

Utopian Fiction and Ideology:
Individuality, Difference and Autonomy in
Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

Julia Debreceeni 3377318
Barnita Bagchi
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Introduction

One no longer becomes poor or rich; both are too burdensome.
Who still wants to rule? Who still wants to obey? Both are too burdensome.
Nietzsche – *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Atlas Shrugged by Ayn Rand, published in 1957, and *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin, published in 1974, break limits and reinvent the utopian mode in their own right. In this thesis I want to analyse their concepts of individuality. Since on first sight the novels seem radically different from each other I will focus on their similarities concerning the workings and interactions of the individual in relation to society.

I have chosen to compare these utopian texts since they both carry powerful ideologies. Le Guin has been widely read and studied for her adept and layered fiction and science-fiction. In *The Dispossessed* she unites her studies about Taoism and anarchism. Little attention has been paid to Ayn Rand in Europe, while she is widely known in the United States. Her texts are part of the American curriculum and her most influential philosophical disciple is, until today, Alan Greenspan (Achterhuis, 7), former head of the Federal Reserve. Many critics and academics ignore and cast aside her writings for the seemingly superficial and one-dimensional content.

In this paper I argue that Ayn Rand encloses the reader in her moral convictions while Le Guin creates distance and understanding for different convictions and societies.

First of all, Rand divides her characters into prime movers and second handers. This distinction creates a psychological closeness to the victimised industrialists. These characters are heightened in their virtuousness by being compared to the entirely flawed second handers. Secondly, Le Guin, although sketching out her protagonist accurately, creates distance from theory and political convictions behind the narrative. She achieves this by giving an accurate picture of the interdependence of the individual and society, pointing out errors as well as advantages.

In this way identification in *Atlas Shrugged* takes place much easier. *The Dispossessed* on the other hand leaves room to observe all characters and societies from a distance, and thereby enables coming to terms with its inherent ambiguity whereby judgement is suspended.

To establish fully the understanding of the individual, both novels deal with the theme of barriers, more directly the literal distinction of two worlds or two kinds of human beings. Rand divides her characters into prime movers and second handers, while Le Guin builds the whole narrative structure on the comparison between Urras, the capitalist and patriarchal planet of the profiteers, and its moon Anarres, inhabited by the seventh generation of anarchist revolutionaries. This planetary distance in opposition to a difference in moral convictions already accounts for the distance or closeness to the basic ideas underlying either narrative.

Closer analyses of the protagonists Dagny Taggart in *Atlas Shrugged* and Shevek in *The Dispossessed* shows that the main conflict is their personal reaction to the changes in the society surrounding them. Both characters are represented as outsiders which accounts for their individual distance from society and at the same time for the inclined identification by the reader.

To define and analyse the human condition, the construct of suffering makes up a major element in both narratives. To Le Guin the idea of eliminating personally related suffering is impossible, Rand on the other hand shapes her protagonists in a way where personal suffering is portrayed as inferior behaviour, working against their ethical convictions. This has for either novel implications for the equally fundamental and implicit ideas of self-interest in *Atlas Shrugged* as opposed to mutual aid and solidarity in *The Dispossessed*.

However, while Rand's idealism, despite the importance of progress, autonomy of the self and the exigency to be free to create is based on finalised virtues, Le Guin, while adhering to similar ideals in her anarchist society, presses the need for juxtaposition and constant reinvention of the individual in relation to society.

Biography and Influence

Ayn Rand grew up in a failed Utopia. Born in 1905 in St. Petersburg into a Jewish middle-class family, her life was moulded by rigid ideas about her identity because of her religious background and social status in Communist Russia. Ursula Le Guin on the other hand experienced early the diversity of cultures and ideas. Born in 1929 in Berkeley, California into an academic household of anthropologists and writers, her formative years were embedded in a secure realm of ideas and cultures. Le Guin “notes in retrospect that she suffered no adolescent hang-ups” (Spivack, 4).

Rand's reality came close to the blue prints for her fictional titans. “From the age of four or five onward, [she] developed a keen sense that anything she liked had to be hers” (Heller, 8) and further “she claimed not to care about being approved of or accepted by her family and peers. Since she generally wasn't accepted, the proud, intelligent child appears to have learned early to make a virtue of necessity” (Heller, 8). Rand studied History and Philosophy at Petrograd State University, after years of hardship, and was influenced by Aristotelian empiricism and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Heller). The idea that people, freed from any spiritual and oppressing rule create a new morality became one of the pillars of her ideology.

