimentary elements of past thinkers that leaves out only those notions that foreclose the possibility of openness and flexibility.

As this project seeks to work backwards, considering the present as the product of the past, it begins with a look at some of the more recent utopian scholarship in the hopes of understanding the need for openness when considering utopia as a literary construct. Ruth Levitas' 1990 treatise, *The Concept of Utopia*, "sets out to clarify the meaning of the term utopia and provide a new definition," yet cautions that, "definitions are tools, not ends in themselves." Yet this sentiment that permeates my own approach toward defining my terms and it is largely through Levitas that the importance of care with regard to this field becomes clear. Ultimately, she concludes, "Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being," while at the

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same time arguing against the search for other commonalities among different utopias. 7 These 
varieties are, in fact, inherently valuable to the field, underscoring the need for an open approach, 
rather than a closed one. Utopia, according to Levitas, is so persistent in Western thought that 
many seek to understand it as the expression "of a fundamental utopian propensity in human 
beings"—a claim she finds to be mistaken. 8 Instead, she celebrates the diversity of utopia's 
"content, form and function," proposing "that all definitions in terms of form, function or content 
are problematic. Not only do they place limits upon what may properly be regarded as utopian 
and thus upon the field of enquiry itself, they also obscure variations in the utopian genre. In 
order to make such a claim, one must of course be able to locate something which remains 
constant while content, form and function vary." 9 For a critical approach to utopian literature to 
prove useful, then, it must recognize and accept that such literature may not be immediately 
recognizable as utopian. This approach must seek out the commonalities of utopian expression, 
however they might appear, and learn to speak of them for their similarities, rather than merely 
decrying their differences.

It is this idea of the spirit, or aura, of utopia that drives Levitas' work, as she seeks first to 
establish a common ground for previous studies and elucidate the one overriding commonality 
between them. Concerns of a utopia's specific shape or presentation matter less once we have 
established a firm understanding of what utopia expresses. Though its form (what it is) may vary 
widely across cultures and times, its function (what it does) may be called into question through 
political maneuvering, and its content (how it is presented) may invite doubt its worth with

7 Ibid., 8.
8 Ibid., 1.
9 Ibid., 4, 7.
claims of "escapist nonsense," we may establish instead the idea of what those who create utopia hope its function would be.\textsuperscript{10}

Indeed, the hoped-for function of utopia seems to prove far more useful to identifying utopian literature than any other quality. Levitas indicates that "even those who define utopia in terms of form and content, however, see it as having some function," elucidating the potential power of utopia to act in the world by way of its promise of possibility.\textsuperscript{11} We may see that the true value in utopian studies—and in utopia itself—is not necessarily what it does to the world, as a traditional understanding of its function would lead us to examine, but what it attempts to do and what it offers in the way of possibility. By reclassifying utopia as the expression of desire, we are able to put aside, however temporarily, criticism of its practicality; instead, we are able to embrace its diversity and move toward a closer understanding of the ways utopia potentially could function. Given the very nature of utopias, many of which are very literal reimaginings of the world, we should not shy away from Levitas' attempts to understand utopia itself as an imagining. How apropos that the unifying definition she produces celebrates not the literal, but the desired function of a concept that is about hope.

This approach provides us with an excellent start; Levitas' ideas take us away from fixating on any specific iteration and push us toward approaching the concept of utopia from a more open-minded position. It is not, however, a resting place, as twenty years later, Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash published a collection of essays that, while holding to this open approach, identify another critical quality of utopia that again finds its roots in previous utopian scholarship. Their collection, presenting essays from a two-year seminar at Princeton University, aims to rethink the way utopia and dystopia are discussed, bringing them into a

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 1-6.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 5.
contemporary context, by considering them less "as objects of study, but as historically grounded analytic categories with which to understand how individuals and groups around the world have interpreted their present tense with an eye to the future." Once again, the function of utopia rises to the fore of an extensive study and recontextualization of the field; by removing emphasis from utopia as an object, the authors reduce the significance of its form and content. Envisioning utopia as an analytic category reaffirms Levitas' assertion that it is what people do with utopia that matters most—though, as indicated above, equal importance should be placed on what people attempt to do with it, rather than only focusing on the manifested results. Thus, when examining history through a utopian lens, we must focus on how the notion of utopia has collided with our notions of cultural development and practice. As Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash write, "Utopias and dystopias are histories of the present," which is to say that their usefulness stems in examining how they reflect on the communities that spawn them, providing a temporal awareness of social critique.

The (No)Where and (No)When of Utopia

The epigraph that heads this chapter foregrounds the manner in which utopia might be mapped spatially, but it also signals a way that maps change, and that temporally is as important to a vision of utopia as is space. Utopia, as indicated above and in the introduction, has mutated constantly over the centuries; indeed, Sir Thomas More's enduring *Utopia* (1516), from which this field draws both its name and its impetus, broke ground in the genre. Regarded as the first modern iteration of these concepts, *Utopia* establishes itself as markedly different from most other examples in its temporality. Aditya Nigam, one of the contributors to *Utopia/Dystopia*,

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13 Ibid., 1.
leads us to believe "that utopias are always displaced in time from the present," in turn citing this as a stumbling block in our ability to analyze meaningfully their applications to the present. While this claim is not without merit, it is deeply ironic, given that More's *Utopia* is set as a contemporary fantasy, apparently displaced only spatially, rather than temporally. Yet, More’s concept of spatial dislocation also indicates a complex approach to temporality. The very present that More satirizes comes to stand for an alternate present that co-exists in historical time, but which challenges time itself by virtue of its displacement. In this way, utopia comments not only on the future, but indicates the way that the present is determined by spatial concerns. In both contexts, a reconfiguration of the narratives of the past then influence the way that speculative narratives are understood.

In a configuration of spatial and temporal change that underlies speculative fiction, the very concept of utopia is always mutating. As such, Levitas' notion that defining utopia in terms of form or content is problematic; if the object in question is too mercurial, no lasting definition can exist if it focuses only on what utopia looks like or what a utopian text contains. There will always be new iterations to confound and complicate the mold—and justly so, as the desires of each new generation are likely to differ from those of their predecessors. Levitas' definition of utopia as an "expression of desire" allows us to "learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled." And yet this seems incomplete. Levitas intentionally seeks to find the most expansive, unifying definition, fearing alienation of any branch of utopian studies and in this regard may stray too far from a concrete understanding of utopia for it to be practical. On the contrary, an awareness of the ways that past, present, and future intersect and inform each other

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14 Ibid., 12; Nigam, "Heterotopias of Dalit Politics," 250.
in speculative fiction allows a view of expressions of desire to transcend singular or particular forms and to attain a space of abstraction that is precisely defined by speculation. We will turn to the embodiment of this in Le Guin's work in chapter two of this thesis. For the moment, however, the space and time of utopia merits further distinction and definition.

Other theorists help complicate the matter endlessly with their own attempts to reach a workable definition of utopia. Russell Jacoby, writing of a present that is ostensibly "beyond utopia," remarks that utopia, "in its widest, and least threatening, meaning, [represents] a belief that the future could fundamentally surpass the present." In this view, utopia has a limit such that we might move "beyond" it. Jacoby's view is different from the one I seek to assert because, in my argument, utopia would not be susceptible to a limit; rather, it would be transcendent because it is always open to possibility and change. Further, Jacoby implies that utopia, because limited, also has the potential to be threatening. As this statement comes nearly a decade after Levitas' definition, we must consider the ways in which the expression of desire might be threatening: in the most basic sense, expressing a desire for something other than the status quo threatens to change the status quo. The specific iteration once again doesn't seem to matter nearly as much as the overriding aura of utopia; the very existence of a desire, once expressed, threatens the ability of the present to maintain its current course unmolested. Rather than adhere to a singular or particular view of utopia, speculative fiction presents a view that would benefit all members of a community, including those who exist outside of it or on its periphery, because it is predicated on multiplicity, possibility, and change. For example, More's novel, in its satire of his own contemporaries, doesn't expect the change it endorses to sweep through London, but its

16 Jacoby, End of Utopia, xi-xii.
17 Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash, Utopia/Dystopia, 13. "Visions themselves are inherently dangerous, whatever their underlying motives. They involve risk, they usually rest upon faith, and they often require their progenitors to relinquish control." The notion of utopia as threatening is inseparable from its hopefulness.
existence nevertheless threatens the stability of the society it critiques. Thus, utopia itself might be seen as a call to change.

It seems the editors of *Utopia/Dystopia* would concur with my developing definition. They state, "Utopias and dystopias by definition seek to alter the social order on a fundamental, systemic level. They address root causes and offer revolutionary solutions." Further, they "suggest, therefore, that readers think of utopia and dystopia [...] as styles of imagination, as approaches to radical change," rather than merely a set of social instructions with positive and negative outcomes. Though they advocate viewing utopia, through the "education of desire," as an impetus for social change, which Levitas points to as a legacy of (mostly) Marxist views of utopian function, they make a point to declare that "utopian visions are never arbitrary. They always draw on the resources present in the ambient culture and develop them with specific ends in mind that are heavily structured by the present." Therefore, while utopia is the expression of desire that threatens change, it is deeply rooted in the present and exists with a specific intention. Utopia itself has a purpose, though its (potential) impotency to enact the change it endorses should not be confused with its ability to accomplish this goal.

Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* details in its third part his conception of how utopia is both impractically idealistic and unable to be realized. Though his analysis rests largely on form and content-based assumptions about the concept of utopia, he makes several particularly salient points concerning the power (or lack thereof) of utopia to accomplish its goal. Speaking directly of the realization of utopian dreams:

Utopia is *not* just a society in which the framework is realized. [...] It is what grows spontaneously from the individual choices of many people over a long period of time that will be

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18 Ibid., 2.
19 Ibid., 5.
20 Ibid., 4.
worth speaking eloquently about. (Not that any particular stage of the process is an end state which all our desires are aimed at. The utopian process is substituted for the utopian end state of other static theories of utopias.)

What Nozick identifies here is that utopia should not be considered purely teleologically; to examine utopias only in terms of their ability to produce a stable end is to deny their ability to make any progress at all. That is, we must focus on the fact that utopia moves us out of inertia, rather than focusing on the place to which we are moved.

Nozick also moves us toward a more complex understanding of the origins of utopia, claiming that it "is the focus of so many different strands of aspiration that there must be many theoretical paths leading to it." This multiplicity of origin doesn't disappear upon its realization, however: "Utopia will consist of utopias. […] Utopia is a framework for utopias." Utopia multiplies and, in its multiplicity it indicates another form of ideal possibility—one in which singularity becomes community and possibility becomes possibilities. Through this plurality of perspectives, desires, and ideals, myths of the present become potentially subject to revolutions.

It is here that I am content to declare my working definition of utopia, one which informs the rest of this thesis. Utopia, by expressing a pluripotent desire for change, inexorably generates momentum, not necessarily through any progress toward the results it espouses, but simply by threatening and thus altering the conditions that spawn it. Utopia, for these purposes, may thus be understood as an implicit threat to the status quo that expresses a desire for something better than the present reality.

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22 Ibid., 309.
23 Ibid., 312.
24 OED Online, s.v. "Pluripotent," http://0-www.oed.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/Entry/146211 (accessed December 12, 2010). The term "pluripotent" refers to cells "capable of differentiating into more than one type of mature cell or tissue." I express here the potential of desire to develop in multiple, different ways.
In my argument, utopia is limited only by the manner in which the present ceases to inspire future possibility or the desire for change. As utopia is reflective of a present set of conditions calling for change, utopia must cease to exist when the present no longer inspires such a longing; should the status quo no longer manage to create a desire for change, either through achieving perfection or, perhaps, from reaching such a state of dysfunction that no better alternative may be imagined, utopia becomes impossible. This state of no desire may best be understood as anti-utopia. 25 As such, it is perhaps even more impossible to achieve than the utopian ideal itself; to conceive of a present that inspires no desire for change requires a state in which a "better" existence cannot be conceived. 26 Thus, this term encompasses both the purely idyllic and the totally repressed (meaning here a present in which situations are oppressive to the point where all hope of a better outcome has truly been lost).

Anti-utopia is thus a state of rest, a place in which stasis overcomes the present and prevents possible imaginings of futures. To make this claim, then, I realize a new understanding of the process of utopia: to achieve utopia is to enter anti-utopia. Karl Mannheim, in his much-referenced *Ideology and Utopia*, remarks upon the difficulty in fully breaking free from the cycle(s) of desiring a better world.

It is no accident that an observer who consciously or unconsciously has taken a stand in favour of the existing and prevailing social order should have such a broad and undifferentiated conception of the utopian; i.e. one which blurs the distinction between absolute and relative unrealizability. From this position, it is practically impossible to transcend the limits of the *status quo*. This reluctance to transcend the *status quo* tends toward the view of regarding something that is unrealizable merely in the given order as completely unrealizable in any order, so that by obscuring these distinctions one can suppress the validity of the claims of the relative utopia. 27

25 Anti-utopia has been used in perhaps the most idiosyncratic manner of all the utopian terms. "I use 'anti-utopia' as a generic term to include what is sometimes called the 'dystopia' or – more rarely – the 'cacotopia.' Jeremy Bentham seems to have invented 'cacotopia' – an evil place – and it was later joined to 'dystopia' by John Stuart Mill." Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 447n2.

26 Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash, *Utopia/Dystopia*, 13. "Everywhere we turn, historical conditions continue to throw up utopias and dystopias as ways to shape, understand, and critique our contemporary world."

27 Mannheim, "The Utopian Mentality," 177.
What he describes here may be seen as a state of anti-utopia. His conception of utopia differs from the one put forth by this project in the critical sense that I have suggested the mere expression of desire necessarily shatters "the order of things prevailing." With this in mind, we return to his concern with the "unrealizability" of change: to be unable to conceive of an altered present state (because of an inability to imagine any possible order of things in which an alternate existence would succeed) is to be without utopian desire, which is to be without utopia. This is the realm of anti-utopia.

Nozick, however, finds this anti-utopia, whether that of perfection or desperation, an impossible state, yet his argument is based on the assumption that utopia is a static ideal; he correctly indicates that the achievement of an ideal cannot eradicate desire for change, but would instead merely alter the form of the desires expressed. For the utopian wish to be expressed and cease all desire for change, it would have to anticipate the needs of each new generation. Ideals fluctuate wildly between contemporaries and even more so when we consider the temporal progression of ideas and values. What is created by utopian desire is not a template for one lasting perfect landscape, but rather progress toward a better landscape that, in turn, will inspire new utopians to voice their desires, perpetually sculpting reality away from the past and toward an unknown future. Even at such points that the present begins to resemble the past, it is unmistakably changed by its journey. By focusing on this evolutionary (perhaps revolutionary) understanding of utopia, in which the function of reflecting the present and looking to the future is brought to the fore of its discussion, we might move past Nozick's argument and embrace the

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28 Ibid., 173. "A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs. […] However, we should not regard as utopian every state of mind which is incongruous with and transcends the immediate situation. […] Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter […] the order of things prevailing at the time."

29 See note 21.
more progressive call to examine what utopias "reveal about a set of abiding concerns and
cultural formations that generated both the desire for utopian transcendence and the specific
form that utopia/dystopia [takes]."  

Utopia is fully accessible, as is dystopia; indeed, they exist in a dialectical relationship
with one another in which dystopia, spurring utopian longing, creates the higher third of a new
utopia. This utopia, not being fully realized, lands at dystopia, which again provokes a new
utopia. We may achieve utopia endlessly, it seems, so long as we do not conflate utopia with
anti-utopia; we must separate the expression of a desire for change from change itself. The first
is utopia, whereas the second most commonly manifests as dystopia.

One of the most common definitions of dystopia grows out of understanding utopia as a
perfect society engineered through total planning, seeing then dystopia as its opposite. As
Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash point out, however:

A true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to
be deliberately terrifying and awful. Dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things;
rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment
of society. In a sense, […] dystopias resemble the actual societies historians encounter in their
research: planned, but not planned all that well or justly.  

