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BEYOND THE WALL OF AN AMBIGUOUS UTOPIA – THE LANGUAGE OF URSULA LE GUIN’S *THE DISPOSSESSED*

*“You can’t crush ideas by suppressing them.
You can only crush them by ignoring them.
By refusing to think, refusing to change.”
The Dispossessed, p. 216*

Abstract

The Dispossessed is one of the most popular works of Ursula Le Guin. Published in 1974, it is believed to have been inspired by the cold war between the Soviet Union and the USA. The story is set in Ursula Le Guin’s Hainish Universe, and deals with the differences between an anarchistic-socialist society and a capitalist society on two sister planets, Anarres and Urras. Once a mining colony of Urras, Anarres is the home of revolutionaries who settled on it almost two centuries before the novel begins. They have lived in isolation ever since, and during that period they developed an artificial language, Pravic, which was created in accordance with the highest values of their very strict society. In this paper I will try to explain some words, constructions and anarchistic concepts of this artificial language, while trying to see how this invented language forms the characters and the way they perceive the world around them. Since Ursula Le Guin’s work is mainly about unbuilding the walls which exist between species, races, sexes, or,

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in this case, societies, we will try to find out what happens when one of the walls is one's language.

Key words: science fiction, ambiguous utopia, artificial language, Pravic

1. Introduction

Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*¹ was published in 1974 and it received several awards in the field of science fiction (Nebula, Hugo, Locus). It has, since then, remained one of her most appreciated and loved novels. It is believed that the story was partially inspired by the cold war between the USA and the USSR. Its subtitle is *An Ambiguous Utopia* because Ursula Le Guin does not claim her utopia to be a perfect society. She is well aware of its flaws, as well as of the fact that such a society would be impossible since "...no utopia can fulfill all its ideals" (Živković 1987: 31). It is important to point out that "[m]ost of her imaginary societies are models critical of our present societies" (Theall 1975: 1).

In this novel we follow the story on two planets, Urras and Anarres, somewhere in Le Guin's invented Hainish Universe. Urras is a regular planet and it is divided into several states, the largest one being A-Io, with a capitalist society. Anarres is Urras's moon, a satellite, which once was a mining colony. This is where two hundred years before the story takes place the revolutionaries emigrated from Urras and settled in order to build the society they strove for. It is a kind of anarchistic society and its inhabitants live in conditions of extreme economic poverty (Porter 1975: 6).

As in most novels by Ursula Le Guin set in her Hainish Universe, this story is about a traveler who arrives alone to an unfamiliar world in order to point out the necessity of communication between people who are different in certain ways (Brigg 1979: 40). The main character in this story, Shevek, is a physicist who specializes in time theory, and he decides

¹ The issue of the title of this novel is very complex. Some authors suggest that Ursula Le Guin decided on this title as a response to Dostoevsky's novel *Бесы* which was translated into English as *The Possessed* (Burns 2008: 171). Suvin believes that this is due to the possession of the demons of ownership (Suvin 1975: 4) and suggests that '*the dispossessed*' "... are those who have no more possessions, ... but also those who are no more possessed (in the Dostoevskian sense of demon-ridden) or obsessed by the principle of Having instead of Being, no more ridden by profiteering possessiveness whether applied to things, other people, nature, knowledge..." (Suvin 1975: 4).

to leave his home planet to finish his research on the theory of simultaneity which is being impeded by the system. He arrives on Urras as the first visitor since the revolution and the reader follows him as he experiences a world significantly different from his own.

The story begins *in medias res*, with Shevek's arrival on Urras, and then the chapters alternately describe his life on Anarres and his adventures on Urras. This type of story-telling is usual in utopian literature (Brennan and Downs 1979: 117) in order to point out the differences between the two societies. We read about Shevek's growing up on Anarres in one chapter, and in the next about his experiences and adventures on Urras until the time of his return home. The reader discovers how the anarchistic society on Anarres functions from Shevek's perspective but also learns about his perception of the society and life on Urras. That way, the reader learns from Shevek about the multiple differences between these two worlds and the people who inhabit them both. In this paper we will focus on the differences between their languages and the way these differences influence our hero's view of the world.

2. Language influences the way one thinks and acts

Since the novel was written during the early seventies, it presents a "poignant literary fulfillment of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis" (Bruhn: 15), which was particularly influential during the middle decades of the last century, "... an extreme version of which guides the development of 'Newspeak' in George Orwell's *1984*" (Bruhn: 3).

The first principle of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is linguistic determinism ("language determines the way we think") and the second one is linguistic relativity ("distinctions coded in one language are not found in any other language", (Crystal 1989: 15)). This basically means that our native tongue influences the way we think and act in a unique way. The differences between the two societies in this novel will be reflected in the languages their inhabitants speak, especially on Anarres since it is a utopian world in which everything is done according to a specific set of rules. As David Crystal puts it: "We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do..." (Crystal 1989: 15), and this will be the cause of many misunderstandings for Shevek when he arrives on a new planet.