In contrast to this Ursula Le Guin “lived in the middle of an ongoing exploration of an alien culture” (Spivack, 4). She could closely follow the studies her father was pursuing about North American Indians. In this way she learned to see things through the lenses of an anthropologist. This role always “involves a tension between observation and participation. To the extent that [the anthropologist] is able to participate sympathetically in the culture that he can never become a part of, he also becomes an outsider to his own culture” (Spivack, 5).

The element of becoming an outsider is most prominent in the way both writers grew up. Only with the major difference that Rand struggled in belonging to a minority concerning the social status of her family in Bolshevik Russia, she also immersed herself in the role of the intellectual outsider. In contrast to this ongoing struggle by choice and necessity, Le Guin was able to perceive cultures, people and social organisms which made her an outsider yet more of an impartial observer, able to adapt and change her views. Also Le Guin was early influenced by Taoism, which teaches inactivity and accounts for a holistic world view, attempting to grasp how everything is interconnected. In commentary to *The Dispossessed* Le Guin explained that its political theory was based on the kind of anarchist thought “prefigured in early Taoist thought, and expounded by Shelly and Kropotkin, Goldman and Goodman. [To her it was the] most idealistic, and ...most interesting, of all political theories” (Le Guin, *The Wind's*, 232).

In 1926 Rand immigrated to the United States and would never leave again. Heller remarks

that “her enthusiasm for this free-wheeling, wildly optimistic, largely unregulated pro-capitalist time and place remained a lifelong touchstone of her expectations and her art” (54). This new world cemented the ideals she had formed so vigorously before. However, Rand still observed the two faced altruism which she extensively portrays in *Atlas Shrugged*. This was essential to strengthen her radical individualism and appraisal for the people who move the world as opposed to the exploiters and the mob.

The Utopian Mode

Both writers would have agreed on the premise that ideas matter. Both chose to materialise their thought experiments. The tension between reading utopian writings as political treatises or works of fiction is inescapable to the idea of implementing and crafting an idea into a fictional artifice. In a response to an essay collection on *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin points out that there is always a delicate line between prose and fiction. Personally, she reads a utopia as fiction, although, she remarks ironically, “everybody knows utopias are to be read not as novels but as blueprints for social theory and practice” (306). She wonders whether the readers who perceive her novel as a treaty are conscious of

the inherent self-contradictions of [a] novelistic narrative that prevents simplistic, single-theme interpretation, the novelistic 'thickness of description' ... that resists reduction to abstracts and binaries, the embodiment of ethical dilemma in a drama of character that evades allegorical interpretation, the presence of symbolic elements that are not fully accessible to rational thought.

Novels are not an “exposition of ideas but ... an embodiment of idea - a revolutionary artefact, a work containing a potential permanent source of renewal of thought and perception.” This fundamental observation about fiction is crucial to consider in respect to both texts.

If one assumes that writing fiction and what is being created by it is to a great extent irrational, it is to be questioned how much Ayn Rand could reconcile this with her ideals. After her two exceedingly influential novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, which both define and work out the virtuously rational prime mover, she continued to write only non-fiction. In the introduction to *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* she writes: “I want to stress that our primary interest is not politics or economics as such, but 'man's nature and man's relationship to existence' – and that we advocate capitalism because it is the only system geared to the life of a rational being” (vii). Yet, although Rand stresses that she is not writing a treaty she also spells out that *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* “is a non-fiction footnote to *Atlas Shrugged*” (ix). Rand continued thus to add her philosophical base to an economic system which, according to her, lacked ideology.

Atlas Shrugged

How strong and dogmatic ideology shows in a text depends on how directly or indirectly we are taken in by its craft and power to change our view on things. As quoted above, Le Guin spells out that the novelistic experience can never be clear cut or one-dimensional. However, the stronger an ideology surfaces in a text, the easier identification or rejection takes place. Ayn Rand's ideas, as preposterous or vulgar they might appear, are as potent and omnipresent as she would have wished them to be today. The utopian mode in her writings transforms from the description of a best possible society to the best imaginable individual. Her outspoken philosophy and sympathy for a most radical form of Capitalism makes up for her importance and influence. The ultimate and extensive insight in Dagny Taggart's psyche, her confidence and innocence, in opposition to the negativity and inferiority of the antagonist characters, pushes the reader into a defined corner.

The image Rand creates of her heroes and heroines carries a strong sense of innocence. They are purely and disastrously self-interested, and have nothing to share or give or help. Because of this, they cannot be held accountable for any suffering around them. This might be described as a “blindness to the results of systematic violence” (Žižek, *Violence*, 14) inherent to the capitalist society we find ourselves in today. However, according to Slavoj Žižek Ayn Rand came close in writing a capitalist manifesto which spans over 1168 pages.

