On Failure and Revolution in Utopian Fiction and Science Fiction of the 1960s and 1970s

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Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) was a bestselling novel of its time, and remains a classic work of contemporary utopian fiction. Despite its successes, utopian scholar Tom Moylan describes it as a “flawed” example of his own model of a critical utopian form particular to the 1970s.¹ He considers Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1979) to be more adequately critical, as they call into question the stasis of a “passively perfect society” with an “engaged, open, critical utopia.”² This kind of self-reflexivity toward the closures of the utopian imagination was necessitated in the 1970s by the totalitarian tendencies of the twentieth century, as Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao's China and corporate America proclaimed their utopian credentials but with little of the happiness and liberty that was supposed to accompany utopia's realisation.³ The experimental, open-ended play of Piercy, Russ and Delany responds to this historical situation by dialogically interrogating the narrative conventions of closure, to push generic boundaries and negate the utopian claims of historical states. Moylan's argument claims a distinctive place for this critical turn in the history of the genre, but finds *The Dispossessed* to not be critical enough, for while it portrays a utopian world, this utopia has become somewhat stagnant. More significantly, the novel is not dialogical, instead relying...
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on a more traditional mode of narrative, in which a supernaturally talented male character, Shevek, plays out a heroic quest by travelling off-world, beyond his utopian world, leaving his female partner and child at home. Moylan cites other critiques of *The Dispossessed*: Samuel Delany argues that the only homosexual character in *The Dispossessed* functions only to normalize the novel's heterosexism, while John Fekete and Nadia Khouri point out that the scarcity of the utopian moon, the way in which the lunar society struggles to produce enough to eat, reproduce those ideologies of capitalism that proclaim its own unrivalled production of wealth.

I want to argue here that Moylan, and by implication these other commentators on Le Guin, have mistaken the actual subject of her book, which is not so much utopia, utopian hope or revolution as much as it is the failure of these forms. The dialogical quality of utopian fiction, its critical engagement with failure and closure, was already at work within the so-called static utopias that Moylan identifies in earlier eras. The problem with Moylan's description of the critical utopia is two-fold. First, to situate the critical utopia historically, he presumes that earlier utopias were static exercises in world building, but as I want to argue here, they were already dialogical and critical. Moylan falls prey to the notion that utopian form has a progressive history, as if one utopian novel succeeds another, thus revealing the fallacies of earlier formulas for fictional production. Second, his critique thinks that the patriarchal power system of capitalism is somehow embedded within the novel's formal qualities, as if the experimental tendencies of Piercy, Russ and Delany were not themselves implicated within this system. Yet the formal experiments of fiction, their interest in self-reflexivity, do not necessarily make them more politically correct, their forms either more or less implicated in the ideological superstructures of their time. In this, Moylan has failed to confront the more dire implications of the failure of utopian states in the twentieth century, their tendencies toward totalitarianism. For even Thomas More's closure of the Island of Utopia from the mainland in the sixteenth century was a critical engagement with the dependence of the utopian imagination upon capitalism, its tendencies toward closure in a dialogic relation with the expansive, assimilative tendencies of capital.

Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* describes the divided and war-ridden world of Urras and its impoverished anarchist moon Anarres, a planet that resembles our own and an alternative utopia that hangs like hope in its skies. The substance of Moylan's criticism of the novel lies in the fact that the oppressed working class of Urras are unable to organise their own revolution, but await Shevek, who arrives from the anarchist moon to incite revolt. For one-and-a-half centuries, the people of Urras have looked up to the moon as a symbol of hope, but a hope that has remained frustrated, out
of reach of their own capacities. It is not really Shevek’s anarchism that drives him to Urras, but his mathematical talent that brings him an invitation to stay at the university there. Shevek’s research promises a theory of instantaneous communication that will allow immediate contact between the inhabited worlds of the galaxy, Le Guin repeating an old pattern of science fiction narrative, a pattern that is patriarchal in the strictest sense, as revolution relies upon not only an individual male hero but the power of a transcendent law of the universe that enforces this power. Moylan reads *The Dispossessed* insofar as it configures the concerns of the 1960s, and is based on the expectation that she could have produced a more radical book, one that is adequate to the experience of utopia. Yet Le Guin published *The Dispossessed* in a very different historical situation – after the failure of the radicalism of the 1960s to effect change in Western societies. Her novel is better read as a response to the question of the survival of capitalism rather than its disruption and overthrow. While Piercy, Russ and Delany narrate societies in radical transition, Le Guin is interested instead in the intricacies of social reproduction.