Two languages are spoken by the people we meet in this novel. Pravic is an artificial language, like Esperanto, invented by one of the first settlers on Anarres, and it has no style or registers, no dialects or sociolects (Bruhn: 8). Iotic is the language spoken in the state on planet Urras our hero visits in the novel, and it is quite similar to the language we use. The interesting fact is that both languages are presented through English (with the exception of several invented words in Pravic). According to Olga Glebova, Ursula Le Guin always pays special attention to the language her characters speak, especially to the choice and usage of a specific word in a specific context (Glebova 2014: 45), and we will see that this was taken to another level in *The Dispossessed*.

3. Anarres and its language, Pravic

In order to understand how the language of Anarres works, it is necessary to learn a few facts about the planet it is spoken on.

The planet Anarres has a wall which was built around its space port, thus separating it from the rest of the world: “It enclosed the universe, leaving Anarres outside, free. ... The whole planet was inside it, a great prison camp, cut off from other worlds and other men, in quarantine” (Le Guin 1994: 2). This planet is bare; there are only several types of plants, and almost no animals. There is not enough water, the soil is not fertile, so it is difficult to grow anything, which leads to frequent food shortages. Since there are no animals, there is no food chain nor evolution, no struggle between the strong and the weak as we know it. All these facts had an influence on their language.

Anyone on Anarres can receive necessary medical help and care, but the fact that they are so isolated and do not have any animals which could spread diseases has led to a world with no viruses, so the inhabitants are almost never ill. This is one of the reasons they believe that it is almost shameful to be ill/sick, the second one being the fact that they were taught to refer to people on Urras as “sick”. People live together in communal buildings in extremely modest conditions; several people share a room so there is no privacy. Couples who want to live together can get a separate room in the communal buildings, but marriage as an institution does not exist and the author informs us that this has led to a world with no prostitution, which, in the author’s opinion, is connected

with the institution of marriage (Le Guin, 1994: 23). They can, however, have “partners” and stay in relationships as long as they please, although staying in a life partnership would be “against the Odonian ethic”² (Le Guin, 1994: 64).

People eat in huge dining halls together, and the quantity of food is limited due to ceaseless shortages, although no one is starving. Art is not appreciated on this planet; the author informs us that they do not distinguish between arts and crafts (Le Guin, 1994: 204). Any expression of individuality (art being its highest form), distinction from the surroundings, from other people, is frowned upon and discouraged; everyone has to look and think the same. This is also why, although everyone on Anarres has clothes, they only get two identical sets each – no one is to stick out. Schooling is available to everyone according to their intellectual capacities and interests, but everyone must occasionally participate in physically demanding communal work, regardless of their level of education. It is, therefore, not unusual to see a scientist or a doctor working in the fields or digging canals. The inhabitants of this planet never go on vacation and nobody has much free time on their hands; their days are filled with many planned activities. They all get up at the same time, meals are served at specific times, they go to bed at a prescribed time. People are trained to appreciate belonging to their group since family connections are not encouraged after very early childhood and their “children are raised in communal boarding schools” (Bruhn: 5). The Anarresti do not distinguish between work and play as they use the same word for both. The idea of work as alienating and exploitative is considered to be a capitalist (profiteering) concept and therefore wrong (Call 2007: 100). There is, however, a specific word for especially boring work, “kleggich” (like the digging of canals we mentioned earlier). Criminal offences and serious crimes are not frequent on this planet and there is no punishment for them; offenders are simply excluded from the community. Therefore, there are no prisons on Anarres, no judges or lawyers, although one might argue that the whole planet is a huge prison. The people of Anarres do not understand the concept of war, since there has never been one on their planet.

² ‘Odonianism’ is the anarchistic philosophy of Anarres, named after its founder, philosopher Laia Odo. This philosophy (which occasionally strongly resembles Marxism) provides the people of Anarres with the strict rules they are supposed to follow in all life situations and is frequently referred to throughout the novel.

Children and young people of Anarres do not learn anything about their planet of origin, Urras. They only watch old films about their ancestors and have no contact with the other world. They are taught that all people on Urras are bad, or, as they say in Pravic, “sick” and that Urras should be hated, detested and feared. Interacting with the other worlds is not welcome, since utopia can be preserved only if there is absolutely no communication with outsiders (Theall 1975: 10). Shevek, our hero, often argues with his friends about this: “We don’t go there, we don’t talk, there’s no communication. We really have no idea what life’s like on Urras now.... Anyhow, they can’t all be sick. No matter what their society’s like, some of them must be decent. People vary here, don’t they?” (Le Guin, 1994: 55).

The language they use also has to serve its purpose, the preservation of utopia. Pravic is there to accentuate the differences between the two societies, the two cultures (Plaw 2005: 286). Lewis Call believes that this language represents a “linguistic anarchy”, that the author tried to invent an anarchistic language. The language is completely rational and logical, but cannot be used to express emotions (Call 2007: 99–100). Since it is an invented language, it also has no style, no dialects or sociolects (Bruhn: 8), which is why its speakers can come across as blunt. For example, there are no euphemisms for bodily functions: they use the same words regardless of the situation, as they do not see these words as offensive. There are no swear words in Pravic: “Pravic was not a good swearing language. It is hard to swear when sex is not dirty and blasphemy does not exist” (Le Guin, 1994: 338). Therefore, when an Anarresti feels the need to swear, they use Iotic language. However, they do not understand the concepts behind the Iotic swear words and insults, for example “bastard” (Bruhn: 4–5). Since marriage does not exist, the concept of children born in or out of wedlock makes no sense to them. The ultimate insult on this planet is to tell someone that they are “propertarians”, “profiteers” or “egoists”, since anything connected with personal property is extremely unfavourable and thus discouraged.