In the mid sixties Ayn Rand asked herself the question: “Which is the dominant ideological trend of today's culture? The disgraceful and terrifying answer is: *there is no ideological trend today*. ... There is no vision of future, no intellectual element of leadership” (Rand, *Capitalism*, 203). Hans Achterhuis points out in *De Utopie van de vrije markt*¹ how today's capitalism is carried by a strong utopian inspiration. He argues that *Atlas Shrugged's* ideals and tactics to implement a society resting on new ideals, mirror the utopian thought which inspired the neo-liberalism reigning economic politics today.

A recent film adaptation of the first part of *Atlas Shrugged* has “succeeded in awakening ... interest in [her] literary work.” Rand's novels sell 100,000 copies every year in the US, and “since the financial crisis, that number has increased five-fold” (Gibson).

Atlas Shrugged is a tale about capitalists going on strike. The industrialists, finding themselves more and more in a dystopian, i.e. collectivist and centralised society, disappear mysteriously in order to build their own utopia of free-trade and self-interest in a hidden mountain valley. *Who is John Galt?* is the question posed throughout the novel, which functions as an answer

¹ The Utopia of the free market

to questions without answers. For the answer, the reader has to wait for about seven hundred pages. John Galt, then, is the ultimate prime mover who initiated the strike and lays out in a sixty pages speech, towards the end of the narrative, the philosophy and moral convictions portrayed throughout the whole text. This speech embodies the final appeal to the people of the United States to leave altruism and collectivism behind and think for themselves. Its broadcasting results in Galt's arrest, whereupon the remaining prime movers rescue him from the Government's (literal) torture chamber. Society, now abandoned by all industrialists, collapses economically and socially and the prime movers prepare for their return.

Most of the narrative is based on Dagny Taggart's experience and reaction to the disintegrating society around her. She runs the rail road company Taggart Transcontinental together with her brother James Taggart. Another prime mover portrayed in the narrative is Francisco D'Anconia, owner of D'Anconia Copper, the largest copper mining empire. He was Dagny's first love. Hank Rearden, owner of Rearden Metal, is one of the heroes who's personal development is portrayed throughout the novel. Dagny's relationship to Hank is crucial to the concept of self-assertion. In addition, Hank's relationship to his brother is essential to the understanding of the divide between prime movers and second handers.

What lies at the heart of Rand's ideal is the formation of the rational and responsible human being. It is not a form of society which accounts for its functionality but the inner drive to exist, as opposed to a death-drive. *Atlas Shrugged*, although spelling out time and again what has to be perceived as the wrong or evil kind of society, is in the first place an epic manual for the actions and reactions of a truly self-interested human being.

What strikes one early in Rand's description of the people to be found in the U.S.A. is their either truly good character, i.e., being driven by self-interest, the will to create and achieve, or their truly evil character, respectively absorbed by a chaotic, guilt-ridden, parasitic passivity. The mob, the upper class and the intellectuals supporting the government, the people who are selfish, yet hiding their actions under the veil of altruism and therefore are blemished in the origin of their actions make up for the Other. There is thus a continual distinction between the prime movers, such as Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden, who are categorically honest and virtuous and the second handers, such as James Taggart and Hank's brother, who are effectively incapable of thinking for themselves, who have to seek for assertion and recognition outside of themselves.

How Dagny Taggart sets herself and the other truly virtuous humans apart is for example described in a moment in which she recognises Hank Rearden within a crowd.

Watching him she realized the contrast for the first time. The faces of the others looked like aggregates of interchangeable features, every face oozing to blend into the

anonymity of resembling all, and all looking as if they were melting. Rearden's face, with the sharp planes, the pale blue eyes, the ash-blond hair, had the firmness of ice; the uncompromising clarity of its lines made it look, among the others, as if he were moving through a fog, hit by a ray of light. (144)

At this early point in the narrative there is already a clear sense of the heightened consciousness of Dagny in respect to Rearden's ultimate difference in comparison to the rest of society.

James Taggart's marriage portrays the nature of the second handers. The relationship between him and his wife has the sole purpose to elevate his character. The stranded, young girl who he picked up in a bar is in awe of his appearance. He has the image of a mover and therefore she admires him. Her modesty and honesty are transformed to ignorance and stupidity in opposition to James' image. His antagonism is spelled out since the sole purpose of their relationship consists in appearing as an altruistic saint and exploiting the girls' naivete.

"I mean we're only human beings- and what's a human being? A weak, ugly, sinful creature, born that way, rotten in his bones – so humility is the one virtue he ought to practice. He ought to spend his life on his knees, begging to be forgiven for his dirty existence. When a man thinks he's good – that's when he's rotten. Pride is the worst of all sins, no matter what he's done."

...