Considering the comprehensive approach to utopia detailed above, this analysis of dystopia still
rings true. In particular, "a utopia that has gone wrong" is especially appropriate to this new
understanding of dystopia. Recalling the warnings of the danger of utopian desire, it is easy to
consider how such an expression could "go wrong:" remember, too, that utopia exists in the act
of changing a society. Thus, dystopia cannot simply be a movement from the status quo to a
worse or more undesirable present. Instead, we must consider dystopia as the expression of

30 Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash, Utopia/Dystopia, 4 (italics in original).
31 Ibid., 1-2.
desire that grows out of a utopian change that has worsened the present condition, rather than improved it. The danger of utopia, then, is not merely that it threatens change, but that this change may take the form of dystopia.32

In his extensive history of the modern trends of utopia and dystopia, Krishan Kumar provides further support to the notion that dystopia, itself being an outcome of utopian desire, is not only readily achievable, but may in fact be more easily recognizable as mimicking the present. Perhaps the best way to understand the literary function of dystopia, then, is through comparison with the function of utopia. He writes, "Unlike utopia, which was only too acutely aware of how much still needed to be done, the [dystopia] was often no more than a thinly disguised portrait of the contemporary world, seen as already more than halfway on the road to damnation."33 What Kumar does not address here is that these utopias about which he writes, "aware of how much still needed to be done," could only be aware of such urgency by being aware of what was undone; that is, these utopias were also rooted firmly in the "contemporary world," but rather than reflecting it as it was, which he claims is the purview of dystopia, utopian literature instead projects the desire to change the present. The dystopias he describes as so imitative of the present, however, might also be seen as reflecting the outcome of past utopias: previous expressions of desire changed the world, in certain instances producing dystopia; thus, as the new present, these dystopian states produced new desires, new utopias. He supports this reading of the interconnectedness of dystopia and utopia: "The [dystopia] is formed by utopia. […] Utopia is the original, [dystopia] the copy—only, as it were, always coloured black. It is

32 Again, change itself is a threat to the present; once changed, the present that inspired utopia ceases to exist as a present. What is highlighted here is an additional threat: that the change enacted may worsen the present.
33 Kumar, Utopia and Anti-Utopia, 110. He uses the term "anti-utopia" in place of "dystopia;" see note 25.
utopia that provides the positive content to which [dystopia] makes the negative response." The question that remains, then, is whether or not dystopia is unavoidable.

Thomas Hobbes, in writing *Leviathan*, sets forth "The Naturall Condition of Mankind," in which he notably claims that equality (itself a utopian desire of the past) is in fact a condition of humanity that guarantees perpetual dystopia.

From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End, (which is principally their owne conservation, and sometimes their delectation only,) endeavour to destroy, or subdue one an other.35

A first reading of this almost assuredly leads one to understand his "Ends" to be tangible objects of desire, such as physical resources needed for survival or comfort. When we apply his ideas to the concept of utopia, however, we see a general replication of this natural impetus toward competition: should two people express different and incompatible desires of a better present existence, they have thus created two incompatible utopias. By Hobbes' assertion, they are both equally capable of realizing these desires (which is not to comment on their actual ability to make them manifest in their surroundings) and will each seek to hamper the other. Surely, this is as likely a catalyst as any for "utopia gone wrong," which, as we have seen, is a possible genesis of dystopia. A different reading of Hobbes, however, perceives it as anti-utopia since it moves toward a teleological end. In this regard, we can see how a recuperation of the need for change must overcome the habits of stasis so that the complex temporality of utopia might be imagined, if not achieved. For the purposes of speculative fiction, it is important to maintain an open sense of time and to avoid the pitfalls of teleological ends.

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34 Ibid., 100.
35 Hobbes, "Naturall Condition."
What happens to this notion, then, when we consider that the mere expression of desire, regardless of its ability to be realized, might itself be utopia? Dystopia cannot be the only outcome, though Hobbes' contention clearly grounds dystopia as a possibility. The differentiation lies in whether or not humanity is bound fully by its nature. To answer this, Hobbes again provides an answer in his discussion of reason: "The Use and End of Reason, is not the finding of the summe, and truth of one, or a few consequences, remote from the first definitions, and settled significations of names; but to begin at these; and proceed from one consequence to another." Applying this to the natural condition of humanity, we are equal except in our intentional use of reason. That is, we have the ability to reason (correctly), or to err. To express a desire for a better state of being is to express an ultimately subjective desire; what one conceives of as "better" than the status quo may, in fact, be worse for another. Such a notion is conceivably utopian, given that we have moved beyond the notion of utopia as mere "perfection" and is, indeed, necessary, given that perfection itself is a subjective concept. It is possible, however, through the faculty of reason for two people to express incompatible utopias and not decide to work against one another. A multitude of possibilities, in fact, arises out of this single moment of recognition, in which both desires are expressed and acknowledged. Hobbes' assertion of inevitable enmity, though pessimistic, is not guaranteed.

We cannot imagine impossibilities if the world is strictly ordered not to include them. Imagination, as Hobbes understands it, is merely "Decaying Sense;" a sensory vestige of what we have perceived with our natural senses. Even dreams, he contends, are little more than the leftover remnants of these sensory creations; he claims that our inability to understand and properly recall these images, however unrealistic they may be, is due merely to our faculties.

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36 Hobbes, "Reason and Science."
37 Hobbes, "Imagination."
being numbed by sleep. Given this, how might new thought be generated, when reason is merely the natural addition and subtraction of given facts and imagination itself is nothing more than the recreation of the world as it is; how might we imagine anything other than the status quo? Hobbes would have us believe utopia impossible, as we could not desire something we have not experienced, which would configure us permanently in a state of anti-utopia. And yet, utopia persists.

The philosophical investigation of a universal concept of human nature cannot simply be dismissed through one fallacious argument. What we should glean from this, then, is not that utopia is impossible; More's *Utopia*, as a literary expression, has endured for centuries, spurring philosophical change among countless generations. No matter that the society envisioned never came to be; utopia was still enacted through the exposure of the world to the notion of change for the better. Indeed, its position as a satire marks it as purely reflective desire, focused on the shape of its expression and not on its outcome. Further, we may see in this an excellent example of how profoundly that change, through expression, affects the present: More ends his novel with the assertion that even his imagined island, his utopian expression, contains much that he would not like to see come to reality, as his exposure to this better state has changed his perspective about his own surroundings. And yet he also remarks that it holds the potential to change his society for the better. Implicit in this, too, is a dystopian realization, as he indicates the improbability of such a change coming to fruition. The two, utopia and dystopia, are separate, but linked dialectically.

More's admonition comes to mind with great clarity: "If you cannot pluck up bad ideas by the root, if you cannot cure long-standing evils as completely as you would like, you must not therefore abandon the commonwealth. [...] You must strive to influence policy indirectly, handle

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the situation tactfully, and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make less bad."  

We see here a call to action, a call to embrace utopias; by imagining change, regardless of whether or not that form takes the shape of perfection, we "may at least make [the world] less bad." Jill Dolan expresses a similar notion of hope inextricably linked to action: "I'd like to argue that such desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us, if not expressly political then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like." Only by performing utopia may we experience it, though Dolan hints that just as the genesis of utopia is itself endlessly multiple, so might be the ways to express it. This is not, of course, to suggest blind optimism; dystopia does occur, though, as noted above, it, too, spurs the creation of new utopias. Nigam is right in this regard; utopia is frequently displaced from the present, as change will always create forward momentum upon which others will build their own hopes.

Within this complicated process of desire, threat, and change, there arises the concept of intentionality. Must utopias originate from a place of intentional revolution, or might innocent longing and expression be considered utopia without intention? Is the very act of expressing desire for change, of writing a piece of utopian literature, a revolutionary act itself, or does the materialization of the image need to occur in reality? Indeed, can we even conceive of such a thing as innocence in a framework in which all desire may be seen as a reaction to dystopia? The definition of utopian desire as that which is intended to cause change forecloses an entire realm of expression in which hope, without faith in its realization, is the guiding force. To experience dystopia and to recognize it as a state far from perfection—to realize that one is not, indeed, experiencing anti-utopia—will necessarily create a longing for a better existence. The utterance of such desire expresses utopia, but the notion of intentionality implies the change itself as the

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39 Ibid., 29.
41 See note 14.
goal of the expression. While this change is inevitable, utopians are more easily recognized by their one truly unifying quality: hope. To hope for change, more than to expect or anticipate it, is the true mark of utopia that helps to unite all definitions, all instances, all conceptions of the quest for a better way of being. We may hope and have faith that change will come, or we may hope for the sheer experience of hoping. Without such hope, however, we cannot conceive of a better existence and we rest in anti-utopia, incapable of desire for something better. To desire, to hope, is inspirational; to wish, to express, is radical. This is the essence of utopia: radical inspiration.

The emphasis on utopian studies must necessarily shift away from a static definition toward a functional analysis of how and why utopia is created and produced. By understanding utopia as the expression of desire that provokes change, dystopia as the dysfunctional realization of this change, and anti-utopia as the state in which desire for change ceases to exist, we move to a more productive investigation into why specific utopias are expressed. These desires are inextricably linked with the historical contexts out of which they arise and they may thus serve as windows into a greater understanding, not of the desires themselves, but of the conditions which provoke them in the first place.

With these understandings of utopia, dystopia, and anti-utopia firmly in hand, our focus now shifts to a close reading of the way in which utopia is perpetually explored, turned awry, and, at least partially, realized in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*; utopia, dystopia, and anti-utopia are all expressed within the course of the protagonist's journey, fully illustrating not only the ability of speculative fiction to serve as a host for utopia, but also the way in which these concepts may be more practically understood. In particular, the ambiguity of the text's
portrayal of utopian desire allows for an examination of the peculiarity of speculative fiction that identifies it as the ideal genre in which to explore utopia.
CHAPTER II. DESIRE FOR CHANGE AND CHANGING DESIRES: READING UTOPIA IN THE DISPOSSESSED

Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all.
—Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

Previously published criticism on The Dispossessed discusses a wide variety of subjects, including among others gender, politics, economic concerns, and social construction. Over its long history, the novel has most frequently been treated as a closed-off text; though many writers do connect it to the continuity of Le Guin's other novels, there is a marked tendency to approach it as an iteration of utopian thought unique to Le Guin. Considerations of the form of its utopias look back to its philosophical ancestors in Kropotkin, Paul Goodman, and even Lao Tzu, or else examine it in light of the political and social context in which it was written. These inquiries have produced wonderfully helpful explorations of theme and critique that, while sometimes forgetting the book is a novel before it is a piece of social commentary, serve to move us closer to understanding the intricacies of the text. What has been lacking, so far as I have seen, is an attempt to read the novel for its display of the function of utopia. The question of what utopia—any utopia—may do for the individual, the community, or both, has largely been relegated to utopian theorists and avoided by literary critics who seem more concerned with analyzing what this specific utopia does for Shevek, for Anarres, for Urras. What follows is an attempt to break from this tradition and unify a reading of The Dispossessed as both a novel and an urtext for exploring how utopia creates and encourages change. The presentation of utopian thought and experience exemplifies not the perfection and idealization of utopia, but the natural and necessary ambiguity it contains, the hope it espouses, and the change it leaves in its wake.
My usage of "utopia," "dystopia," and "anti-utopia" in this chapter draw exclusively on the definitions established in the preceding chapter. Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better existence, which threatens and thereby changes the status quo; dystopia is the resulting change that fails to fully realize the expressed desire and so provokes new utopias. Anti-utopia reads as either pure perfection or pure despondency—that place in which no better existence can be imagined, much less expressed. Many of the authors whose work is cited here, however, rely on the more traditional understanding of these terms. For them, notions of utopia are concerned primarily with its specific shape; criticism of a utopia centers on whether or not such an idea is possible, or whether the way in which it appears is, in fact, a glimpse at a perfect society. Much of the criticism of Le Guin's "utopianism" in her work, then, finds fault with its imperfections, or else lauds her for breaking from the traditional utopia by focusing on ambiguity and disillusion. The enduring conditions they call utopia, I would be more apt to call anti-utopia, as utopia itself—as I am using it—is about change, not a static condition. Ian Buchanan, presenting an analysis of the theories of Michel de Certeau, remarks that utopia "means radical change, the kind of change that sweeps away all resistances," whereas anti-utopia is "not so much anti-change as against change made in the name of a false god, utopia."¹ Yet it bears note that this arises not out of a conception of utopia as having the potential to enact change for the better, as has been established here, but instead "[turns] on the fact that some of the best of intentions have resulted in the worst of living conditions."² de Certeau thus sets himself, not against the possibility of utopia, but against the possibility for utopia to produce anything other than dystopia—and in this, he may be right. Yet what he seems to overlook is the potential, the inevitability, for new utopia to arise from such dystopia. Anti-utopia, then, for de Certeau resists

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² Ibid., 60.
dystopia as surely as it resists the (potentially) false promises of utopia, carrying with it a resistance to possibility that is in keeping with the definitions set forth in Chapter One.

I have striven to reduce confusion as much as possible in the following chapter as a result of this split use of the terminology. Some authors, as I discuss below, seem to realize in Le Guin's writing the call for utopia to be read as change and indicate this as one of the more profound elements of *The Dispossessed*. If there is no need for change, if no better world can be envisioned, then there is no need for utopian desire. By contrast, however, my use of anti-utopia may also indicate total despair, in which no desire can be expressed because none is imaginable. This duality mimics the ambiguity that so elegantly permeates Le Guin's work. What *The Dispossessed* most poignantly reveals is that the quest for utopia is always landing at dystopia; something inevitably corrupts the ability to realize the utopian ideal, however it is expressed. What appears to be perfection is only, in fact, a thin veneer, revealing in its underlying corruption and degradation the possibility for hope for a better existence: the façade of utopia, when removed, provides the impetus for new utopian desire.

**Synopsis of *The Dispossessed***

*The Dispossessed* is written in thirteen alternating chapters, tracking two major timelines in the life of the protagonist; as a result, it may be understood linearly and holistically and, unlike many traditional stories, the effect is quite different depending on the approach. The structure Le Guin uses to tell her story obstructs a linear reading of the text, placing emphasis on the notion that the linear expression and perception of time is, perhaps, a human convention, rather

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3 Several authors cited in this chapter abbreviate the title to TD or *TD* in their own work. For sake of consistency, I have chosen to render the title in full each time, as this change does not distort the meaning of the quoted materials.

than a truism of reality. To that end, the anti-chronological presentation of events in the novel shifts the reader's focus back and forth, not according to the order in which the characters perceive events to occur, but in the way most suited to better understanding the totality of the text's impact. This encourages a holistic reading of the novel. As Elizabeth Cummins points out, however, explaining the novel in this manner would generate "considerable repetition." Clarity is aided by referring to events in their chronological order, as follows here.

Odo, a radical thinker on the planet Urras, writes of her belief in an anarchic society, one in which the prevailing power structures of her world are dismantled, thus allowing people the ability to serve their own interests, rather than the interest of a state entity. Critical to this society's viability is the belief that a person's self-interest is directly tied to the community; thus, in looking out for the self, the individual's most likely course of action will be to do what benefits the community. Though she is imprisoned for her beliefs, Odo continues to write of her ideas, laying the foundation for a political movement that sweeps through the world following her death. The nations of the world, threatened by the growing number of "Odonians," agree to cede them dominion over the planet's habitable moon, Anarres, in exchange for their acceptance of permanent exile. Minimal trade relations exist between the planet and the moon, but otherwise contact between the two worlds ceases for one hundred and seventy years.