The utopian moon of Anarres has, like the capitalist world Urras from which it seceded, become stagnant, and thus possessed of its own mode of patriarchal order. Le Guin’s point is that, although Urras realizes the kind of utopian society imagined by the radicalism of the 1960s, this is not the same as the spontaneous living embodied by many 1960s radicals. A post-revolutionary society, as the old Soviet Union and China have taught us, is not the same thing as the activity of revolution itself. *The Dispossessed* is Le Guin’s considered response to the historical experience of the 1960s, when radicals were confronted by a real-world communism that had gone awry, as well as by the incredible stability of capitalism itself in the face of upheaval. She signals the subject in the novel’s 168-year time frame, the period since a group of revolutionaries left Urras to establish the anarchist, lunar moon. This causes slippage between the story time of 168 years and the actual time of 1968, the year in which state capitalism was nearly overthrown by protest in France (at least according to those involved), and in which America prepared to put men on the moon. To think these historical moments alongside the novel is to discover something of the unconscious of this historical time in the early 1970s, a time that began to periodise the 1960s.

This was an idea of the 1960s that presented multiple possibilities for the human race, yet by the time Le Guin published *The Dispossessed* these possibilities were being eclipsed. As the 1968 revolution failed to effect permanent change in France, America faced a financial crisis and cut back its planned Apollo missions to the moon. The 1960s were a time of possibilities that seemed in retrospect to be excessive, as this decade
turned into the 1970s, so that *The Dispossessed* positions itself in this historical moment of the 1970s rather than in the utopian one that has just passed. It is not so much a utopian novel as a meditation upon the failures of utopian imagination. Indeed, as I will argue, utopian fiction has maintained from its inception a dialogue with the failures of the utopian form. As Le Guin reports, on her anarchist moon:

> The circle has come right back round to the most vile kind of profiteering utilitarianism. The complexity, the vitality, the freedom of invention and initiative that was the centre of the Odonian ideal, we've thrown it all away. We've gone right back to barbarism — if it's new, run away from it; if you can't eat it, throw it all away!7

The measure for this loss of the revolutionary moment is the alienation of the physicist Shevek, who must rely on a degree of “egoism,” as the derogatory Anarres term has it, to accomplish his work. Yet the anarchist autocracy demands that he be egoless, that his labour be collective rather than solitary. This notion of egoism restricts the vitality of imagination, its creativity in work, and is ultimately the sign of a patriarchy, a rule by law, at work on this anarchist moon. What began as a philosophy of liberation turns on this post-revolutionary world into another discursive regime of power and its restrictions. Thus Le Guin illustrates the mobility of patriarchy, and that it is not only tied to capitalism, but will reappear in new historical situations. She outlines not only the joy of living in this anarchist society, but also the limits of this joy, which ultimately drive Shevek off-world to visit his fellow physicists on the capitalist world of Urras. This is a narrative of return, as he recognises the “air” of his ancestral “home,” on the planet of Urras, without ever having been there.8 The break that his world has made with Urras is incomplete, as he remains tied to this old order, his anarchist identity implicated in its capitalism. No wonder that his own moon developed its own structure of power, its own rhetoric of authority, as its inhabitants looked up to see capitalism in orbit across their sky. As the working class of Urras looked up to see hope in the anarchist moon, so the socialists on Anarres look in their sky to see the world they fled as a sign of their own continuing problems, its problems written into the fate of their own experimental society.