"I ... I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. It takes years and year of study in the higher reaches of the intellect." (264)

The girl however seems to hold similar convictions as the prime movers, yet she is initially portrayed as too simple-minded. She later realises that her true self is nothing like the self-destructive characters now surrounding her. She seeks Dagny's help, who generously asserts her moral dilemma. The girl explains that she "married Jim because [she] thought that he was you [i.e. Dagny]. .. Now [she] knows that he's some sort of vicious moocher" (887). Dagny's final advice to the girl is "to place nothing – nothing – above the verdict of [your] own mind" (891). Yet, entirely confused and overthrown by the newly set foundations of her existence the girl loses her mind and commits suicide.

The relationship between Hank Rearden and his brother serves to underline Rearden's resolute convictions. The reader is continually faced with a clear-cut opposition of his moral convictions and ideas about society. In one of numerous dialogues with his family, his brother asks for a job at the mills. As expected, Rearden rejects him fully.

'You can't be hard on a man who needs you, it will prey on your conscience for the rest of you life.'

'It won't.'

'You wouldn't want me to think that you're selfish.'

'I am.' (468)

The Purest Form of Self-Assertion

The extent of the concept of the purest form of selfishness, which is being self-interested without ever trying to, is continually and excessively portrayed by the sexual relationships Dagny has with the three most frequently featured prime movers. Francisco D'Anconia, Hank Rearden and, as the crown of self-interested creation, John Galt. As Slavoj Žižek points out in his essay “The Actuality of Ayn Rand” their mutual love portrays the purest expression of selfishness. It stands for “the highest self-assertion. Love for others is the highest form of properly understood 'selfishness,' i.e., of my capacity to realize through my relationship with others my own innermost drives” (216), my own innermost identity.

It is also through passages of romantic encounter, where repressed emotions, i.e. the avoidance as well as the release of suffering by the prime movers is portrayed. In addition, these episodes are a driving force to the narrative. Next to the prime mover's battle with the increasingly restrictive Government, the tension released and built up by the possibility or impossibility of the encounters between Dagny and Hank or Dagny and Galt are essential to the narrative's suspense and plot development.

Dagny's and John Galt's relationship and mutual sexual desire lets Dagny's thoughts about her desire and inner conflict go on for pages. She wonders “is this what it means to be an animal? - it does and I am” (781). She analyses herself, coming to the conclusion that she recognises all inclinations, that she is not attracted to his body as such but what his mind embodies.

There is thus a continual interplay of portraying moral convictions and alternating passages of romance. The reunion of Dagny and Francisco in Atlantis gives ample proof to the release of emotional tension. With their encounter in their free-trade paradise, all secrets which kept them apart before are lifted. Francisco falls on his knees and explains himself vigorously, confessing his love and rehashing the whole situation of the downfall of society.

And then I saw the whole industrial establishment of the world, with all of its magnificent machinery, its thousand-ton furnaces, ... its mahogany offices, its stock exchanges, its blazing electric signs, its power, its wealth – all of it was run, not by bankers and boards of directors, but by any unshaven humanitarian in any basement beer joint, ... who preached that virtue must be penalized for being virtue, that the purpose of ability is to serve incompetence, that man has no right to exist except for the sake of others. (766)

This passage accounts for a biased and contrasting style of language which shows the clear divide between two moral convictions. In addition, the reader will have waited for this delicate confession, feeling the emotionality of this once most deceived and masked character of the novel. His intentions are uncompromisingly untainted; he continues to explain how he will not even object to

her loving somebody else: “Dagny, every form of happiness is one, every desire is driven by the same motor – by our love for a single value, for the highest potentiality of our own existence – and every achievement is an expression of it” (768).

In order to exemplify the idealistic plight *Atlas Shrugged* conveys, the protagonists are pushed to the margins of society by continually being victimised in contrast to the immoral others. This creates a wish to identify and reconcile with them. Towards the end of the second book we find Hank Rearden on a lonely path. At this point his “belief, respect and desire” that to trade with his fellow men was an “act of honor” has left him. “He did not care what men made, what they sold, where they bought his Metal or whether any of them would know that it had been his” (572). Human beings and any interaction with them has lost its meaning to him. However, another prime mover hiding behind the next tree will rejuvenate his spirits. He introduces himself as the “Friend of the friendless” (573). His name is Ragnar Danneskjöld and he expresses his desire to destroy the idea of Robin Hood. In his moral appeal to Rearden he points out that Robin Hood “is the man who became the symbol of the idea that need, not achievement, is the source of rights, that we don't have to produce, only to want, that the earned does not belong to us, but the unearned does.” His mission consists of making people believe that Robin Hood “is the most immoral and the most contemptible” symbol there is. He believes strongly that “there will be no justice on earth and no way for mankind to survive” otherwise. This passage closes with Danneskjöld offering Rearden to join their association of free individuals in Atlantis. This passage accounts accurately for the premise of ideas and to what kind of ideology they are attached to.