Shevek, the protagonist, is born on Anarres well over a century after its secession, the Anarresti society having at this point reached the peak of its civilization's development. The moon's harsh environment limits the growth of the anarchists' society, prompting food shortages and other natural disasters. "Rain was sparse when it fell at all. This was a dry world. Dry, pale, inimical" (118). Despite this, however, the society remains largely functional and Shevek, in true anarchist fashion, is free to pursue whatever course of development most interests him. He

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5 Cummins, *Understanding*, 109. Other authors, however, attempt to present the plot in different ways; see note 4.
learns, however, that the desire for a society without structures of power has not actually come to pass: the inevitable concern for "the good of the society" begins to place limitations on what he, as an individual, might accomplish. "None of them at the Institute knew how wretched he was. They hadn't been posted, just as they were beginning independent research, to a damned tree-planting project. Their central function wasn't being wasted. They were working: doing what they wanted to do. He was not working. He was being worked" (49).

Interested in theoretical physics that are quite beyond the ability of his peers to understand, he finds that his ability to pursue these studies in full is limited by the whims and egos of more experienced scholars. Unofficial power structures have developed in a world meant to exist without them, yet they impact him just as if they were fully sanctioned by his people's ideology. As he surpasses his teacher, for instance, feelings of jealousy manifest in attempts to mark Shevek's work as undesirable and pointless. Further, any attempts Shevek makes to defend his work are seen as selfish, as he appears to be defending his work not for its own merit, but because it is his work. Yet trapped within this construct, blocked by obstinacy of his unwilling mentor and the traditions of his people, Shevek comes to realize both the shortcomings of his society and the means to overcome them. "Obviously an ethically intolerable situation, which Shevek would denounce and relinquish. Only he would not. He needed Sabul. He wanted to publish what he wrote and to send it to the men who could understand it, the Urrasti physicists; he needed their ideas, their criticism, their collaboration. So they had bargained, he and Sabul, bargained like profiteers" (117).  

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6 Sabul is the scientist under whose guidance Shevek pursues his greatest work and through whose hypocrisy Shevek begins to crystallize his disaffection with the supposed utopia of his world. "Profiteer" refers to a person in a capitalist society, whose chief concern is profit and ownership, rather than altruism, a common Anarresti term for the people of Urras.
Desperate to find someone who will receive his work and also believing that its development will, in fact, benefit society as a whole, Shevek turns to scientists on Urras. In a greatly unpopular move, he becomes the first person to break the anarchists' exile. Traveling to the prominent, capitalist nation of A-Io, Shevek is established in the planet's most prominent university, where he believes himself free to pursue his intellectual passions while also observing the vast differences between his native society and his new environs. He soon learns, however, that what at first appears to be a genuine interest in intellectual freedom is instead a cover for the desire for profit and the hope of developing weapons of war (just as his society's accusations of selfishness was a cover for fear, jealousy, and, ironically, a stubborn resistance to change).\(^7\)

Aided by the rebels of the nation's lower class, but unable to turn to the totalitarian third-world nation of Benbili or the authoritarian socialist country, Thu (the novel's analog of Cold War-era socialist states), he at last makes his way to the one neutral group that presents itself: aliens, diplomatic representatives from the galaxy's other developed civilizations. With their technology, he is ultimately able to share his theory, a fundamentally transformative concept of temporality, with all peoples, the competing nations of Urras and the other worlds beyond it. "Do you not understand that I want to give this to you—and to Hain and the other worlds—and to the countries of Urras? But to you all! So that one of you cannot use it, as A-Io wants to do, 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" (345). This move eliminates the need to approach individual groups for permission to share with them, just as it averts the fear that some would use

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\(^7\) I consider the Anarresti resistance to change as ironic, primarily, because they are a society of revolutionaries. Odo, their ideological founder, and Shevek, their main representative in the text, claim revolution, change, and innovation as the only way to ensure a free society. A society that stagnates is one that allows for the growth and centralization of power, which is the antithesis of anarchy.
his knowledge as a weapon over those who do not possess it; everyone, he believes, will be equally able to use his knowledge and so remain relatively safe from its abuse.

Following this momentous example of charity, Shevek returns home, in possession of a new understanding of the possibilities of change and a more evolved concept of utopia. As will be explored in the remainder of this chapter, he achieves, in the conclusion of the novel, a state of anti-utopia, in which he holds no desires for a better existence. This is made possible purely through his ability to reflect on his previous utopian desires and their dystopian realizations.

The Desire for Change

As should be clear by now, it is exceedingly difficult to relate the plot of *The Dispossessed* without beginning to explain the theories at play within the text. The concepts of political and social ideology that are present are so tightly interwoven as to make them virtually indistinguishable from the action; no character development may easily be read as purely a reaction to events, as each person we see also exists as a reaction to ideas. The most readily identifiable of these ideas is utopian desire: the expression of a longing for change. It permeates every layer of the novel, showing up in each character through its overwhelming strength or its notably silent lack. The threat that utopia evokes in the status quo, then, necessarily erupts onto those who wish to remain stable: those who believe themselves to exist in an anti-utopic state, who hold no desire for change for the better, cannot abide the longings expressed by the utopians they encounter. The results are varied and largely dependent on the particular individuals and circumstances involved. What remains stable, however, is not necessarily the triumph and

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8 Many critics turn to Le Guin's own description of *The Dispossessed* as a thought experiment. She herself has staunchly defended *The Dispossessed* as a novel, first and foremost, though it is impossible to deny the major ideological themes present in the work. She remarks sarcastically, "Everybody knows utopias are to be read not as novels but as blueprints for social theory or practice." Le Guin, "Response," 306.
achievement of the utopian desire, but its consistent presence: so long as utopian desire is met with dystopian reality, new utopias become possible. When what is hoped for is not realized, or is realized incompletely, the most consistent response is not defeat, but an ever-renewed desire that the present conditions might be made better.

One event, in particular, provides a clear example of the ability of the desire for change to endure. As mentioned above, the anarchist society on Anarres survives, but does not flourish because of the harsh conditions of the environment. Indeed, when a drought strikes, massive food shortages curtail the freedoms of most citizens, as the survival of their race demands an unusual level of compliance and obedience from the Anarresti. Many people are drafted into service in grand attempts to increase food supplies and curtail the negative environmental impact on their survival. Famine-prevention postings take Shevek away from his work in physics, away from his partner and his child, and place him in a position of labor that he accepts as a temporary sacrifice. Yet when the drought extends over a year, food shortages torment the population, taxing all reserves. Moving between work postings, Shevek experiences hunger for the first time: "He had fasted sometimes when he was working because he did not want to be bothered with eating, but two full meals a day had always been available; constant as sunrise and sunset. He had never even thought what it might be like to have to go without them. Nobody in his society, nobody in the world, had to go without them" (255-56). Just as they experience hunger, so too do they begin to experience a decrease in their liberty as emergency drafts pull people across their desolate world. While they are free to refuse a posting, it would be tantamount to refusing their community. For an entire society raised with the primary guiding principle that the freedom to follow one's natural inclinations is the most noble and inalienable of all rights, these mandatory assignments create an almost intolerable burden.
Within their society, however, there also exists the notion that if everyone shares in the demanding, menial, or unpleasant tasks necessary to maintain a civilization, such as sanitation and construction work, then no one is forced to do such work exclusively, unless they choose to. Regular and temporary assignments have always been the norm. So already entrenched in this community is a conditional system of mandatory service; freedom is not entirely free. Yet the sacrifice made is seen as exactly that: a sacrifice. What is given up (autonomy, in favor of a temporary and unpleasant assignment) is rewarded with something more valuable (an enduring legacy of free choice whenever such assignments are not necessary). To serve their community, then, ultimately serves the individuals. This was the utopian desire expressed by the first colonizers of Anarres.

Yet Anarresti society reads more like a dystopia in this regard. When the drought strikes, the mechanism for temporary service is used to force the Anarresti into intolerably long periods of service. What was once acceptable, even desirable, becomes an unbearable burden, an assault to the very principles that spawned the anarchists' society. The desire for change for the better, which prompted the foundation of their society, is not fully realized because of how easily it is corrupted. The dystopic outcome reflects not on the initial desire, but on the execution and on the populace. This, in fact, is the key to understanding the dystopic relationship to change: the actual desire for change is less important than its expression and realization—or lack thereof. Without expression, there is no utopia. Without realization, there is dystopia. A fully expressed desire is utopia that, when fully realized, becomes anti-utopia.

If the notion of mandatory work that isn't temporary, then, is evidence of a dystopic realization of their founders' desires, then it must either provoke a new utopia or rest at an anti-utopia. The Anarresti, when faced with a new status quo, must either desire for it to change for
the better or not. Further, because the status quo is not to their liking, it provokes an inevitable longing for one they would prefer: an inherent utopian desire is contained within dystopia, which itself is the product of utopian desire. Shevek, whom the text follows most closely through the events of the drought, resists the dystopian present by consistently expressing his utopian desire for the future. He longs for a new present, a better present, and so his longing threatens the ability of the status quo to perpetuate itself. Here, however, we come to an important divide: the threat utopia poses to the status quo does not necessarily effect the conditions which spawned the utopian desire in the first place, yet those conditions which are threatened will inevitably produce change.

To break down this concept: a group of laborers work in unfavorable conditions, accepting that they must do so. This is the status quo. The unfavorable conditions inspire one laborer to desire a change for better conditions. Once this desire is expressed, change must necessarily follow. The expression of this desire might have no bearing on the unfavorable conditions, yet they are not the whole of the status quo: the worker is one part of a group, all of whom previously accepted their condition. The individual worker's desire for a better existence, once expressed, will necessarily challenge each individual within the group: that individual is then free to agree or disagree with the expressed desire. Yet, before such a desire is expressed, people are not able to agree or disagree: their acceptance or rejection of utopia represents the change. Should those workers agree with the desire, quit their labor, and subsequently face negative consequences, this would represent a dystopian outcome; the essence of the utopian change, however, lies in their choice, regardless of its outcome. Should the group reject the desire and continue their labor, they have done so now because they have chosen to reject, not a better existence, but the desire for a better existence.
In the case of Shevek, the drought provokes a dystopian realization of the Anarresti society, but his utopian longing can have no influence over the drought. Nor does it matter, per se, whether his desire changes the social structure he finds intolerable. By expressing utopia, Shevek changes his own role within the status quo, which in this case may be seen as one link in the chain of events that leads to his eventual departure from Anarres. The desire for change is always threatening the status quo and such a threat will always provoke change, for better or worse.

Odo's Endless Utopia

The notion of change as threat is highlighted nowhere as clearly as it is in Odo, the visionary whose dream for an ideal society spawns the split between Urras and Anarres. The particularities of Odo's dream take the form of an anarchic, communal society, whose real-world analog most closely resembles a form of libertarian communism. Much as we have seen in our own global history, the notion of a communist state is inherently threatening to nations whose internal structures of power thrive on inequality or profit-driven commerce. Of particular interest to this inquiry is the notion that the specific form of Odo's vision of utopia matters far less than the fact that she expresses any idea at all that aims to alter the world from its extant state; whatever form her vision takes would equally threaten the status quo of Urras. We have seen how utopia provokes change in the status quo. Where the previous example of the drought and Shevek's utopian desire leads to a change in Shevek, however, Odo's utopia succeeds on a far

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9 Significant attention has been given to the specific shape of Le Guin's portrayal of compassionate anarchy. For these discussions, see especially Davis and Stillman, The New Utopian Politics; Selinger, Le Guin and Identity, 103-26; Suvin, "Cognition, Freedom," 23-49; Urbanowicz, "Personal and Political," 145-54; and White, Dancing with Dragons, 84-95.
larger scale: her expressed desire changes the people around her and they, in turn, effect change on the social structures they decry.

Again, the particular form of utopia is less important here than its expression and realization. If this holds true, then Odo's ability to change the social landscape of Urras rests not on her ability to envision an altruistic society of anarchists, but in her ability to express such a vision to those capable of seeing it enacted. The power of an instigator rests not on the logic or truth of her words, but on the passion with which she says them and the conviction she is able to instill in her followers. The power of rhetoric comes into focus when desire is expressed. It might fail to sway minds, or it might force those in control, be they singular, oligarchic, or legion, to recognize the possibility that they do not live in a perfect world, that the path on which they have set their society will not steer them to the best of all possible futures. This realization, in turn, prompts action: either the rejection, suppression, or acceptance of new ideas. What lingers, however, is the knowledge that different possibilities for change exist and that possibility can always be made into reality. Victor Urbanowicz calls to our attention the specific power of rhetoric, as well as Le Guin's skill in its employment: "In this way Le Guin makes her novel a vehicle for a central moral principle of anarchism, commonly called that of the unity of means and ends: a better society should not and cannot be achieved by using methods today which would be intolerable once it was a reality."¹⁰ To embody anarchy in her rhetoric, Odo must use the tools of her envisioned utopia, rather than the systems she wishes to overthrow. Cooperation, not competition. In doing so, she clarifies for the disillusioned and the dispossessed of Urras, not so much what is wrong with their society, but how it could be better. And yet each action from this point, each thought, is irrevocably influenced by the knowledge that the people, as a whole, are not content. If contentment, as a marker of stability, is the ultimate goal of a society, then it

strives toward anti-utopia; so long as a utopian desire for a better way of life can be expressed, the society cannot rest. And so long as utopian desire lands at dystopian realization, new utopias will continue to be conceived and expressed.

What Odo reveals upon examination, then, is the power of political and ideological rhetoric. Her utopian vision allows us to understand the status quo against which she reacts: a society based on capitalism, individualism, and restriction. The way in which she expresses her vision, however, showcases within the novel the enduring powers of nonviolence and peaceful protest; what begins as a series of peaceful revolutions and protests on Urras generates the "free" society of Anarres that endures for nearly two centuries following Odo's death. Further, the expression of her vision reveals the inherent difficulties in expressing a utopia that is so fundamentally at odds with the status quo, as the revolution is not easily waged. Finally, her work provides the novel with a chance to show the ease with which utopian desires might land at dystopia: no matter the shape of a utopia, it remains possible for its realization to achieve dystopia, rather than anti-utopia, as we witness in the Anarresti.

One of the most significant ways in which the specific shape of Odo's utopia impacts this discussion is her insistence on nonviolence as the means to revolution. Nonviolence has vast ideological implications, as it seeks to balance the power of the oppressors and the oppressed by removing from the battle physical force (albeit not always successfully), but it has great rhetorical implications as well. When the oppressed have little to no power at their disposal, as did the poor of Urras when Odo began her revolution, the notion that the oppressed might influence change in their world is itself an act of empowerment. Further, this brings to light the concept of the dangerous idea. "You are an idea. A dangerous one. The idea of anarchism, made flesh" (295). Slusser, writing of the Urrasti fear of Shevek (as the embodiment of Odonianism),
remarks, "The only danger, it appears, is from Anarres, which has little physical force, but a
general and dangerous idea. When Shevek leaps the gap between planets, he comes as the
incarnation of the anarchist ideal." The idea is threatening, must like the change espoused in
utopia because, as Beth Snowberger tells us, "Once a new idea is present in one's consciousness,
the presence lingers thereafter." You cannot unthink an idea and utopian ideas, harbingers of
change, are the most threatening of all.

This is not to say, however, that the desired change comes easily. Even when effective
rhetorical tools are employed, resistance to change must still be taken into account. Indeed, the
more a utopian ideal differs from the status quo, the more resistant the status quo will be to
change. Similarly, the more radical the utopia, the more threatening it becomes and threat
provokes change. Thus, some change is inevitable; the dependent variables, then, are which
elements will change and to what degree. Odo's utopia is so powerful, in large part, because of
its resistance of the notion of anti-utopia; central to Odo's anarchy is a constant state of
revolution, in which the status quo is permanently threatened and thus always forced to change,
ever-evolving, ever-provocative. This is fundamentally at odds with the notion of a stable
government and so is marked as extremely threatening—perhaps even explaining why, rather
than continue to fight against the Odonian protesters, the nations of Urras agreed to cede
dominion of Anarres, to protect the status quo (by means of exile) from the threat, not
necessarily of anarchy, but of constant utopia. Stability seeks anti-utopia; Odo seeks unceasing
utopia.