Thus Le Guin's book dialectically poses a series of problems with utopian form, and illustrates the dependence of this form on capitalism. This is the critical quality of *The Dispossessed*, as it does not so much create a viable alternative vision as create a multiplicity of systems that implicate each in the others. The self-critical quality of this novel, that describes its place within 1970s capitalism, addresses not so much the intricacies of revolu-
tionary thought as it does revolutionary failure. After the 1960s, she takes this failure to be historically demonstrated, not only by the persistence of capitalism in her own time, but by the stratification of twentieth-century radicalism itself. Her critique of the totalitarian regimes of communism lies within her descriptions of life on the utopian moon itself, with its own distinctive series of oppressions. Shevek discovers that:

the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate – we obey. We fear being outcast, being called lazy, dysfunctional, egoizing. We fear our neighbour's opinion more than we respect our own freedom of choice.⁹

Thus, even utopian society tends toward the sedimentary, toward patriarchy and oppression. The phenomenon of egoism is a central, dialectical problem that Le Guin sets out on the level of content, as characters accuse each other of being egoists, while Shevek's ego drives the narrative tension. While the anarchist identity is founded on its difference from capitalism, it will produce such internal differentiations as the negative idea of a capitalist world from which utopia is born infects this utopia with negativity. The cultural reproduction of a society does not take place in isolation, but in an ongoing dialectic with its own history. The implications of this utopian failure to make an absolute and revolutionary break with the past lie in Shevek's thought: “That the Odonian society on Anarres had fallen short of the ideal did not, in his eyes, lessen his responsibility to it; just the contrary.”¹⁰ Le Guin's utopianism here recognises that it is a part of the very structures it wants to overturn, that its own utopianism is caught up in the utopian idealism that has preceded it, and failed.

The most concrete historical analogy for the anarchist moon of Anarres, in which revolution becomes a discursive regime, is the experience of the old Eastern Bloc, such as the Soviet Union. These countries realised in history the same features of enclosure and scarcity that Le Guin is putting into play in this novel. In her contribution to a debate over the relationship between Marxism and science fiction in early issues of *Science Fiction Studies*, Le Guin shares her disillusionment with communism, a disillusion that the left confronted at this moment in its history.¹¹ Scarcity becomes the penance served upon a revolution for some, rather than for all. The utopian moon is, like the old East, cut off from the world from which it came, its isolation an attempt to foster revolutionary purity but actually fostering pathologies of paranoia toward capitalism. To blame this author for not being utopian enough in her narrative, as Moylan does, is simply not to be critical enough, not to see that Le Guin is making a considered response to a con-
crete historical situation that in the early 1970s had become all too apparent for the left. Utopian form is dependent upon the anti-utopian world of capitalism. The novel's narrative form is dependent upon a history of narratives that have evolved within capitalism. Born of the violent differences internal to capitalism, the novel re-enacts this violence upon itself, struggling with revolutionary ideas but in a process of narration and world building that bear the scars of its own historical formation.

Thus the distinction that Moylan makes between the critical utopia and the totalising blueprints of the classical utopia is a problematic one. The distinction he makes is Hegelian, as it regards the utopian novel developing within its own, internal logic, toward an actualization of utopia itself. Yet many critics have argued that even Thomas More's inaugural text, *Utopia* (1516), did not represent a stasis but was instead operating dialogically, as it proposed a series of contraries that were themselves self-critical. William T Cotton, for example, finds at least five historical crises within More's novel, betrayed by the fact that the "Utopians' institutions are neither immutable nor completely consistent, and therein lies potential for significant change."¹²