This is also expressed in a statement made by John Galt explaining Atlantis, the utopia of free trade to Dagny:

I gave them the pride they did not know they had. I gave them the *words* [sic] to identify it. I gave them that *priceless* possession which they had missed, ... had not known they needed: a moral sanction. ... I was the defender of the oppressed, the disinherited, the exploited – and when I use those words they have, for once, a literal meaning. (746)

To take this one level further, Rand's novel gives in the same sense shape to an ideology which is otherwise met with contempt. At this point we are dangerously close to what makes up an angle of the way entrepreneurs are treated in today's society. To justify the ideal of the self-interested mover, Rand establishes not only their victimhood but also constructs her vigorous belief that Man is detached from organic, cyclic movement.

Man's Badge is the Straight Line

The novel presupposes the idea that Man is set apart from nature, although acknowledging the universal condition of circular motion, the argument that man must pursue a straight line,

following the force of which his existence is made of, is summed up in a passage towards the end of the second book. Dagny is situated in a secluded cottage in order to get away from the city. There, “she had lived in chronic tension to withstand the shock of anger, indignation, disgust [and] contempt” (608). While she improves her abode and adjusts to the routine she finds that “what she needed, [still], was the motion to a purpose, no matter how small or in what form, the sense of an activity going step by step to some chosen end across a span of time” (609), she finds that cooking a meal does not give her as much pleasure as building a road, since it is the expression of a closed circle. Her extreme drive to reach further with everything she does becomes hysterical. She goes on reasoning that

a circle is the movement proper to physical nature, there's nothing but circular motion in the inanimate universe around us, but the straight line is the badge of man, the straight line of a geometrical abstraction that makes roads, rails and bridges

and what concludes this thought is her realization that “it is not proper for man's life to be a circle, or a string of circles dropping off like zeros behind him – man's life must be a straight line of a single growing sum, like a journey down the track of a rail road – oh, stop it!” (609). What this episode indicates most prominently is Dagny's incapability of coming to rest. She needs to plan, construct, invent and she rationalises this as her sole and true reason for existence.

At this point we can ask the question if this does not contain a fundamental conviction about what to expect from life and society. That there will be achievements and progress cannot and should not be denied within the realm of human interaction, but her obsession and stress to be the motor of a straight line instead of submitting to a motion which is all encompassing lies at the heart of two diverging philosophies.

In connection to this the idea of suffering is closely related to the idea of autonomy. A true sense of autonomy is connected to the pursuit of freeing one's self from pain, according to the ideas expressed in *Atlas Shrugged*. As soon as the individual frees him or herself from the pain of emotional suffering there are no obstacles left in order to reach a choice based on true desires. After the first sexual encounter between Dagny and John Galt, he asserts that

it's not that I don't suffer, it's that I know the unimportance of suffering, I know that pain is to be fought and thrown aside, not to be accepted as part of one's soul and as a permanent scar across one's view of existence. (959-960)

What is in many places too swiftly forgotten and cast aside in this ideal environment to decide, is the basic conviction of Rand's philosophy that there are distinct realities, i.e. ideologies. All prime movers show disgust and contempt for the reality which suffocates them and forces them to go on strike. They are unable to comply with this “view of existence” which entails and celebrates

suffering, lacks purpose and is made up of the inability to realise one's self as a thinking agent. This extreme distinction helps to strengthen the sense of self and purpose of the virtuous. The whole philosophy is carried by a strong sense of self and uncompromising autonomy, as John Galt asserts in his epic speech in the third part of the novel. This speech expresses all basic attributes of Rand's philosophy. Rand and her writer's collective worked for two years on this speech. Editors were pressing her to cut the content, yet she remained persistent in keeping it (Achterhuis, 78).

At this point we have to consider the meaning and implications of the enigmatic as well as emblematic question: *Who is John Galt?* This question is posed throughout the novel and can be translated to: What is wrong with the world?, but ultimately it stays for: *Who is going to liberate us? Who has the answer to all our questions?* Although Galt ultimately advocates freedom and the ability to think for one's self and to be self-assertive instead of self-destructive, it is ultimately he, a prime mover, a hero, a higher moral being, who explains over 60 pages what should be perceived as right and wrong, whereby he thoroughly discards Christian and collectivist values. His words, which resonate with a hammering certainty all principles and morals expressed throughout the whole text, radically reduce distance to the matter expressed.