11 Slusser, Farthest Shores, 49. Suzanne Reid also recognizes Shevek as "a brilliantly inventive physicist whose
work threatens the status quo on Anarres." Reid, Presenting Ursula K. Le Guin, 61-62.
12 Snowberger, "Utopian Imagination," 60.
Dystopic Realization

So what went wrong?

The world of Anarres at the start of the novel is hardly anti-utopian. The protagonist serves as the living embodiment of utopia, forever at odds with his surroundings, suffused with the possibility of a better way of life, and convinced of the value of Odo's call for constant revolution. Such a character could not exist in anti-utopia, as perfection would elide the need to dream of improving society. And yet the form of Shevek's utopian desire so frequently finds frustration with the static ideals of his contemporaries; his society, meant to provoke utopia, has instead encouraged complacency. Though the ideology of the Anarresti is markedly different from the Urrasti, they are no more revolutionaries, but instead have settled into the roles of libertarian communism. Each is free to do as he pleases, so long as the needs of the community are first served; an individual has an obligation to others that precedes her obligations to herself. When the needs of the community conflict with the needs of the individual, sacrifice is expected. Were this to be shared equally, then, the principles of communism would surely apply; however, when the exceptional individual is forced to sacrifice to a disproportionate degree, such as is the case with Shevek, the Anarresti anarchy is revealed to differ markedly from its intended shape.

With this in mind, we may most easily locate Anarres as a dystopia.

_The Dispossessed_ rather clearly delineates Urras as a dystopia for the reader; though many there consider it a paradise, the type of planet whose conditions should lead its people into anti-utopia, there is, in fact, deep unrest beneath its beautiful surface and a great longing that closely resembles the rebellious uproar of Odo's time. Le Guin is careful to shape Shevek's interaction with the planet, chiefly the people of A-Io, in such a way that he grows to respect those traits they have which are valuable, even as he is confronted with those he finds detestable.
The novel is thus careful to stay true to its origins as a piece of literature, rather than straying into a didactic caricature of morality, civics, and economics. Less clear, perhaps, is the way in which Anarres may be read as dystopic. Certainly, Shevek's disappointment with his community indicates flaws, yet he returns there at the end of the novel, believing it to be a better society than the ones he finds on Urras. This move may be read as an implicit preference for reading Anarres as utopic—not as a utopia, as again its stability inhibits change, but as desiring to be better. Anarres, after all, was founded on the hope that people could find a better way of treating one another and sustain themselves, not on the disproportionate suffering of some, but on the shared suffering and resilience of all.

What are we to make, then, of Shevek's return? In his journey to Urras, Shevek finds his way to anti-utopia. This is not to say that Anarres has suddenly become a place for Shevek in which he cannot picture better circumstances, but instead posits that, in accepting the flaws of the society and resigning himself to work against them he enters a perpetual state of utopia fully aware of the circumstances. This presents the notion of a personal, rather than a communal utopia. As Buchanan explains, one of the stumbling blocks to realizing utopia is that it is "a mirage," dismissible because it is "inherently of the present; and it can be rejected for being, finally, too personal."¹³ Winter Elliott echoes this sentiment, remarking that The Dispossessed only allows for the realization of a personal utopia, "attainable only through individual effort and psychological struggle."¹⁴ Even of anarchy, the guiding principle of Anarres' attempted utopia, Elliott notes that it "requires stimulus on an individual level—an anarchist society may only exist if it is composed of a very great many individual anarchists."¹⁵ How can this notion of personal utopia, then, be reconciled with the desire to enact change on the social scale? Darko Suvin

¹³ Buchanan, Michel de Certeau, 43.
¹⁵ Ibid., 160.
traces this problem as manifested in the novel through the barrenness of Anarres, which he sees as the metaphorical result of the Odonians' "separation, rather than permeation," resulting in "a revolution only for a vanguard and then exile group;" the settlers of Anarres claimed a personal utopia for themselves, rather than pushing for it to encompass all of Urras, and so are left barren.16

In achieving perpetual utopia, Shevek realizes a purpose for himself and, though the betterment of society will remain his goal, his personal condition reaches a point that he does not wish to change; for him, perpetual social utopia is the best possible existence and so his return to Anarres is the achievement of a personal anti-utopia. Unsurprisingly, this is exactly Odo's utopia, never fully realized in the Anarresti society; perhaps the fact that Odo was not involved in the settlement of Anarres explains this, though, as we start to see in "The Day Before the Revolution," she had already begun to realize that her followers were seeking, not utopia, but anti-utopia.17

The communal living the early Odonians accept for themselves and wish to bring to others is seen as an end, when in fact it is the perpetual revolution that matters. Le Guin writes, "Favoritism, elitism, leader-worship, they crept back and cropped out everywhere. But she had never hoped to see them eradicated in her lifetime, in one generation; only Time works the great changes."18 Already settled into a communal environment, the members of her Movement seek to elevate Odo from one among many to the level of an exalted leader, someone to be treated differently. They see her as the one who started them on a path with a destination in mind (that being a world of harmony and community), rather than on a journey without an ending; she,

17 "The Day Before the Revolution," published a year after The Dispossessed, is a short story following the last day in the life of Odo. It focuses on the woman she has become and her reflections on the work of her youth, which creates the anarchist society of Anarres that she never lives to see.
18 Le Guin, "Day Before," 236.
however, sees their worship of her as a mark that they have not fully understood her call for revolution. It is her lingering hope, however, her unexpressed utopian desire, that "Time [will] work the great changes" and that her followers will realize they cannot rest, cannot allow the old methods of governance, of authority and inequality to "[creep] back" after they have accomplished so much. As utopia is as much about the expression of desire as it is the desire itself, it seems that the Odonian call for anarchy overwhelmed the call for constant revolution. The rhetoric of instability was not as successful as the rhetoric of equality and peace, though even equality remains difficult to realize when the exceptional individual is considered.

Odo worked hard to create a legacy of change that would continue beyond her lifetime, to be taken up by new anarchists, a perpetual wave of utopia in which the status quo would never be accepted as such, in which the betterment of society would always be sought, would always be voiced. The Revolution hinted at in Le Guin's short story indeed becomes a general strike, one which mirrors (indeed, is the historical catalyst for) the strike that forms the climax of The Dispossessed. Revolution occurs—but comes to a halt, one not intended by Odo's utopia. The anarchy of Anarres is the dystopic realization of the Movement's goal to end the rule of authority and uphold the guiding principle of freedom. To better understand this dystopia, then, we must consider the ways in which the idealized anarchy fails to protect the freedom of all, instead serving only some.

Unequal Equality

Nowhere are the flaws of Anarres' proposed free society seen as clearly as when confronting the exceptional individual. Shevek surrounds himself with such people, such as Tirin, the playwright whose satire evokes such disapproval from his peers that he retreats to a
mental asylum to recover and ultimately finds himself trapped in repeatedly writing the same play over and over, or Bedap, the political idealist whose vehement criticism of the structure of Anaretti society both invites disapproval of his work and helps inspire Shevek's own self-reflection. Anarres purports itself as a society of equals, in which no one has the right to tell another what to do—or what not to do. Yet Shevek's friend Salas, a musician, encounters exactly this problem when he seeks to share his music with others; rather than having the chance to compose music for the public to hear and critique, he is thwarted by those responsible for registering people to such work.

"But there must be postings for composers." "Where?" "In the Music Syndicate, I suppose." "But the Music syndics don't like my compositions. And nobody much else does, yet. […] You see, I don't write the way I was trained to write at the conservatory. I write dysfunctional music." (174-75)

Innovation is suppressed, not through overt laws, but through the inherent function of public opinion. Those who can bestow on artists the work postings to let them create do so only when what will be created aligns with what is already known to be in favor. When the artist seeks to create something wholly novel, rather than encouraging such an independent whim and letting the public choose whether or not to accept the result, the growing bureaucracy of Anarres instead attempts to thwart such innovation. Salas' response, similar to most of the disenfranchised artists with whom Shevek associates, is to refuse the unwanted postings he is offered instead. Shevek faces the same difficulties, not through his art, but his science. His conflicts with Sabul, his mentor, reveal themselves to Bedap as further evidence of the disconnect between individual and community.
[Sabul] gets [power] from the innate cowardice of the average human mind. Public opinion! That's the power structure he's part of, and knows how to use. The unadmitted, inadmissible government that rules the Odonian society by stifling the individual mind. (165)

Such a thought is so contradictory to the conditions of freedom which the Anarresti believe to comprise their society that Shevek, the victim of Sabul's unadmitted power, suggests "It's not our society that frustrates individual creativity. It's the poverty of Anarres" (167). Yet his faith in the spirit of Anarresti individualism slowly wears down under closer scrutiny. Bedap, the exceptional cynic, awakes in Shevek a passion to claim the same "freedom of mind" as his friend (173).

Shevek's struggle against the unanticipated rigidity of his society exemplifies not only the more inimical forms of Anarres' dystopia, but also the inherent difficulty in realizing a utopia that works for all, rather than merely some. This difficulty is so poignant that it leads some, such as George Slusser, to cite it as the core focus of the novel—though such a position risks obscuring the greater connection between this difficulty and its connection to dystopia: "The problem in The Dispossessed is not so much whether man can regulate himself; it is rather that he regulates himself naturally, and too much. The classic utopian question is asked here: What is the maximum personal freedom consistent with collective order? The Dispossessed is less the story of social norms than that of the exceptional individual, Shevek."19 By framing the question as a utopian concern, however, Slusser does support the reading of disconnection between the individual and her community as intimately linked with utopian desire. Approaching The Dispossessed as a text chiefly concerned with the struggle between individual and community seems to be in keeping with Le Guin's own intentions, as she insists that her work is, first and

19 Slusser, Farthest Shores, 47.
foremost, a novel, literature about people, not ideas; the ideas grow through the characters, just as the characters grow through their conflict with her ideas.\(^\text{20}\)

Shevek is at once scientist and artist, the proxy for exceptionalism in general in a society in which exceptionality is neither valued nor supported. Bedap remarks about Shevek, "You had all sorts of limitations and defects. But not in physics. I'm no temporalist, I know. But you don't have to be able to swim to know a fish, you don't have to shine to recognize a star" (164). As the most radically talented physicist on his world, he stands out among his peers, yet is equally as progressive with his political and social concerns; many of the customs of complacency and structure that have evolved among the Anarresti strike him as particularly offensive, allowing the reader a glimpse at the ways in which Odo's utopia has failed to perpetuate itself among her followers. Indeed, it is only by understanding Shevek that we may view Anarres as a dystopia; for others, it is Shevek who is the problem, rather than the society. Slusser again captures this sentiment by highlighting the individual as being powerful through adaptability.\(^\text{21}\) He is also the reactionary, the reflecting mirror through which we may view society.

By viewing Shevek as the epitome of exceptionalism, the spokesman for those who are not content to accept what is offered, instead demanding the ability to rise above the status quo, it becomes possible to more rigorously examine this rupture between personal and communal utopias. Bernard Selinger proves helpful in identifying Shevek as the ideological double for

\(^{20}\) "[The Dispossessed] has generally, not always but often, been discussed as a treatise, not as a novel. [...] But I wondered if the people who read it as a treatise ever wondered why I had written it as a novel." Le Guin, "Response," 306; "Le Guin discovered in her imagination a character who stated he was 'a citizen of Utopia'" who later became Shevek. Thus, The Dispossessed has always been, first and foremost, about a character. Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 104; "In addition to being a novel of ideas, there is evidence to suggest that The Dispossessed is very much a story about the exceptional creative individual." Selinger, Le Guin and Identity, 103.

\(^{21}\) "We are born not to mourn the fact that all is fixed, permanent. We are born rather to adapt our individual lives to these patterns, to live and die. [...] Individual man is important, for he is the prime mover, the source of power." Slusser, Farthest Shores, 4.
Anarres and self, reading Urras as merely a double for the concept of the Other. Shevek's discontent with his society helps mark him as outside of it, yearning to be part of it. Yet the very nature of the Anarresti society is one of inclusion and wholeness. To be separated from an inclusive group is to expose the exclusivity that marks it as dysfunctional; in the case of Anarres, this dysfunction is the dystopian perversion of its utopian inception. Selinger continues: "Contemporary psychoanalytic writers [...] have consistently depicted the interrelationship of individual and society, of inside and outside;" "The opposition to the isolation or separation manifests itself in a striving for union with some personal, private other, [...] which ultimately transforms into a striving or yearning for social unity, communion with others." At this point, then, we may read Shevek's separation from the Anarresti at once as a mark of its dystopic state and also of his growing desire to improve it. He "[yearns] for social unity" and so begins his journey toward understanding and expressing his desire to change it so that he may be part of it. He identifies, as well, "the truth of an underlying unity between micro and macro, self and society," which Beth Snowberger cites as that which "is truly utopian" about the novel. This can only happen, however, by fully realizing the wall that separates him; he cannot reenter his community until he understands why he is separate from it. Ironically, Selinger suggests that it is, in part, Shevek's quest to reenter his community that is to blame for his exclusion from it, and in this he may be correct: "The pain, the fear, and the isolation caused by the wall that keeps self Other will always be present as long as he courageously strives to unbuild walls."25 Shevek's

22 "To understand how Le Guin's identity theme manifests itself in The Dispossessed, how it germinates and informs theme and structure, it is important to recognize that the two planets, Anarres and Urras are, in Le Guin's creative imagination, physical bodies: Shevek and Other." Selinger, Le Guin and Identity, 104.
23 Ibid., 106, 151.
24 Snowberger, "Utopian Imagination," 55.
25 Selinger, Le Guin and Identity, 115.
particular quest to "unbuild walls" is of course a metaphor for the threat his utopia—any utopia—poses to the stability of the dystopia against which it rebels.

What, exactly, is so threatening to the Anarresti, the communists, the compassionate anarchists who put the needs of others ahead of their own, about an individual who seeks to better their society? Charlotte Spivack suggests it is the clarity with which Shevek views them and the intensity of his character. By marking himself as exceptional, he necessarily highlights the ways in which he differs from them, placing the individual in view, rather than the community. "The goal of social harmony creates tensions with the demands of the individual. Society does not cultivate or even understand genius. [...] Absence of repressive laws does not protect from the equal tyranny of social approval and disapproval."26 Shevek expresses the immensity of this burden when he realizes how far astray his society has developed from the ideals its members claim to espouse.

We fear being outcast, being called lazy, dysfunctional, egoizing. We fear our neighbor's opinion more than we respect our own freedom of choice. [...] Just try stepping over the line, just in imagination, and see how you feel. [...] We have created crime, just as the propertarians did. We force a man outside the sphere of our approval, and then condemn him for it. We've made laws, laws of conventional behavior, built walls around ourselves, and we can't see them, because they're part of our thinking. (330-31)

Le Guin portrays this disapproval as especially galling to the exceptional individual, who seeks at once inclusion in the group and to transcend the group with her work. Shevek and his friends linger in discontentment—Shevek even contemplates suicide, rather than endure continued disapproval from his peers—until they express the utopian urge to form their own group, in which they need seek no one's approval save their own (164). Formed on the premise of disseminating that which is not otherwise "wanted" by the other bureaucratic groups, Shevek's

26 Spivack, Ursula K. Le Guin, 79-80.
printing syndicate becomes a powerful force of unrest. Victor Urbanowicz aptly highlights the struggle by identifying the creative individuals, the exceptional class disenfranchised by a community of equals, as victims: "In a libertarian communist society […] freedom is more fragile than communism, and the spirit of freedom can easily lapse into one of conformity. When this happens, the first to suffer are likely to be those creative individuals whose work must be solitary—precisely those, in other words, who are the best justification of freedom." To Urbanowicz, then, freedom does not exist for its own sake, but rather to allow the exceptional individual to pursue individual goals without oppression from the group—the tradeoff being that the work of the exceptional individual will inevitably benefit the group; while this seems at odds with the theme of freedom presented in The Dispossessed, where revolution and anarchy are promoted as supreme virtues in their own right, it does shed light on one particularly crucial question: at which boundaries do the needs of the individual and the community collide, enrich one another, and conflict?