Christopher Kendrick maps the influence of several coincident modes of production upon the novel, modes that were at work in More's unsettled period of European history.¹³ The traces of feudalism and capitalism are there, as well as communism itself. Kendrick takes his theoretical tools from Louis Marin's *Utopics* (1984), itself indebted to the experience of May 1968.¹⁴ This study of More emerged from a seminar on utopia during the upheavals of this time, and developed as a way of making his teaching relevant and constructive to the student movement around him. Marin reports that the seminar failed because it was institutionalised in the first place, and thus thinks of More's book as a meditation on the difficulty of realising utopian ideas.¹⁵ In *Utopics*, he proposes a dialectical reading of More, the implication being that there never was an uncritical utopia, and that even in the sixteenth century the utopian text is self-conscious about its own stasis, or ideological closure. How can there be markets and theft in a society without money or crime? How can there be a prince in a society of equals? The Island of Utopia was never a perfect society, but an expression of More's own historical time, as capitalism confronted an aristocratic feudalism. The clash between modes of production and their attendant ideologies produces the contradictions at work within the Island of Utopia, which was never a blueprint for a closed social order, but was always wracked by its own internal differences. In this, Marin pushes Moylan's notion of the critical utopia back to the fifteenth century, revealing that utopia's critical operation cannot be distinguished from its self-critical operation.

Marin invents the idea of the 'neutral', a theoretical figure by which the
possibility of other worlds might be imagined. This neutral appears in More as a trench dug by the Utopians to let the ocean flow between their island and the mainland. The neutral also describes the vast desert that Raphael must cross before arriving at the Island of Utopia, the perilous journey he must make to discover this lost society. This neutral is at work in Le Guin too, as Shevek steps off the spaceship and onto the ground of his ancestral world of Urras. In doing so, "he stumbled and nearly fell. He thought of death, in that gap between the beginning of a step and its completion; and at the end of the step he stood on a new Earth." Here, Le Guin puts a void into narrative play, in an absence that lies between pre- and post-revolutionary orders, in an infinity that pertains to the logic of worlds that allows both to exist side by side, capitalism and utopia in one figuration. Of concern here are the structures of recuperation that Le Guin and Marin have in common, structures that they put into place so as to figure revolutionary experience. In Le Guin, the disappointment in the legacy of the 1960s, the trauma of returning to life as normal, turns into this schism between the worlds of Urras and Anarres. For Marin, this experience is registered in the neutral, a concept that looks to the radical possibility of social change, but interpellates this possibility into its own failure as it embraces different worlds, different social orders.

In the wake of 1968, the philosopher Pierre Macherey turned to fiction to recover its revolutionary imagery from the ideological closures that Hegelian modes of critique tended to impose upon it. Writing in the wake of May 1968, Macherey argues that the ideologies of literature are always and inevitably determined by capitalism, and that it is the role of critique to find within fiction that which eludes such closures, for sites of cultural production entreated what Macherey's teacher, Louis Althusser, described as a conditional autonomy, a freedom permitted only within the repetitious, mirroring structures of cultural reproduction. In A Theory of Literary Production (1978), Macherey turns to the content within a novel that resists ideological sedimentation, to the chaotic assemblage of images that betray the dynamic resistance of an author to the ideological operation of their own fiction. If Moylan, Delany, Fekete and Khouri rail against the betrayals that Le Guin has made of their various, utopian concerns, it is because she is not battling on this terrain of ideological expression in the first place. If Le Guin had a woman as a hero, or put into place an experimental style of writing, it would make little difference insofar as Macherey is concerned, since these are ideological operations already recuperated within capitalism. Yet by its nature, writing simultaneously eludes these ideological operations, these closures, to put into play more complex figurative constellations. In this sense, the utopianism of Le Guin's novel lies not in the ideological struggle to effect change, but
in the remainder of an ideological struggle that exhausts its potential to effect change. Thus the utopianism of *The Dispossessed* lies in its figures rather than its discourse, within its constellation of irreconcilable imagery rather than within its narrative ideologies.