The Dispossessed

It is partly through the genre of science-fiction that Ursula K. Le Guin encompasses difference in such a genuine and intelligent fashion. The magnitude of life and human existence is ingeniously incorporated in different worlds and societies. With this portrayal of diversity the reader can easily enter to the realm of political and social theory which is embedded in her fiction.

Le Guin's conviction about the novelistic experience entails that every story, in order to convey meaning and recognition, needs to sketch a rounded protagonist. "A book does not come to me as an idea, a plot, or an event, or a society, or a message; it comes to me as a person" (Le Guin, *The Language*, 94). The experience of the embodiment of an idea has thus to start with a character, in the case of *The Dispossessed* with the physicist Shevek. It is then Shevek's main motivation for his journey which establishes the viewpoint from which *The Dispossessed* can be read.

The novel opens with Shevek's departure from Anarres in order to venture to Urras. Seven generations ago, from the present time of the narrative, a group of revolutionaries who called themselves Odonians, believing in the writings of Odo, were allowed to settle on Annarres, a moon of Urras. There, they created a society based on anarchic ideals. Shevek is the first Annaresti to leave his planet. On Urras he seeks to elaborate and share his theory which will make instantaneous communication possible. However, the Urrasti's main intention of welcoming Shevek consists in wanting to claim his revolutionary theory their own.

The narrative is built up of alternating chapters taking place either on Anarres or Urras. The chapters on Urras follow the chronology of Shevek's departure from Anarres, while the chapters on Anarres start with Shevek's childhood up to the point where he decides to journey to Urras.

The distance which is created to both societies is enhanced by Shevek's eccentric character. As stated before he is an outsider within his society. For expressing a physical conundrum at an early age, he is accused of "egoising," since his thoughts are incomprehensible to the rest of his peers. This conundrum however will occupy his whole life. Only with his descent to Urras he finds intellectual equals, which accounts for the restrictions laid upon the individual by the social organism as a whole, however autonomous they were brought up to be.

Shevek however is a virtuous, honest and likeable person. "Uninfluenced by others, he never knew he influenced them; he had no idea they liked him" (Le Guin, 51). He is after all the first Annaresti since the settlement who decides to venture beyond the wall which encloses their planet. "It is the aim of his life work in physics to reconcile sequence and simultaneity, linear and circular time, being and becoming" (Spivack, 75). His theory will make instantaneous communication possible. The idea of this theory already creates a much broader approach to social organisms and human interaction as opposed to the mere pursuit of one's own happiness and ultimate self-interest.

What is of utmost importance to Shevek, because of his ideals, is that his theory shall not be exploited by any state with a centralised power structure, but be used and shared indiscriminately by all of Humanity. None should be able to take advantage of it but everyone ought to be able to equally implement the means of communication, seeing it as an end in itself.

The element of Taoist thought united with anarchist theory shapes the whole ideological paradigm Le Guin creates in *The Dispossessed*. Taoism dates back to the first century B.C., Le Guin explains that “nothing about it is certain except that it's Chinese, and very old, and [that it] speaks to people everywhere as if it had been written yesterday” (Lao Tzu, ix). Its poetical philosophy “creates a consciousness of the world that encompasses every distinct thing and being into an unsegmented whole” (Habib, 336). Odonian thought then, unites parts of Taoist thought and anarchist theory by, for example, Goldman and Kropotkin (Habib).

Distinction is one of the main themes, as referred back to later, discussed in *The Dispossessed*. However, “distinction in Taoist thought is an illusion. ... On the basis of the uncertainty of all knowledge a Taoist cannot conceive a law, since a law assumes one certainty or another” (Habib, 337). The vagueness created by these convictions, which are not quite convictions, is part of the holistic view which this philosophy teaches. Furthermore, its inability to conceive, accept and practice finite laws is what makes it so attractive and similar to anarchist theory.

In a dialogue about conceptions of morality with a woman from Urras, Shevek explains that his “society ... is an attempt to *reach* it [i.e. morality]. To throw out the moralising, yes, the rules, the laws, the punishment – so that men can see good and evil, and choose between them” (182). Ultimately it is thus a way of looking at, of creating a consciousness how to approach things, and not a way of following principles. The only principle which remains is to remember yourself as a part of a whole.