Shevek's continued analysis of this boundary attempts to answer the question by pointing to the limit to which the individual can yield.

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. (333)

Sacrifice is best understood as the loss of something in return for a greater reward; what is sacrificed in this case is the ability to pursue specific, individual goals, while the society, in response, provides "security and stability." To compromise, however, is not to abandon one goal, but to abandon the concept of setting goals for the self; to compromise to the Anarresti

27 Urbanowicz, "Personal and Political," 152.
society is to accept its rule as complete, such that what is given up is no longer adequately compensated for by what the society returns to the individual. Shevek portrays here both the intent of anarchy to sustain the individual, as the lack of authority is meant to preserve individual freedoms, and also the ability of "permanent revolution" to accomplish this goal. By uniting individual, "the thinking mind," and society, Shevek proposes a means of achieving balance. This balance is supremely important because, as some like Urbanowicz have noted, "the demands of the individual can never be perfectly reconciled with those of society."28

This notion of irreconcilability becomes centrally important upon reflection of the exceptional individual, she who will constantly push against the bounds of what her society allows. If, remembering Selinger's framing of this problem as itself a utopian concern, we cannot separate the exceptional from notions of utopia, the importance of balance through sacrifice magnifies tremendously. It is even possible to claim that a reading of *The Dispossessed* suggests this balance between individual and society as more desirable than a reconciliation; Dan Sabia certainly supports such a notion, as the "sources of disharmony are also sources of harmony."29 Out of conflict and grief, for instance, arises the opportunity for shared suffering, which Shevek identifies as the key to brotherhood, to community itself.30 The only option is to balance these forces "in a dynamic, conflictful [sic] equilibrium," though there is always risk to both the individual and the society.31 Indeed, "balance isn’t a problem to be solved."32 Were the individual to be completely subsumed by the society, it would cease to evolve, begin to oppress, and the notion of anarchy to become completely defunct; similarly, to pursue individual goals to

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29 Sabia, "Individual and Community," 120.
30 "It is our suffering that brings us together. It is not love. […] The bond that binds us is beyond choice. […] We are brothers in what we share. In pain, which each of us must suffer alone, in hunger, in poverty, in hope, we know our brotherhood." Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 300.
32 Cadden, "Review," 311.
exclusion, ignoring the society, would be to bring an end to security, to turn revolution into chaos. Ironically, "[the Anarresti] seem unable to tolerate excess of freedom, in spite of their code of permanent rebellion. The 'madmen' they seek to contain, by conventions if not by laws, are ironically the true anarchists themselves."³³ Still, as Cummins points out, "Le Guin shows Shevek encountering the imperfections of this utopian anarchy and yet sharpening his personal commitment to it," rather than becoming disillusioned.³⁴ The problem Shevek faces is how to confront this dystopia and bring back the revolution upon which it was founded; his desire seeks expression, raising the issue, once again, of the way in which utopia may threaten the status quo and, perhaps more urgently, the way in which the status quo responds.

Forcing Change

One of the chief concerns with expressing a utopia that seeks an ideal anti-utopia, bereft of the need for new desires, is the method in which it is expressed; the wrong expression might easily lead the utopian desire to dystopian realization. While realizing the imperfections of a society necessarily paint it as a dystopia, which provides the impetus for utopian desire, the outcome of that expression has the potential to arrive at the "perfect anti-utopia" or a new dystopia of failed or imperfectly realized change. This is perhaps best explained by considering the issues of balance and submission, cooperating and obeying. As Bedap angrily remarks, "We've let cooperation become obedience. On Urras they have government by the minority. Here we have government by the majority. But it is government! The social conscience isn't a living thing any more, but a machine, a power machine, controlled by bureaucrats!" (167). The projected, perfect anti-utopia of Anarres, an endless repetition of utopian expression, has

³³ Slusser, Farthest Shores, 50.
³⁴ Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 110.
failed—in this case, because the rebellious Odonians never considered that their anarchy could become itself a dystopia. They settled into complacency, thinking their static system was itself a perfect anti-utopia of freedom, individualism, and cooperation. By expressing the idea of Anarres as an end, rather than as a means to an indescribable, ever-changing end, the utopia became dystopia and only through great effort are Shevek and his friend able to rouse it from this state.

When considering mobilizing a society out of inertia into the momentum of constant revolution, then, Odo and Shevek face equally daunting challenges: Odo had to contend with the direct and obvious oppression of an authority that did not want to cede power to the subjugated class on which it sustained itself; Shevek, meanwhile, attempts to catalyze into revolution a society that thinks itself revolutionary. In the case of the Anarresti, they identify themselves as a response to the past, conflating present and future; as long as they compare themselves to their Urrasti past, then of course they are change itself, the very antithesis of their ancestors' societies. They are the future. Yet in this dichotomy of past and future, they neglect to consider the present moment. For Shevek, they have stalled, no longer moving forward, yet still convinced they are indeed the apogee of societal development. His options are limited: submit to the inertia of his community (an intolerable proposition to him), convince them of their situation (a tactic he tries throughout much of his life, meeting with little success), or force them to see themselves as he does. This last option, while the most dangerous in its threat of triggering further dystopias, is that most intimately linked with his utopia.

Force is a particularly troubling concept in light of a community of anarchists: their very nature compels them to resist—at least in theory. As Shevek notes, "We don't cooperate—we obey" (330; italics in original). The authority the Anarresti obey is that of social pressure, of
opinion rather than law, yet it holds them just as tightly. Still, to confront an Anarresti directly with the notion of force, to deprive her of the choice of ignoring or accepting a new perspective of reality, is the mark of a "bad Odonian." Odo herself remarks, "What is an anarchist? One who, choosing, accepts the responsibility of choice." Shevek, in forcing realization of their dystopia on the Anarresti, chooses for them. He accepts, upon threat of his life, the responsibility, seeing in his means the end that most closely resembles his utopia. This issue of means and ends, however, is not a matter of two separate entities, but for Odonians is one linked concept. Cummins explains, if this value holds true as a reality, not just a theory, then Shevek's actions will spark new utopias in the same fashion as the one that guides him, spreading "cooperation, not competition." One cannot separate means and ends in any circumstance; force will only beget more force. Yet by pursuing his journey to Urras, by forcing open the barrier between worlds and cultures after nearly two centuries of segregation, he exposes the Anarresti to consider his actions and their motivation.

The end goal he seeks is to inspire the revolutionary spirit in revolutionaries who have become complacent. The means he employs is to be, himself, revolutionary. Means and ends are linked. When his actions violate the social conscience, however, individual and society conflict and, as is the Odonian way, sacrifice is expected. What Shevek sacrifices, however, is not his utopia but the segregation of his people.

Things are…a little broken loose, on Anarres. […] It was our purpose all along […] to shake up things, to stir up, to break some habits, to make people ask questions. To behave like anarchists! All this has been going on while I was gone. So, you see, nobody is quite sure what happens next. And if you land with me, even more gets broken loose. I cannot push too far. (384)

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35 Le Guin, "Day Before," 242 (italics in original).
36 Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 120.
Through his actions, Shevek forces the Anarresti to confront their own lassitude. He could just as easily pursue a different path. The Urrasti, for instance, seek to co-opt Shevek for their own ends: the Ioti upper class for his knowledge and its commercial and military applications, the "Odonian" underclass as their living ideological monument. Instead, he opts to bring his knowledge to all people, sharing with all to make an example of the power of the Odonian ideals he wishes to rekindle in his own people. By sharing with those who know only how to buy or take, and making a spectacle of such an action, Shevek lets loose on Urras a flood of anarchy that cannot help but lap against Anarresti shores.

"'Anarchy' connotes disorder, lawlessness, and violent overthrow of the government. However, the word also denotes a philosophy based on a belief that moral responsibility rests solely with the individual and on a model of evolution that views cooperation, not competition, as the key to survival."37 This is the Odonian ideal, the concept that most consistently permeates the utopia upon which their society was founded. To keep such evolution alive, constant change is needed. Jean-Luc Nancy brings to this the notion that change is always anarchic, or "anarchic," as creation (or change) recognizes in the world a "radical immanence," meaning that there is "no model for the world" and so change can have no origin, but instead must arise as a new beginning, a new immanence.38 While the specific need for change surely arises in a pre-existing context, change is not only a rebellion, but a creation of a new order; as the world is changed, it must be considered a new world, forgetting in this moment its past, its exterior reference, and "can only refer to itself. [...] This is why the world's immanence is ab-solute, detached, without connection."39 History, Nancy writes, is "denatured. But this denaturation is what requires us to consider the extent to which [...] history is not and cannot be auto-

39 Ibid.
generating." In this notion, then, is the abandonment of history in favor of the present. Our concept of history shifts and, as we connect to our present and look to our future, we assume that change as a part of the history, rather than a rupture with what was already there.

Shevek's utopian actions may thus be read as a rupture between past and present. As the Anarresti would not change themselves, Shevek seeks to change them. As he explains to a Terran alien, "Since my people refuse to look outward, I thought I might make others look at us. I thought it would be better not to hold apart behind a wall, but to be a society among the others, a world among the others, giving and taking" (346). He claims to have been wrong, as the experiment reminds him why his people retreated from Urras in the first place, and yet his mission is not a failure. As things are "a little broken loose" upon his return, he realizes that forcing the Anarresti back into the gaze of the Urrasti (and their new galactic allies) means the anarchists can no longer afford to be complacent, to rest in dystopia. They were blind to their dystopic state and utopia must have a dystopia against which to respond; to achieve constant utopia, one must constantly experience dystopia. To sever themselves from Urras was to sever their ability to compare themselves and so recognize when they strayed from their self-appointed path; "without Urras, there would be no Anarres, and the only way Shevek discovers the real Anarres [...] is by going to Urras." In this, Shevek reveals that the key to Anarres' utopia lies not with the Anarresti, but on Urras.

True Journey is Return: Traveling Toward Utopia

The growth of Shevek throughout The Dispossessed may most clearly be read as the growth of a utopian desire. His experiences on Anarres first raise his awareness of his dystopian

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40 Nancy, The Creation of the World, 82 (italics in original).
41 "A real sense of triumph must be preceded by real despair." Le Guin, "Day Before," 240.
42 Bittner, Approaches to the Fiction, 123.
present and later come to inspire his deep longing for a better future. He expresses this longing in his travel to Urras, risking his present existence all on the hope of what is yet to come, but in doing so reclaims his past as well. It is extremely significant, then, that these developments in his life are chiefly categorized by travel. As he travels to and from Abennay, the "capital" of Anarres, to and from the Dust, the site of major efforts to alleviate the famine that cripples the Anarresti, to and from Urras, he is confronted with new tools with which to shape his understanding of disillusion and hope. Essentially connected to this spatial travel, however, is a series of temporal journeys. The novel's structure most clearly communicates this, as it shuffles the reader back and forth from Shevek's past to his present, collapsing the notion of linearity and simultaneously forcing the reader to consider the connection of time, of history, to actions of the present and ramifications for the future. Slusser points to his growing understanding of the relationship between Urras and Anarres as the clearest link in this temporal travel.

In one sense, Urras is Anarres' past, a thing abandoned. But as the mining ships from Urras show, this cleavage is a figment of the Anarresti mind. To those on Urras, the twin planet is very much part of their material present—a mining colony. To Shevek the frustrated physicist, however, Urras has become the future, the place where he will complete his work. The result of his going is the discovery that Urras really is Anarres' past. But in order to see this, he must first break free of new walls and a new dilemma. [...] At this point, to love both [Urras and Anarres] is to lose both past and future, to be doubly alienated. Later, he will realize that only in choosing both can he regain a past and a future. Only thus can he move toward a future which is also a return.  

This return is the key element of travel in the utopian mindset of Odo and her followers: to journey, to discover, and to return to the beginning with new knowledge that not only serves to help grow the community, but also to transform radically the understanding of what that community is and might be. "You can go home again [...] so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been" (55; italics in original). The beginning place is never the

43 Slusser, Farthest Shores, 52.
end point, even if the journey is truly cyclical, because it will have changed in response to the experiences of the sojourner and those awaiting her return. "Even when the hero does return to his beginning, as in *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin provides alternating time frames, so that the reader moves back and forth, constructing and reconstructing history." Shevek himself participates in this reconstruction of history; his numerous journeys, nearly all of them forced displacements, provoke unhappiness and unrest—and yet are the sites to which he displaces his happiness in the present.

Shevek's most significant journeys may be read as his travel to the Dust, his famine posting, his journey to Urras, and his return to Anarres, and even his arrival at Abbenay. Though all that he does is voluntary—especially in the context of his society, in which no person is forced, only expected, to act—each journey starts with an imperative originating from beyond Shevek himself.

As mentioned above, the Anarresti are accustomed to accepting labor postings that go against their natural inclinations because they recognize the work must be done, but in sharing such labor they may alleviate the burden it creates. Yet for Shevek, his first long-term posting to the Dust creates for him a condition of aggrievement.

The work needed doing, but a lot of people didn't care what they were posted to and changed jobs all the time; they should have volunteered. Any fool could do this work. In fact, a lot of them could do it better than he could. He had been proud of his strength, and had always volunteered for the "heavies" on tenth-day rotational duty; but here it was day after day, eight hours a day, in dust and heat. (48)

Even in lamenting his present, however, he looks back to the past, to previous manual labor, displacing his present happiness. The work he does in the Dust is inimical to his nature because of its length, its refusal to let him pursue his intellectual studies. Yet his time in the Dust seems

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44 Clarke, "Contrary Instincts," 44.
to engender in him a new awareness of the necessity for acting on his own freedom: "Long before, in the Dust, in the years of famine and despair, when he had promised himself that he would never act again but by his own choice. And following that promise he had brought himself here: to this moment without time, this place without an earth, this little room, this prison"(8). This reflection occurs on board the spaceship taking Shevek from Anarres to Urras—again linking travel with realization, reflection.

Even Abbenay, the unofficial capital of Anarres, which holds possibility for intellectual growth unparalleled by anything else on Shevek's world, represents a forced dislocation. In this case, it is the urging of a destiny, a compulsion to seek out his purpose, that drives Shevek. His first true mentor, Mitis, explains as much when he first begins to realize the possibility of doing work there, of leaving behind all he knows and embarking on a journey with no understandable end point.

"[Sabul will] want you to come there, to Abbenay, you know." The young man did not answer. "Do you want to go?" "Not yet." "So I judged. But you must go. For the books, and for the minds you'll meet there. You will not waste that mind in a desert! [...] It's your duty to seek out the best, Shevek. (57)

This compulsory move to Abbenay differs significantly from most of his other journeys, as that which expects him to undertake the journey is his own research, his intellect. It is the same impulse which leads him to Urras, needing to seek out a place where his work can continue, unable to abide stagnation in the present. He believes himself to act upon his own will entirely, yet his "choice" is not made without influence. Mitis speaks to him of a duty, which is intimately tied to the notion of the exceptional individual. She continues, "Don't let false egalitarianism ever trick you" (57-58). He is not equal to everyone else—which he discovers as

45 "It was his own will that had started it all, that had created this moment." Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 8.
he reflects upon the loneliness and isolation engendered by his stay in Abbenay. As he draws into his studies, working in isolation, he realizes the quality of separation that has always plagued him; different even from his father, Palat, his journey to Abbenay opens Shevek's eyes to a quality of solitude that marks him as distinctly as his genius.

Palat had not had this curse of difference. He was like the others, like all the others to whom community came so easy. He loved Shevek, but he could not show him what freedom is, that recognition of each person's solitude which alone transcends it. (106)

Unsurprisingly, this seems to confirm Shevek's earlier sentiment that brotherhood, the fundamental quality of the Anarresti, "begins in shared pain" (62). To find someone else to whom community does not come easily, to commiserate about loneliness is to transcend loneliness. But if those around him do not know loneliness as he does, then he must journey to find his way to community. Again, Abbenay, the place to which his difference compels him to find, offers Shevek the key to understanding this when he visits the statue of Odo.