The figure I have largely turned to thus far to illustrate the figuration that exceeds ideological recuperation is egoism. Egoism and propertarianism are the negative signs of what is otherwise a positive social order that strives for the realisation of mutual aid in everyday life. They are used to discipline society and subjects alike in order that this utopian world might function. Yet they also function to create the very things they set out to eliminate, as Sabul, the nominal head of the physics syndicate, obstructs Shevek's desire to publish his work by calling his brand of physics "propertarian," or, when Takver dislikes the name her child has been allocated by a central computer, she betrays a dimension of motherhood that might be considered propertarian. The concepts necessary to make anarchism function are ideological because they interpellate individuals in different ways, yet these concepts are also figures because they betray the way that individuals exceed their own interpellation. Le Guin's inability or unwillingness to imagine a truly utopian world, instead imagining the failure of utopia, is tied up with the fate of these figures.

Indeed, the novel is full of figures that generate narrative tensions around the possibility of utopia. Physics is another, appearing at once to be a potentially utopian and liberating science in the possibility of Shevek realising his theory of simultaneity that will allow easy communication and travel between solar systems. Yet it is also anti-utopian, as it serves little function on the impoverished anarchist moon that has little use for communicating with the rest of humanity. The contradiction here is between the idea of utopia for all and utopia for some, one of the most pressing conflicts in utopian thinking, and one that doomed 1960s America, where Le Guin is from, to a conflict between political activists and drop-outs. Yet another figure is monogamy, which is difficult, even looked down upon on the anarchist moon, because it inconveniences the distribution of workers to the most effective places.

Monogamy is a figure because it produces multiple ideological configurations, at once being a sign of the ultimate sharing and social sacrifice, and on the other a propertarian act. Such figures generate critical descriptions of the contradictions at work within the utopian imagination.

The question of physics as either a functional or non-functional part of a society configures fiction's own place within revolutionary politics. One of Shevek's friends is a playwright, who is socially isolated by the critical and cynical nature of his writing. This character ends up committing suicide after also finding himself at odds with his anarchist moon, in a mirror of Shevek's own departure to the world of Urras. Shevek, who thinks of the
work of the artist (and, by implication, the novelist) as central, because they apply to all areas of life, resists the possibility that this work is itself useless and non-functional.  

Yet Le Guin’s narrative remains haunted by the failure of its own utopian politics, by the possibility that the novel may itself be inadequate to the demands of actualising utopia. That the contradiction is worked into the novel itself, in the figure of Tirin the artist, realises the criticality that has been at work within utopian fiction since Thomas More himself, so that, on the one hand, Le Guin’s narrative is counter-revolutionary since it returns to pre-revolutionary situations – the change that the novel anticipates both on Urras and Anarres are never realised. Yet the model of narrative presented here argues that narrative structures are always counter-revolutionary, and that the true revolutionary content of a novel lies elsewhere.

Macherey’s distinction between representation, which is ideological, and figuration, which describes the poetic images that generate narrative tension, is useful for differentiating the two modes of reading. It also helps in getting around the expectation that narratives will conform to certain ideological parameters, that the form of a novel will adequately reflect its political commitments. On the contrary, I have argued here against Moylan’s proposition that one novel could be more political than another, more utopian than another. This reading of Le Guin’s The Dispossessed suggests instead that utopian content can be found in its figures, that the utopian figure is the generative contradiction behind the utopian novel, rather than the other way around (that is, the novel determining this or that utopian ideology).

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NOTES

1 Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination (New York: Methuen, 1987) 120.
2 Moylan, Demand the Impossible 56.
3 Moylan, Demand the Impossible 8.
4 Moylan, Demand the Impossible 102.
5 Moylan, Demand the Impossible 101. For more on Delany’s reading of Le Guin, see Valerie Holliday, “Delany Dispossessed,” Extrapolation 44:1 (2003) 425-36. Holliday sets out to critique Delany’s novel Trouble on Triton (1996) with the same methods that Delany used to deconstruct Le Guin, in the process demonstrating
something of the adage that there is no such thing as an ideologically correct novel.

6 Moylan, *Demand the Impossible* 102-3.


10 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 275.


21 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 269-73.