The Wall

Distinction grows with the extent of definition. The importance of distinction in order to understand how definition can alienate us from each other and at the same time make us understand difference is explained with the central device used in *The Dispossessed*; the wall. Shevek travels to Urras because of “the need for communication, [because of] the wish to unbuild walls” (Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 65). The image of the wall communicates the inherent opposition of the utopian and the dystopian, i.e., Anares and Urras. It elaborates the distance which is automatically created when realising the walls which enclose one's view as well as what lies beyond it. Le Guin upholds the ambiguity of her constructed ideal by opening the novel with this image. This is why, however strong and positive the belief in the anarchist ideal in the text is represented, all its possible inherent

errors are made apparent throughout the narrative. In addition to this it is not just the inherent errors which ought to be related and acknowledged, the wall also enhances awareness for the necessity as well as inevitability of difference. In this respect the wall which the reader faces with the first sentence of the novel

enclosed the universe, leaving Anarres outside, free. Looked at from the other side, the wall enclosed Anarres: the whole planet was inside it, a great prison camp, cut off from the other worlds and other men, in quarantine. (5)

This portrayal genuinely embraces the phenomenon of difference as well as the danger and the fear of the ideals envisioned and practised on Anarres by its Other, Urras. Also, being in “quarantine” suggests not only that their society is finite, but also that it poses a threat to anyone who is not part of its isolation.

As the chapters explaining Anarres' practices and social customs advance, they reveal that during their life time Shevek and his friends become revolutionaries within their own society. They press the right for individual initiative and contact with the outside world, but also that not just society is supposed to be revolutionary but every single individual who is part of it. Their consciousness of the situation of which their society was born from shapes their actions and convictions, yet not all of the Anarresti share the same sense of freedom or risk-taking as opposed to stability and security.

Although “they knew that their anarchism was the product of a very high civilisation, of a complex diversified culture, of a stable economy and a highly industrialised technology” (Le Guin, 81), many Anarresti have become isolated in their ideals. They rather not venture beyond the wall which protects them from a profit seeking, hierarchically structured world.

This conflict between the actions born from individual convictions and the expectations of the public, the interdependence between individual and community, is the most complex dilemma the people of Anarres face. They soon realise that the only power structure that steers their doing and not doing is public opinion.

Shevek is well aware of this divide. When he gets to work on his theory, still on Anarres, he is given a private room, which is otherwise reserved for couples. Through his feelings about this exception made for him, he realises that “the social conscience, the opinion of others, was the most powerful moral force motivating the behaviour of most Anarresti, but it was a little less powerful in him than in most of them” (Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 95). Later, when trying to get his theory published, he needs to submit to the will of Sabul, one of the most greedy characters displayed on Anarres, who wants to be co-publisher of Shevek's thesis although he has not contributed to its making.

It becomes clear to Shevek that his “career, like the existence of his society, depended on the continuance of a fundamental, unadmitted profit-contract. Not a relationship of mutual aid and solidarity, but an exploitative relationship; not organic, but mechanical” (95). Both Shevek's deal with Sabul as well as the existence of the Anarresti society (which is based on a trade agreement with Urras) remain to be not independent but merely tolerated. Both are thus not controlled by, but ultimately a product of profit calculations, and therefore strongly oppose Shevek's ideals.

However, this essential contradiction to the theory practised and embodied by the people of Anarres is part of the broader context of political theory and utopian thought expressed with this novel. It tries to reconcile the realism of Le Guin's thought experiment. It shows the fragility and ambiguity of the constructed ideal.

When Shevek meets for the first time the Urrasti physicists, who are part of the competitive, free-market economy of Urras, the dilemma of equality within his collectivist yet individualist society is made apparent. Shevek only now realises that “[h]e had had no equals. Here, in the realm of inequity, he met them at last” (62). The standards and the fear of the majority that one cell, although ideally individually responsible for all their initiatives, might abuse the system, restricts the Anarresti society from having highly skilled individuals among them. Yet, Shevek becomes an exception to the rule. It becomes clear how the freedom of the individual which is in theory supposed to be a setting stone, is ultimately restricted by the needs or opinions of the community.

Before Shevek's departure from Anarres other Anarresti object to his plans to visit Urras. However eventually he acts according to his own beliefs and the security or advantage of his society. “He had chosen, in defiance of the expectations of his society, to do the work he was individually called to do. To do it was to rebel: to risk the self for the sake of society” (Le Guin, 225).

The Cult of Pain

If, however, action is inhibited, one reaches the topic of suffering. The theme of the origin and basic assumption of human suffering are essential to political theory and how all human beings deal with the world surrounding them. To Shevek suffering is part of the nature of existence:

We can't prevent suffering. This pain and that pain, yes, but not Pain. A society can only relive social suffering – unnecessary suffering. The rest remains. The root, the reality. ... I wonder if it isn't all a misunderstanding – this grasping after happiness, this fear of pain... It's the self that suffers, and there's a place where the self - ceases. (53)

Here, Shevek is in the middle of a thought process, in the middle of an argument with his friends. The theme of suffering, which is essential to existence, opens up many viewpoints on how

the idea of Pain and personal suffering, the kind of suffering society cannot alleviate, mirrors the ideas about how all people in a society are essentially of the same value or how some are inferior to others. Since we have to assume that any moral code, i.e. rules on how to act and interact with the rest of society, are exchangeable, we also have to assume that a society based on a strict moral code, can be overthrown.