Shevek looked at Odo for a while, and then he sat down on the bench beside her. He had no concept of status at all, and there was plenty of room on the bench. He was moved by a pure impulse of companionship. [...] For the first time in his life he comprehended that Odo [...] was an alien: an exile. (101)

He connects to his past, to his distant past, in his present which is a journey—and implicit in all journey is the destination, which for the Anarresti is also the return. Thus the present, through journey, is also connected to the future. Journey itself becomes a form of utopia.

Odo's own wisdom becomes apparent here: "If you wanted to come home you had to keep going on, that was what she meant when she wrote 'True journey is return.'"46 Of course, in Odo's utopian conception of such a journey, the change will ultimately benefit the group, as the

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growth of an individual serves the social organism. Threat, such as that provoked in Shevek's attempt to break the centuries-old hermitage of his people, is a force for good when the change it spurs in the status quo benefits society—and also, perhaps, in the individual. As Jennifer Rodgers suggests, in each journey Shevek takes, he discovers "another level of fulfillment in coming home," pushing him closer to understanding both utopia and the necessity of constant travel, intimately linking these two. So constant travel becomes constant change, which begets endless utopia—"a continual, never-ending (r)evolution—the process of utopia." Yet, as we have seen, the endless utopia Odo envisioned never manifested and the dystopia that results on Anarres cannot see any good in exposure to its ideological nemesis. This conviction is so strong that it colors even Shevek's feelings of his journey.

What is remarkable about the power of utopia, as *The Dispossessed* portrays it, is again its ability to change the status quo independently from intention and compliance. Utopia, by its very essence, is a transformative emotion and needs no agreement to effect change; granted, forces working against the expressed desire may very well result in dystopia. But change is momentum and each dystopia in turn provides the impetus for a new utopia. This is, in a way, Odo's anti-utopia: to never rest, to seek always new experiences so that her followers, her people, her human family will always be able to respond to each dystopia with a more powerful and more passionately expressed utopia. Travel, temporal or spatial, is essential to this process, as the stagnation of place, the disconnection from time, allows for inertia to build and is the death of change.

But for such travel to provoke change, it must confront the traveler with difference. Amy Clarke's treatment of the text claims, in part, that the travel Le Guin's characters experience is

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47 Rodgers, "Fulfillment as a Function," 190.
48 Ibid., 192.
mitigated by a lack of true otherness. "There are no real 'aliens' in Le Guin's science fiction since they are all offspring of a single humanoid species. The union of aliens in Le Guin's novels is more properly a reunion of related peoples."⁴⁹ In this critique is again the notion of return, of "reunion." By moving forward, the various "offspring" of the Hainish race reunite throughout Le Guin's works, coming to understand each other as fundamentally different. Always there is an affirmation of Odo's, and Shevek's, certainties of the change implicit in journey. Yet Clarke overlooks the significance of cultural and ideological otherness in this regard. Claiming that there are no aliens because they are genetically linked belies the extreme differences that appear among the various groups. They are, indeed, distinct enough to provoke change as their cultures collide and they face the aftermath of seeing themselves reflected in a stranger's eyes. We must not become so narrow in our reading of this as to see nothing but conflict and difference; as Gérard Klein explains, "Le Guin's intention is clearly not simply to contrast two societies. […] Much less is it her intention to take a side […], but rather to show that the two societies equally belong to human possibility."⁵⁰ The contrast, however, cannot be ignored. We might, as Spivack suggests, best understand these collisions through dialectics; such an approach allows us to move past conflict and examine its results, which in turn invites a more critical examination of the function of utopia.

Le Guin thus sharpens the vision of her opposed worlds through contrast from within as well as without. Although Shevek believes in the Odonian revolutionary ideal of anarchism, […] he also discovers its weaknesses, such as bureaucracy and the tyranny of public opinion. Similarly, although he believes that propertarianism and class structure are essentially vicious social systems, he also finds that in such a society art and culture can thrive, and the gifted individual can be nourished. Unlike most Utopian works, The Dispossessed maintains a dialectic throughout.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Clarke, "Contrary Instincts," 57.
⁵¹ Spivack, Ursula K. Le Guin, 81-82.
If Urras and Anarres are thesis and antithesis, what are we to read as synthesis? What is the higher third born of their confrontation? It is perhaps best understood as the realization that neither thesis nor antithesis are themselves what they once were. "It is the beginning of a new journey; the home [Shevek] is returning to has changed in his absence, and the man who is returning to it has changed. In a world of change where humans bind past and future together by the promise made in the face of uncertainty," the journey itself represents the culmination of experiences, carrying back to the beginning what was discovered along the way.\textsuperscript{52} We find then that through journey, indeed, utopia finds ample ground in which to grow.

On this note of utopia and travel, however, Le Guin makes one of her most subversive moves. "The traditional utopia has usually been a geographically isolated world, the assumption being that it must wall out the contamination and complexity of the rest of the world. Le Guin's ambiguous utopia now has an ambiguous wall in the sense that Shevek has breached it. He has left and returned, he is bringing in Anarres's first offworld visitor, and he has released his general temporal theory which will make possible the invention of the ansible and communication with other worlds."\textsuperscript{53} By having Shevek, a citizen of the anarchist state (what was once conceived of as a utopia by Urrasti and Odonians alike) breach the walls of the "real world," Le Guin contravenes the tradition of utopian literature in which a traveler visits utopia and experiences it with wonder and incredulity. However, Le Guin, too, experiences a return, as she ends the novel with just such a traveler visiting the ambiguous utopia/dystopia that is Anarres. How fitting that Ketho, one of the Hainish diplomats posted to Urras, should visit the anarchist homeworld, then, when it enters its period of greatest unrest—when it is on the verge of tumbling from dystopia into utopian change. Yet there is no guarantee that such a visit will turn out well; he and Shevek

\textsuperscript{52} Cummins, \textit{Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin}, 120.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 121-22.
are just as likely to be killed by the awaiting mob as they are to find themselves witnesses and participants to great social change. The novel ends with ambiguity—though it also ends with hope, as Shevek anticipates reunion with his partner, Takver. Thus Le Guin reveals clearly that ambiguity is the key to utopia and, with it, hope for the future.

Ambiguity as the Key to Utopia

Ambiguity, as *The Dispossessed*’s subtitle suggests, permeates nearly every layer of the text. The imperfect society that seeks to revolutionize what society means falls prey to the same institutions it strove to reject, merely dressed down and hidden in the cloak of public opinion, rather than overt authority; the novel's protagonist struggles to accept his duty to society when it conflicts with his own freedoms, two paradoxically important virtues that must somehow strive to find a balance; the antagonist planet contains valuable traits that defy its characterization as corrupt and worthy of no respect. We may even trace ambiguity back to Odo herself, thanks in large part to "The Day Before the Revolution;" the story presents a surprisingly flawed—surprisingly human—depiction of the woman who, in Shevek's time, is more ideological incarnation than historical figure. As she moved through the final day of her life in this story, lamenting her deterioration through age and pondering the implications of the rebellious utopia she set in motion, she recognizes flaws, gaps in her vision, but also the potential for others to correct these, to recognize them and move forward. In setting utopia in motion, she casts herself into a future far beyond her physical life—one that becomes Shevek's past and present, ambiguous in her certainty about what was done, ambiguous about her role in the world. "If there is anything really revolutionary in *The Dispossessed*, it is that the anarchy in which Shevek lives was founded by a woman, Odo. […] Le Guin quickly captures the ambiguities of Odo's
personality: she is the founder of Odonianism who is not a good Odonian, the crippled old woman uninterested in the events she has helped to create.⁵⁴ Odo's thoughts lead us to realize, too, the difficulties in creating change, pointing to the necessity of time and the impact of cultural conditioning; for the founder of such a grand revolution to consider herself separate from the totality of its impact casts doubt, not on the validity of the revolutionary movement, but on its applicability to all who would be swept up in its passing. "Besides, they had grown up in the principle of freedom of dress and sex and all the rest, and she hadn't. All she had done was invent it. It's not the same."⁵⁵ Her reluctance to adopt the principles she preaches do not speak of hypocrisy, but of the myriad gaps in her utopic vision that, as we see in *The Dispossessed*, open the door to dystopia.

Yet it is also in these ambiguities, these inconsistencies and gray areas, that her utopia finds its greatest potential in bringing about change—and through which Le Guin most clearly succeeds in reflecting back the dystopia of her own reality to her readers. Claire Curtis posits that *The Dispossessed*, in presenting Odonian values, sets forth a utopia that is composed not of a predetermined structure, but instead one of choice and interpretation, such a concept necessarily inviting the reader, in turn, to choose how to interpret his or her present reality.⁵⁶ As will be explored in Chapter Three, speculative fiction does not appear from a vacuum; it is the product of writers, whose experiences it inevitably mimics. As Clarke explains, "This literature is not, according to Le Guin, predictive but rather descriptive: 'The purpose of a thought experiment … [is] to describe reality, the present world."⁵⁷ This is the great value of literature: not merely to provide a window of escape, but also to reflect in that window a vision of our own reality. As

⁵⁴ Clarke, "Contrary Instincts," 67.
⁵⁷ Clarke, "Contrary Instincts," 58.
James Bittner explains, "The substance of Le Guin's 'ambiguous utopia' is neither an outdated and naïve vision of social perfection from a more innocent age, nor is it a blueprint for a society set in the never-never land of the far future. The Dispossessed is about the present, the 'here, now,' and it argues that the present is made real only when one has a full consciousness of the past (memory and history) and the future (intention, hope, and promise)."\(^{58}\) Her ambiguity allows her work to be read on its own terms, breaking free of generic convention; Bittner continues: "The Dispossessed is both social contract and utopia."\(^{59}\) And yet Fredric Jameson correctly suggests that what Le Guin presents in her fiction, including The Dispossessed, is not, in fact, the traditional utopia precisely because of its ambiguous approach: "One is tempted to wonder whether the strategy of not asking questions […] is not the way in which the utopian imagination protects itself against a fatal return to just those historical contradictions from which it was supposed to provide relief. In that case, the deepest subject of Le Guin's [The Left Hand of Darkness] would not be utopia as such, but rather our own incapacity to conceive it in the first place. In this way, too, it would be a proving ground for The Dispossessed."\(^{60}\)

Indeed, The Dispossessed is intimately tied to The Left Hand of Darkness, not just through their shared literary continuity, but through their exploration of ambiguity, utopia, and the nature of humanity; where the former explores these concepts through a primarily political

\(^{58}\) Bittner, Approaches to the Fiction, 119.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{60}\) Jameson, "World-Reduction," 70. Jameson indicates that The Left Hand of Darkness (LHD) functions as an ideological precursor to the thought experiment carried of The Dispossessed; both novels are part of the same continuity. They mark Le Guin's most widely praised work of the era and present ambiguity as a major characteristic of their themes, inviting multiple conflicting and complementary critiques. "Something of the fascination of LHD—as well as the ambiguity of its ultimate message—surely derives from the subterranean drive within it towards a utopian 'rest' of this kind, towards some ultimate 'no-place' of a collectivity untormented by sex or history, by cultural superfluities." Ibid. Le Guin challenges this notion of a utopian resting point in The Dispossessed with the concept of constant revolution.
vehicle, the latter tackles directly issues of gender, sexuality, and trust. The Left Hand of Darkness concerns the planet Gethen, or Winter, a remote, cold world whose human inhabitants differ quite remarkably from their Terran visitor: their population is neither wholly male nor female, but exists androgynously except for a brief period once a month when, responding to physical and emotional chemistry from a partner, they develop sexual urges and organs. The thematic idea behind such a process is to exhibit a world without the strict duality that so characterizes our own societies; it is strongly implied within the novel that Gethen has never experienced war because there are no rigid genders. One might be male, even father a child, then become female the next month and become pregnant.

Yet this seemingly ideal approach, ending war and aggression by removing gendered duality, is not so simply perfect. Still implicit in this situation, for instance, is an inherent heterosexuality and drive toward reproduction. It is fine for two individuals to adopt mutable gender roles, the novel claims, so long as when they engage in sexual relations, one may be identified as male and the other female. This particular flaw is not represented within the text, instead arising out of external criticism of the novel. Yet it represents an underlying tension regarding acceptable performances of gender and sexuality that the novel does display. Also notable in this structure is the idea that physical genders carry with them social and emotional connotations that are not merely constructed, but inherent aspects of biology. Were there "real" men, rather than simply "hermaphroditic neuters," aggression would be obvious, inevitable.

This should not simply be read as Le Guin's outlook on gender, but rather as a suggestion that we

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61 Both novels exist within Le Guin's "Hainish" series, sharing similar universal characteristics, though existing at different times and rarely including direct crossovers of plot or character. Shevek's theories create a device, the ansible, which is featured in The Left Hand of Darkness, though that book was published five years earlier. It should also be noted that The Left Hand of Darkness deals with a great deal of political issues, but these appear secondary to other themes, whereas in The Dispossessed they are a recurring focal point for the novel.

62 "They did not go to war. They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to mobilize. They behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women." Le Guin, The Left Hand of Darkness, 48-49.

63 Ibid., 48.
might view our own assumptions of gender construction in this absurdist light; we cannot mistake Le Guin's fiction to be a representation of her own personal beliefs, and so must recognize them as ideas taken root in characters. If the function of literature may be to provide entertainment or escape, it may also be to provide a distorting mirror through which we can challenge our assumptions. By showing the possibility of difference, we must question the status quo against which this novel's themes rebound. In this way, it marks itself as a utopian text, identifying not merely a social dystopia in the real world, but one that permeates our very notion of gender and sexuality.

Both novels receive similar critical attention from scholars who approach Le Guin's work as a whole, finding *The Dispossessed* to be, perhaps, a refinement or at least a development of the utopian themes first introduced in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This link, in fact, does not end with these two novels, but may be seen carried throughout much of Le Guin's work, as her exploration of utopia has seeped into nearly all of her work. And yet, while *The Left Hand of Darkness* is recognized for its vivid realization of gender construction, *The Dispossessed* continues to intrude more forcefully into utopian discussions because of its refusal to define utopia as a space, a place, a person, or an idea. It recognizes the mutability and ambiguity that must characterize utopia in its expression and realization.

Büulent Somay offers us the means to identify ambiguity in *The Dispossessed* by contrasting it with the traditional presentation of utopian literature: "The utopian longing which arose from the people's collective imagination throughout history was thus enclosed in a fictive utopian locus which arose from the individual imagination of the author, who presented it to her or his audience in a finished, unchanging, form. What the utopographer did was to verbalize and enclose the utopian horizon of an age, which was in itself non-discursive, infinite, and open-
ended. […] The utopian horizon was 'stabilized' or finalized, and the final product was presented to the audience as if in a 'referendum.'"64 Donna White, reviewing this criticism, explains that "the traditional utopia" was static, allowing "dystopian writers to come along later and criticize the vision," while the desires that inspired these utopias were not static—something "the new utopian writers of the 1970s" addressed by creating utopias as open-ended as the utopian horizons of their age.65 "The Dispossessed is a prime example of an open-ended utopia. The utopian horizon is present, but it can never be reached, never be frozen in a static vision."