However, to define the concept of suffering later in the novel during a heated discussion between Bedap and Shevek, Shevek slowly comes to realise that the society he finds himself in can only remain perfect as long as he does not attempt to pass the wall of public opinion. Bedap defines the suffering which is very similar to the suffering the prime movers try to work against:

I speak of spiritual suffering! Of people seeing their talent, their work, their lives wasted. Of good minds submitting to stupid ones. Of strength and courage strangled by envy, greed for power, fear of change. Change is freedom, change is life – is anything more basic to Odonian thought than that? But nothing changes any more! Our society is sick. (139)

In this respect both protagonists find themselves in an equal dilemma, but their means and final fulfilment of desires could not be more different. While Dagny Taggart is driven by the mere purpose of following the straight line of achievement in order to do anything which will make her happy, Shevek acts ultimately to share his achievements with as many people as possible, not because they asked for it or because they are in dire need, but to ultimately unbuild walls, to lower the barriers which divide all human beings and to enhance the possibilities to learn from each other instead of being caught in a vicious circle of isolation and alienation, profit-calculations and relentless self-interest.

Taoism

The awareness of the importance of constant mutability wherein ideals can be nurtured and transformed is a basic concept expressed in *The Dispossessed*. The concept of change and mutability is closely related to how Taoism tries to capture that which cannot be captured. In the translated edition by Le Guin of the *Tao Te Ching* the second poem “Soul food” expresses the impossibility of one straight line, one moral code:

Everybody on earth knowing / that beauty is beautiful / makes ugliness. / Everybody knowing / that goodness is good / makes wickedness. ... To bear and not to own; / to act and not lay claim; / to do the work and let it go: / for just letting it go / is what makes it stay. (4-5)

Le Guin's editorial note on this poem notes “not only [that values and beliefs] are culturally constructed but also [are] part of the interplay of yin and yan. ... To believe that our beliefs are permanent truths which encompass reality is a sad arrogance. To let go of this belief is to find safety” (5).

It is this “sad arrogance” with which Rand wins over her readers. The innocence and self-centred behaviour of her characters hides the implications of their acts. When considering that the prime movers reject the notion of spiritual or emotional suffering, they basically reject, through means of wealth and privilege, the inherent struggle of existence. One can pick up the threats of Rand's basic moral assumptions and unite them to a positive assertion of life, and still accept the exigency of struggle, of life being essentially always in flux. Therefore, it can never be stable in its succession, only in its assertion. It is the simplicity of this rejection of suffering which makes Rand's view of a best possible moral conduct so alluring.

Considering this, we could even question the extent of independence and autonomy Rand advocates. Being eventually only responsible for oneself is much less painful than taking others into account. However, not having to mirror and communicate emotional pain remains to be an utterly idealistic concept. According to Shevek, everyone suffers alone. Yet the moment where empathy begins, or “brotherhood” in his words, is “in shared pain” (Le Guin, 54), in the ability to find recognition and understanding in others.

Conclusion

What lies at the heart of every utopian imagination is the chase after an ideal. What distinguishes Le Guin's to Rand's approach to idealism is Le Guin's ability to create an awareness of the inherent ambiguity of every ideal. Rand on the other hand proclaims fully her strict dualism. The ideal to her is unblemished and it expects complete commitment.

This is established throughout both narratives in the way they explain difference and individuality. While Rand establishes early a sharp distinction between the industrialists, who are self-assertive and the rest of society, which is self-destructive, Le Guin, opening her novel with the image of the wall, explains the inherent ambiguity of every definition, as well as the need to revise and relate definitions in connection to one's surroundings.

Furthermore, opinions expressed through dialogue throughout *Atlas Shrugged* are always defined by opposing moral convictions. Characters are either identifying themselves with one or the other. Rand's explicit favouring for the victimised industrialist forces the reader to take sides. In *The Dispossessed*, on the other hand, ideas are established by argument. Different opinions are considered and discussions are rarely closed with a definite conclusion.

The society which Le Guin builds rests on the premise that every single cell has the potential to be a Randian hero, only with the difference that their sense of self is heightened in their ability for empathy, not for ultimate self-interest. Also they are different concerning the extent and necessity to enact what they desire, since the artificial society of Anarres depends on the concept of mutual aid. Rand's sharp dualism nurtures difference, i.e. individuality as well as freedom, i.e. self-interest. This however results in the radical reduction of empathy and solidarity which are so crucial to Le Guin's ideal.

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