Again we return to the concept of constant revolt and also to the temporal location of utopia; these qualities may, in fact, be ambiguous elements. Cummins touches on both in her examination of the final events of the novel: "The human solidarity that Shevek hoped to find with the Urrasti he unexpectedly finds with the Hainish. Shevek and Ketho exchange the phrase 'We are the children of time' in Iotic and Pravic (339). The act is akin to the Odonian promise, the acknowledgment that human responsibility is a temporal relationship. Shevek thus brings another element of change into the Anarresti society, and the novel ends in the middle of another revolution of this utopia."66 In a return to Anarres, Shevek faces an uncertain future: life or death, change or stagnation, utopia or dystopia. Also in returning, he claims his future, reclaims his past, and sets his stake in the present—which is the means for him to find his way to anti-utopia. Rather than seek a better possible outcome, he accepts what awaits him with hope for the future, inexorably linking future, hope, and uncertainty to his achievement of utopia. Le Guin marks, in this fashion, ambiguity as the key to utopia, rejecting the tradition of a static utopia by

64 Somay, "Towards an Open-Ended Utopia," 25 (italics in original).
65 White, Dancing with Dragons, 92.
66 Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 121. The edition of The Dispossessed Cummins cites in her work differs from the one used for this essay. This scene takes place on page 385 in the edition found in the bibliography.
revealing its dystopian tendencies at the same time as she casts doubt on the outcome of Shevek's hope.

And yet, as Slusser reminds us, this is not new territory for Le Guin: "She has never embraced either extreme, the fear and trembling of the isolated individual in an absurd universe, or the security of the collective cause. Her best fiction, in fact, examines the possibility of balance between the individual and his world."\(^67\) The balance she prizes is certainly displayed in *The Dispossessed*, as utopia and dystopia engage in a constant, cyclical dance, never resting except in anti-utopia—which, the novel suggests, is perhaps only attainable on a personal, rather than a social level, as both Shevek's and Odo's anti-utopias lie in their desire for constant utopia for their people.

Conclusion

While I have striven to avoid delving deeply into the exact details of Le Guin's utopia in this novel, given that my particular inquiry into this text is on how utopia functions, not what it looks like, and given that such exploration has already been capably handled by many of the scholars referenced so far, I turn here to a single notion that, for me, encapsulates one concrete element I do wish the reader to carry away from the text. Cummins beautifully renders the meaning of Odonianism into a message that reaches through the void of space and time, uniting readers of any era with Le Guin's powerful utopia: "The promise that binds Anarres together is the vow of fidelity to each other to do that which ensures the continuation of a society without government, dominance, and ownership; it is a vow of human solidarity, a moral commitment to mutual aid and cooperation."\(^68\) If I may express my own utopia, it would be that we recognize

\(^{67}\) Slusser, *Farthest Shores*, 3.
\(^{68}\) Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 110.
the great empathy implicit in such a vow and that we also not delude ourselves into thinking that such a commitment to each other must necessitate the notion of political anarchism. While much of the novel specifically explores how any form of government fundamentally inhibits the ideals of cooperation and community, we should not mistake this for fact. We should not close ourselves to the possibility of communal solidarity that is mutually compatible with the whole range of human governance. Indeed, as Simon Stow remarks, *The Dispossessed* should be considered not for a "simple depiction of the promise and problems of anarchism as a political theory," but as "a method for critical reflection." While some extremes of government may limit the ease with which community sustains itself as an empathic construct, a dedication to solidarity also ensures a balance between emotional anarchy and political totalitarianism.

Slusser's cautionary reading of Shevek's interaction with the aliens, however, seems equally applicable to our own society, one all too ready to accept anti-utopia—not because it has reached the best of all possible worlds, but because it has lost hope in even the chance of a better existence: "More dangerous than the imperfections of Anarresti society is the Edenic temptation Keng the Terran offers Shevek. To her people, who have destroyed their world, Urras is paradise lost. Held by the bleakness of their past, they can neither join with the present (they are 'outside' it, they 'envy' it), nor conceive of hope for the future." Le Guin's Terrans have settled into a state of dystopia and believe themselves unable to express utopia. Yet they have not reached anti-utopia, because they can, indeed, conceive of a better way of being and even, in this moment, express a desire for it. Keng changes implicitly upon recognizing the possibility for a better life: her interaction with Urras creates a longing and her interaction with Shevek finally

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69 Stow, "Worlds Apart," 43.
70 Slusser, *Farthest Shores*, 54. The danger Slusser identifies is for Shevek to focus on the beauty of Urras, forgiving its faults. The path Shevek chooses instead, to acknowledge its advantages while still condemning its failures, is to be read as a supreme commitment to his belief in Odonianism, securing, at least metaphorically, his right to return to Anarres as an Anarresti.
prompts the expression of that longing. The inevitable conclusion is that Keng must change with
this realization, either accepting a permanent state of longing, or moving toward a way to
embrace it and change. Regardless of which option is chosen, Keng expresses utopia in her
confession to Shevek and her present, one of silent longing, is threatened by the change that
becomes possible and the change that takes place. So, too, must we remember that despair is a
poor substitute for hope, not because hope is necessarily nobler, but because "a real sense of
triumph must be preceded by real despair."\textsuperscript{71} Despair is the hallmark of a dystopia ripe for
utopian change.

\textsuperscript{71} See note 41.
CHAPTER III. LOCATING UTOPIA IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

*Imagination is more important than knowledge.*
—Einstein

This project has so far been concerned with identifying what, precisely, we may understand as a literary utopia (and its siblings, dystopia and anti-utopia) and learning to recognize it in a text that displays, with fascinating complexity, the intricate interrelation of these concepts. We cannot land at dystopia without first launching ourselves from a utopian desire, nor may we conceive of a desire unless we find ourselves in extant dystopia; further, anti-utopia, as the term itself implies, is fundamentally linked to utopia as the negation of desire. The question then poses itself: What is the utopia of utopias? The answer lies in the text which inspired this project, *The Dispossessed*, not as a unique utopian vessel, but rather as the flagship for the genre of speculative fiction. We must come to understand the genre, itself nebulous, ever in flux, as the ideal way in which to express utopian desire. To do so, however, much as in Chapter One, we must first come to a consensus on what we may learn to recognize as speculative fiction.

There remains in the literary community much debate over the topic of genre. This debate is especially contentious between the realms of science fiction and fantasy. Authors, fans, and critics alike each engage in endless attempts to reach consensus over where the distinguishing line between them may be drawn, yet new authors consistently tread over this line, blurring it, eroding it, until a new definition may be set—only to see itself erased as well. Some, seeking to settle this debate, or perhaps merely to complicate it further, have proposed new, more inclusive terms, hinting at an essential relationship that binds science fiction and fantasy—and horror, the
gothic, the supernatural, and any number of holdouts who find themselves straddling the lines between other genres—in spite of their differences. Speculative fiction, to that end, has become one of the most commonly used modern terms that, in its particular approach, attempts to exclude nothing while at the same time imposing as little restriction as may be possible in the case of genre.¹

Genre is at once a hindrance and a convenient tool. Elizabeth Cummins, one of Le Guin's most well-respected critics, indicates the practicality of genre conventions as "categories which publishers recognize and can market."² Genre, at its most basic, allows readers to approach a text with expectations and preconceptions. To the author, this might stifle the range of creative expression allowed, though some also point to restrictions this places upon the reader: "When you read a short story that’s classified as horror, you’re already preparing yourself for the horror element to pop up."³ The literary community must choose, then, between the ease of having a readily identifiable handle, in the form of a genre label, and the freedom to decide independently to which category, if any, a work belongs. This becomes of particular interest to those works which may be included among the ranks of speculative fiction, as the contravention of norms is precisely what marks them as speculative in nature. The differentiation of the various forms of genre they may assume—science fiction (sci-fi), fantasy, horror, supernatural, etc.—tends to focus on the specific way in which the literature goes against the mainstream, while never quite questioning what, exactly, counts as "mainstream." Indeed, some critics speak out against genre

¹ Many of the authors cited hereafter refer specifically either to science fiction (sci-fi) or fantasy, following in part Le Guin's own descriptions of her work as such. This chapter makes an argument in favor of using the term speculative fiction (spec fic) because of its tendency to include that which is often excluded by these other two terms; as a result, many of the arguments made in favor of sci-fi and fantasy apply to spec fic as a whole. As this chapter intends to prove, the similarities between the works that may be termed spec fic suggest that they share essential qualities that many have claimed apply primarily to sci-fi or fantasy.
writers who stray too close to this ill-defined mainstream literature, indicating it as tantamount to pandering, selling out, and ultimately further justifying the habit of literary circles to discount genre as literature.⁴

Le Guin herself has straddled the line between genre as a useful concept and a limitation. Amy Clarke writes, "Le Guin would come to disparage the literary world's reliance on genre distinctions, particularly the way that some classifications like science fiction, fantasy, and young adult not only oversimplify but stigmatize the work as not 'literature.' Yet she has written a number of important essays defining and defending these genres."⁵ Clarke continues, pointing out that Le Guin consistently attempts to subvert the conventions of the genres while still working within them, which is notable for its particular acceptance within speculative fiction; it is a genre, in part, of subversion, contradiction, and contravention just as much as it is a genre of tradition. "Though science fiction in the last forty years has changed considerably, it has a long tradition of reinforcing its tropes."⁶ Such tropes are particularly confounding to genres that Le Guin describes as "the only literature that can really speak to our times," owing to their ability to "[extrapolate] metaphorically about the human condition" (in the case of sci-fi) and "[help] readers cope with their lives" and "[restore] some sense of wonder to a world where reason has triumphed" (as Clarke describes the power of fantasy).⁷ Perhaps for her understanding of this ability to speak in a way that "realistic" literature cannot, Le Guin is widely recognized for the way her texts "register an effective attack on the categorical rigidities which are constantly being

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⁴ White, _Dancing with Dragons_, 96-97. White talks here mainly of the accusations of Norman Spinrad against "the established American critical apparatus" and his condemnation of genre writers, like Le Guin, who cross genre lines primarily "to please her intellectual admirers." His particular invective is classified as "angry," yet indicates the general sentiment behind efforts to recognize genres for their own merit, as exclusive, well-defined entities.

⁵ Clarke, "Contrary Instincts," 41.

⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁷ Ibid., 42-44.
imposed on prose fiction." And at the same time, as Mike Cadden observes, genre is also a guide for Le Guin, "[enabling] her to do the right thing for certain readers;" fantasy, she feels, "guarantees a hopeful outcome," whereas sci-fi and realism allow for the diminution of hope.

So, to understand the importance of defining an inclusive literary genre, we must understand the importance of genre to these particular writers; by understanding what conventions they see sci-fi and fantasy as capable of bringing to their work, we will both erode the notion that such concepts must, indeed, be segmented into distinct genres and also come to understand the benefit of identifying speculative fiction as the means to solve this dilemma.

Genres, as James Bittner explains, "are heuristic devices that a writer uses to constitute meanings. Fantasy and science fiction […] are subgenres of the romance, so fantasy and science fiction should exhibit the same general configurations that the romance does." Again turning to Clarke, we find that "Extrapolation is the key to achieving the distance or estrangement necessary for science fiction." Fantasy, meanwhile, "[evokes] wonder and [contains] a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural." Again, the distinction lies not in what these genres do for author and reader, but rather in how they do it. As Samuel Delany explains, a report describes what happens and a realistic novel describes what "could have happened;" science fiction describes what has not happened and fantasy describes what "could not have happened." Further, they are connected on what Le Guin has described as a spectrum, indicating the possibility of overlap.

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8 Selinger, *Le Guin and Identity*, 149.
11 Clarke, "Contrary Instincts," 50.
13 Delany, "About Five Thousand," 141. The realistic novel, discussed below, then is characterized by its ties to realism and, by extension, authenticity; plausibility and imagination seems to be the only relevant conditions for sci-fi and fantasy, respectively.
Realizing genre as a spectrum, rather than a rigid, inflexible construct, is the first step toward recognizing possibility and the potential for collaboration, a step away from separation and stagnation. Cummins elaborates on the concept of the spectrum: "Science fiction and fantasy share the same spectrum because they both create worlds that are radically different from the author's 'consensus reality,' that is, the facts and beliefs about the world of the author and of the reader on which people base their daily activities. [...] The worlds of science fiction and fantasy literature, then, offer readers a chance to stretch their minds by experiencing an alternate world and then a chance to return to consensus reality with a changed perspective." Ultimately, however, the debate returns to the separation of means between these two forms: "Compared to the world of consensus reality, science fiction creates an alternate world that might be possible, whereas fantasy creates an alternate world that is impossible." Does this not suffice our need for differentiation between genre conventions? Unfortunately not, for, as Clarke reminds us, the subdivision into sci-fi and fantasy is only the beginning: "While [these two genres] are often grouped under the umbrella term 'the fantastic,' that classification is less encompassing than might be expected. [...] It is then possible to subdivide these nearly endlessly into specific types." Once we begin to focus on the peculiarities of form, we begin a never-ending cascade of determination and categorization that, while allowing us a clearer idea of what is presented, will ultimately face challenges when Le Guin's concept of the spectrum reemerges. Instead of one line, the opposite ends of which are composed of two distinct forms of literature, we find a complicated nexus of interconnecting, merging, branching, and endlessly meandering subgenres, all of which clamor for respect and inclusion in the literary community.

15 Ibid., 8.
16 Clarke, "Contrary Instincts," 41.
The usefulness of a more comprehensive term has been garnering more attention in the literary community for some time, though it has not fully taken hold. Gary Wolfe, in his review of publications from the mid-eighties in the field of sci-fi scholarship, indicates that there is, indeed, merit in a more comprehensive term: "Perhaps this is evidence that, after all, science fiction (or speculative fiction) is not really a coherent genre, and that it not only invites but requires the kind of pluralistic approaches represented by these books."\(^{17}\) He takes issue here, not so much with the literature itself as with critical responses to it, indicating that this field's rapid growth provoked a new need to understand what, exactly, belongs in sci-fi.\(^{18}\) Without coming to a consensus, the field is left open to criticism of its rigor and seriousness, much as the literature itself has suffered from being considered "less" than the mainstream—less serious, less useful, less worthy of attention. To close in on specific sub-genres, rather than helping to identify the various works as unique, fractures an otherwise progressive community—indeed, a style of literature that stands out because of its ability to transcend normal expectations.

The solution seems to be to retreat, to move away from the micro-organization of subgenre and to identify the elements that most distinctly and most broadly remove a work from the (still-as-yet-undefined) mainstream literature. To do this, many have turned to speculative fiction. Not all are happy with such a move, however. Gérard Klein, in particular, sees the step toward speculative fiction as an assault on the stability of sci-fi, a genre he claims has a culturally valid "durable relationship" that it has "muddled through to establish between science […] and literature. […] Therefore, a break in this relation (which some would call the emancipation of speculative literature from science) is a real regression which has its

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\(^{17}\) Wolfe, "Review," 461-62.

\(^{18}\) Wolfe, "Review," 461. "It is clear that science fiction scholarship has moved beyond the stage of general surveys and introductions and into a phase of more detailed and narrowly focused studies;" Ibid., 458. "The last decade has seen a dramatic growth in such scholarship, ranging from expensive bibliographies of even minor writers to the ubiquitous collections of critical essays (half of them, it seems, about the work of Ursula K. Le Guin)."
counterpart, and even its origin in society."^{19} Charles Tan, however, disagrees; he claims speculative fiction to be freeing, in that authors "can tell the stories that [they] want without placing artificial barriers."^{20} In turn, he posits that the one true distinction between works that may be classified as speculative fiction and those allowed to remain free of a qualifier—merely "fiction"—is the notion of realism; speculative fiction, for Tan, is literature that is not hampered by the need to adhere to this concept. Margaret Atwood, in part, would agree; she notes that in all fiction, "the business of the author is not so much factual truth as plausibility. Not that a thing did happen or even that it could happen but that the reader believes it while reading."^{21} For her, the convention of speculative fiction "can speak of what is past and passing, but especially of what's to come," with the implication that this is beyond the capability of realistic fiction.^{22}

Is this, then, what connotes the mainstream: a more rigorous adherence to what might happen? Delany suggests as much.^{23} If this is the case, then all novels that break from the mainstream tradition seem likely candidates for inclusion in the genre of speculative fiction. The usefulness of such a term becomes of paramount concern here. If genres constrict, then the answer seems likely to be a loosening of restrictions; yet to loosen too much is to do away with the usefulness of implying convention. If the only criterion for speculative fiction is to be imaginative, to embark on a journey of the absurd—to speculate about what might be or what could have been—then it seems plausible merely to do away with the notion of genre completely.^{24} As Tan writes, "In a perfect world, all fiction would fall under ['fiction']."^{25} Atwood, however, defends the distinction: "We have shambled into the bad habit of labeling all

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^{19} Klein, "Le Guin's 'Aberrant' Opus," 85.
^{20} Tan, "A Stalker's Notebook."
^{21} Atwood, "The Handmaid's Tale," 516.
^{22} Ibid., 515.
^{23} See note 13.
^{24} "We cannot ask reason to take us across the gulfs of the absurd. Only the imagination can get us out of the bind of the eternal present." Le Guin, "Some Thoughts on Narrative," 45.
^{25} Tan, "A Stalker's Notebook."
prose fictions as novels and of judging them accordingly—by comparing them with novels or with 'realistic' fiction generally. But a book can be a prose fiction without being a novel. [...] The French have two words for the short story, *conte* and *nouvelle*—'tale' and 'news'—and this is a useful distinction. The tale can be set anywhere, and can move into realms that are off-limits to the novel. [...] The news, however, is news of us; it's the daily news, as in 'daily life.' [...] But there's more to the news than 'the news.' Speculative fiction can bring us that other kind of news."26

This connotation of the possibilities of speculative fiction necessarily invites us to wonder, to imagine; to categorize all literature as without genre implies a sameness that belies the different frame in which we may approach these works. As mentioned earlier, the infinite subcategorization of genre risks inhibiting the reader, but the possibility inherent in an open, more reflexive genre is to invite with restrictions. Atwood dismisses the importance of the distinctions favored by others in breaking down speculative fiction into distinct genres by pointing to the science fiction's antecedent, "scientific romances." As she explains, "the science element is a qualifier. The nouns are romance and fiction, and as we have seen, the word fiction covers a lot of ground."27 We are left then, with an understanding that speculative fiction "can do some things that novels [...] cannot do."28 To that end, as Klein writes, it is "[literature] which consider[s] the problem of cultural diversity, whether in order to exclude it, or to reduce it, or again to deny its benefits, [...] or finally to exalt it."29 Fredric Jameson, railing against the "paralysis of so-called high literature" to engage in thought experiments, highlights the

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 515-16. She refers here to novels as distinct from speculative fiction, then proceeds to enumerate on the ways in which speculative fiction allows for an exploration, as opposed to a presentation, which is, for her, more typical of realistic, or mainstream, fiction.
29 Klein, "Le Guin's 'Aberrant' Opus," 96 (italics in original). In the original, Klein is talking here of both science fiction and utopian literature. The issue of where to locate utopian literature is discussed below.
usefulness of sci-fi and, through the connections made above, speculative fiction in general. "The officially 'non-serious' or pulp character of [science fiction] is an indispensable feature in its capacity to relax that tyrannical 'reality principle' which functions as a crippling censorship over high art, and to allow the 'paraliterary' form thereby to inherit the vocation of giving us alternate versions of a world that has elsewhere seemed to resist even imagined change."30 Finally, Le Guin offers a comment about speculative fiction, though she speaks here specifically of sci-fi: "the unique aesthetic delight of [science fiction lies] in the intense, coherent following-through of the implications of an idea."31 The varied forms this may take indicate that sci-fi is not the only sub-genre capable of such follow-through; the power of imagination, let loose in a literary context, may apply just as critical a lens, whether it locates itself in the imagined past or the projected future.

Understanding now the usefulness of speculative fiction as an inclusive genre, we may turn at last to our final inquiry: the location of utopia within this context as not just descriptive, but indeed necessary for its comprehension and expression. If speculative fiction allows us to wonder, to engage in an "intense, coherent following-through of the implications of an idea," to explore thought experiments, to practice in literature what we cannot achieve in reality, then it seems ideal for utopia. After all, if we recognize utopia not as perfection, but as the expression of a desire for a better way of being that threatens the status quo, then it cannot be a mainstream work, for it tells us not "news of us," but news of what we could be. Dystopian literature, by contrast, may be read both as the understanding of where our past desires have led us, but also of where our desires will take us, should they be realized in ways not intended or in ways that do not reflect the desires of everyone. In both cases, utopian and dystopian literature then explore

30 Jameson, "World-Reduction in Le Guin," 60 (italics in original).
possibilities—and yet both strive to connect, at their very core, with a time and a place, indeed a people, who are very much real. As Robert Elliott and Rodney Kilcup point out, utopian and dystopian literature, much like satire, establishes at its core "a standard in terms of which existing society is found defective."32 Despite whatever trappings of the fantastic with which authors might invest their utopian or dystopian works, these are not merely ideas; they are unquestionably tied to the real world. Their desires erupt from authors who, despite how removed from reality their fancies may seem, are very much a part of the world, members of communities, people who experience joy and pain and tragedy and, in the very best cases, sublimate such experience into their art.

Speculative fiction, in all its variations, carries with it a quality especially suited to this exploration of desire. Klein tells us of sci-fi, "No other novelistic genre seems to have concerned itself with [the subject of utopia] to" the same degree.33 Le Guin posits that this is because, "at this point, realism is perhaps the least adequate means of understanding or portraying the incredible realities of our existence. […] The fantasist, whether he uses the ancient archetypes of myth and legend, or the younger ones of science and technology, may be talking as seriously as any sociologist—and a good deal more directly—about human life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived. […] It is above all by the imagination that we achieve perception, and compassion, and hope."34 She offers "that the genres best suited for depicting this journey of discovery undertaken by both author and reader [are] science fiction and fantasy."35 Clarke agrees, indicating that the radical appearance of speculative fiction is not so far-removed from our real-world concerns: "Despite the revolutionary potential of science

34 Le Guin, "National Book Award," 58.
35 Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 6.
fiction, the chance it offers to envision new possibilities, it often reflects some of our most basic impulses and traditions. Jameson also reveals, in explaining speculative fiction's potential, the inescapability of its connection to reality: "One of the most significant potentialities of [science fiction] as a form is precisely this capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe." We are to understand, then, the inherent connection between speculative fiction and reality; that all works of imagination are ultimately grounded in real-world concerns, fears, dreams, possibilities, questions, or observations. Again, however, instead of trying to portray these qualities as they most clearly appear to us in our everyday lives, as does mainstream literature, speculative fiction finds itself particularly concerned with the way in which these ideas are expressed. The particular form of expression is thus paramount to speculative fiction: it is not merely ideas, but literature built upon, around, or with ideas, tied up in plot, character, and theme; to mistake speculative fiction for merely a collection of ideas is to deny its location in literature. Indeed, the ways in which authors choose to present their ideas is the true mark of their artistry. Expression, then, becomes the cornerstone of utopia's relationship with speculative fiction.

The relationship between utopia and speculative fiction, however, is not without its detractors. Robert C. Elliott, for instance, highlights both the distinction between the two and the perceived unpopularity of speculative fiction in relation to Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*; he laments that sci-fi has co-opted utopian literature in a quest for respectability, when instead sci-fi's negative reputation has lowered the perception of utopian literature's value. As White explains, "being classified as science fiction relegated the novel to the science fiction ghetto, whereas it belongs to the great tradition of utopian literature," yet *The Dispossessed* managed to

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36 Clarke, "Contrary Instincts," 51.
37 Jameson, "World-Reduction," 60.
revive confidence in both sci-fi and utopian literature. The notion that utopian literature, on its own, is somehow more respectable relies almost entirely on its historical association with well respected authors (Plato, More, Orwell, etc.). This assertion, however, comes with the implicit rejection of speculative fiction of being capable of such respect. Elliott "celebrates" Le Guin's work for reviving utopia, but not for her efforts to showcase speculative fiction as valuable literature. Neither is he alone in his attempts to mark utopia as inherently different from speculative fiction; Charlotte Spivack similarly lauds *The Dispossessed* while at the same time erecting (or at least sustaining) a boundary between the two: "Neither wholly [science fiction], nor utopian, nor mainstream, it is all of these and more, as critics have come somewhat belatedly to recognize." And yet, what is more utopian than the exploration of possibility? How might we express the desire for a new existence if we confine ourselves to "news of us?" Utopia is not, as some have claimed, "a model for human society," nor is it merely "a fantastic place of the imagination." It is neither and it is both; the ambiguity contained within the concept of utopia itself necessarily bleeds into the literature that depicts it and, as we have seen, speculative fiction is the genre of ambiguity, of nebulous, blurry boundaries that suggests the possibility of convention while simultaneously encouraging others to subvert those same traditions.

Utopia is the ultimate expression of ambiguity; it is a neologism that has integrated itself into our vernacular without ever committing to a concrete form. It is apropos to locate it within a genre that makes a habit of creating similar neologisms. No other genre is so well known for its tradition of creating new words when familiar ones will not suffice, nor for having these terms adopted by its consumers into such widespread usage. Unsurprisingly, these words are often the

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38 White, *Dancing with Dragons*, 84.
40 Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 105. Cummins also references the ambiguity of the word utopia itself, pointing to its etymology. The word's Greek etymology suggests both "the good place" and "no place."
focal point of revolution and change within the texts that spawn them: Le Guin's anarchists
develop an entire new language to communicate their ideals, as they recognize the impact of
language on thought and culture. The barriers created between the Anarresti and the Urrasti,
physically, culturally, is only strengthened by the differences in their languages. Shevek's quest
to understand the Urrasti is mirrored by his development of Ioti, while the Urrasti's failure to
grasp the totality of what he stands for may be read in their general lack of Pravic. Meanwhile,
countless other writers, when attempting their own speculative explorations, find that there are
no words to describe that which does not exist; undaunted, they create their own and these words
spur their texts forward, challenging readers to imagine. Utopia is the very essence of such
creation and it must be recognized as belonging not to its own, isolated tradition of literature, but
to literary works that do not rest on convention, on the status quo, but instead constantly threaten
what exists by provoking visions of what might.

Speculative fiction emerges, then, not as a new genre to which we might ascribe utopian
literature, but as the genre we are still learning how to understand, much as we are still learning
how to understand utopia itself. Utopia has always belonged to speculative fiction because it is
inherently speculative; indeed, the two are so radically linked that it may even be said that all
speculative fiction is itself utopian—not in the traditional sense, surely, but in the sense that it
expresses and explores the possibility of desire. Desire does not always present itself as pure, as
wholesome, or even as desirable; disgust is sometimes the more readily identifiable side of
desire. If utopia is ambiguous, then it is sometimes fierce, sometimes horrid, just as it is
sometimes idyllic, sometimes peaceful. In the horrid utopia, there is a call for peace, just as in
the peaceful revolution there is a trace of horror. Literature that explores these elements, that
does not shy away from stepping outside of us, so that we might look back on ourselves, is
fundamental to expressing utopia, in whatever shape it may take. So, too, is it necessary to provide a perspective by which we may judge dystopian realizations and so create new utopias. Speculative fiction is essential for knowing ourselves by showing us who we might be in the future, who we might have been in the past, or who we could be if we only tilt our heads and squint, just as mainstream fiction attempts to show us who we are in the present, with disarming clarity and unapologetic boldness. Yet mainstream literature cannot express utopia, for even the most mundane iteration of the desire for change provokes a disconnect with reality that finds its expression in the worlds of possibility that are tread by lumbering giants, mechanical monsters, and starving idealists.

I end here with a cautionary note from Wolfe; in his criticism of William Toupance's *Ray Bradbury and the Poetics of Reverie: Fantasy, Science Fiction, and the Reader*, he complains that "Bradbury is treated as little more than an exemplary set of texts for a reading of fantastic literature, but he is at the same time such an idiosyncratic writer that Touponce is never able to quite make clear how his theories might apply to a broader spectrum of texts."41 Certainly the same critique may be leveled here of my treatment of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* as a study in utopia and, further, in my call to locate utopia firmly within speculative fiction; she is, in part, so highly lauded because of her ability to subvert generic conventions and her habit of adaptability, displayed over her long career. Rather than marking her as outside the boundaries of most speculative fiction, however, she has remained one of the most highly respected and widely critiqued authors of the past fifty years. Cadden suggests that it is "by constantly bringing our attention to her defiance of [genre], she reveals how she uses genre to define herself and to give herself authority, even if it is all (or mostly) by opposition."42 Her work stands as both an

41 Wolfe, "Review," 460.
42 Cadden, *Ursula K. Le Guin Beyond Genre*, 142.
inspiration and an antagonist, revealing her to be an artist who displays a wide range of the capabilities of literature and especially of speculative fiction. To find in her work the ability to understand better the function of utopia and speculative fiction is not to describe merely the way to read Le Guin, as a singular entity, but to explore a possibility of how the field might be approached *en masse*. 
A house, Le Guin writes, is not merely a house to a child, but the world on a microcosmic scale and if such a world is "deliberately made beautiful," designed "to give pleasure" and not just shelter, it cannot help but to impart in the child "a familiarity with and expectation of beauty, on the human scale and in human terms."\(^1\) So, too, may we think of literature as the world in miniature, of its ability to impart that with which it is created to those who inhabit it. Literature is very much a habitable space, as it seeks to draw us into its narratives, to immerse us in the worlds it lays before us, and no genre seeks this so adamantly as speculative fiction. Though some dismiss this as escapist fantasy, we may also view speculative fiction as essential to imparting hope by teaching us about the possibility of exploring desire and the very real ability to enact change in the world by expressing it. As Beth Snowberger claims, we can theorize about utopia only in the abstract, but never imagine it, unless we believe that there is some essential truth—this, indeed, "is the foundation of utopian imagination."\(^2\) Speculative fiction reveals, through the pluripotentiality of imagination, a glimpse at an essential truth: change is possible. Indeed, if we may view *The Dispossessed* as an able flagship for the genre, then we may read Laurence Davis' claim that the novel demonstrates "a dynamic and revolutionary utopia premised on an acceptance of the enduring reality of social conflict and historical change" as a hallmark of speculative fiction as a whole, imparting on us a lasting wisdom about the genre that speaks, not

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\(^1\) Le Guin, "Living in a Work," 132.  
\(^2\) Snowberger, "Utopian Imagination," 59.
only of its imaginative power, but of its importance to our imagination.³ If we are to believe in change in order to imagine, and if we are to imagine in order to enact change, then speculative fiction surely identifies itself as indispensible to our ability to realize change in the world.

Sylvia Kelso opens her 2008 collection of essays on Le Guin with a warning to scholars seeking to retread ground so thoroughly covered by their academic peers: "Bold indeed must be the soul who dares [imply] that he or she has not only read all the original texts, but all the secondary work, and now knows better enough to pontificate upon it all."⁴ This speaks not only of the need for hubris, but also of the weariness with which we might approach a "new" treatise upon such a familiar subject. And yet it is also a challenge. Mike Cadden, reviewing Davis and Stillman's collection *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, notes that, while some passages are cited repeatedly by different authors, they are used for different arguments, "which allows the reader to see the versatility of the novel."⁵ Surely Le Guin is not so remarkable in the literary world that hers is the only novel to hold within it a rich ground for multiple scholastic inquiries. Instead, we must take Kelso's challenge for what it is and boldly seek to explore new territory in the familiar landscapes of the literature around us, just as we set foot in new literary worlds, discovering new utopias, new imaginations. If speculative fiction is vital to our imaginative process, imparting on those who inhabit it a familiarity with and expectation of change, then we must never rest in our quest to use such fiction as a lens through which to view ourselves.

But, lest we forget, novels are only partially about ideas. They are also about characters, about worlds, about the pure joy of imagination, the thrill of discovery, and the fear of realizing that we do not represent the sum of all possibility the universe holds.

³ Davis, "Introduction," x.
⁴ Kelso, "Boldly to Re-Venture," 7.
⁵ Cadden, "Review," 310.
Bibliography


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