They do not have words with which to begin a conversation, like “hello” or “good morning”; in their society the usage of those expressions is considered an unnecessary waste of time. They begin a conversation by saying their own name, which was given to them at birth by a computer. All names can be both male and female and they always have two syllables, but each name is unique. There are no address forms, no “sir” or “madam”, “as there exists no concept of status or class in the Anarresti society” (Bruhn:

4). They refer to each other as brother/sister, “ammar” since people are regarded as completely equal.

Pravic does not have words which express belonging or ownership. Its speakers are discouraged from using possessive adjectives and pronouns from their early age. When Shevek as a baby looks at the Sun and says “My Sun!”, he is immediately corrected: “It is not yours. ... Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share” (Le Guin, 1994: 35). “The use of *my, your, his* or *her* is reserved for emphasis and is often derogatory, as the pronouns³ imply a sense of private property ... which is odious to a system of anarchism” (Bruhn: 4).

This is the world our hero, Shevek, originates from. As a young scientist, a father of two children, he decides to leave them and his partner Takver to travel to the enemy world in order to finish his research which is being impeded by the rigid system of his home planet. He refuses to believe that his is an ideal world: “You can’t crush ideas by suppressing them. You can only crush them by ignoring them. By refusing to think – refusing to change. And that’s precisely what our society is doing!” (Le Guin 1994: 216). His aim is to connect the two worlds, to unbuild the walls which separate them.

4. Urras through the eyes of its visitor, Shevek

Shevek lands on Urras as the first visitor in over 200 years, and uses the foreign language he learned at home for the first time: “Iotic. The words made sense. All the little things made sense; only the whole thing did not” (Le Guin 1994: 8).

After being vaccinated and held in quarantine for a while, he is welcomed by the scientific community of Urras. He is surprised by their constant referring to him as “Dr Shevek”. Since all people are considered equal on his planet, he is not used to paying attention to one’s status and therefore insists that they should call him by name: “‘Shevek’, he said mildly. ‘No ‘doctor’” (Le Guin 1994: 258).

³ It is necessary to point out that none of the authors who wrote about this novel (not even Ursula Le Guin in the novel itself) distinguished between possessive adjectives (determiners) and possessive pronouns. All of them used the term “possessive pronoun/pronouns” for both categories, although in most cases they talked about possessive adjectives (determiners).

At the beginning of his stay, he is astonished by the splendor of the new world in comparison with his bare home planet. He sees lush green trees and hears the birds sing for the first time in his life and, at first, he is overwhelmed by the abundance of everything. Since there are not many animals or plants on his home planet, he adores the colours of the flowers and the blue sky. However, he feels slightly out of place in his plain clothes and wants some new things to wear in order to fit in with everybody else. After a while he begins to get used to wearing different types of clothes, to having plenty of food. He enjoys working with his students at the University, who are well rested and attentive, unlike the students back home who were always exhausted from their obligatory community work. He gets used to having his own rooms at the University, to having all the space for himself, and even begins to use possessive pronouns and adjectives (“Yes. My rooms?” He was accustomed to the constant use of the possessive pronoun⁴ by now, and spoke it without self-consciousness” (Le Guin 1994: 174–175)). It follows that people are influenced by their new environment as well, especially if the experience is enjoyable.

However, as time passes, Shevek begins to feel out of place. He interacts only with a small circle of people, all members of the upper classes, and he realizes that they do not want to learn about his world. Sometimes he knows the words they use, but does not understand the concepts behind them, for example: buy, business, prison or slave⁵. Since they do not use money on his home planet, “buying”, “selling” or “business” make no sense to an Anarresti. “Prison” is on this list because there are no crimes or punishments as we know them on his planet, while the concept of slavery is a complete puzzle to him since all people are regarded as true equals on his planet.

On Urras women are believed to be inferior to men and this is also something he is unable to grasp, since on Anarres both sexes are considered completely equal. He learns from his colleagues that women are only allowed to study enough to become schoolteachers, or, in the world of science, laboratory technicians. They do not believe that women are capable of achieving anything significant in the field of science, since women on this planet are appreciated only as wives and mothers. This is completely incomprehensible to Shevek, since it clashes with everything he has learnt

⁴ See footnote 3.

⁵ These examples can also be found in Bruhn, Daniel, “Walls of the Tongue: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*”, p. 5.

and believed all his life: “This matter of superiority and inferiority must be a central one in Urrasti social life. If to respect himself [a man] had to consider half the human race as inferior to him, how then did women manage to respect themselves – did they consider men inferior?” (Le Guin 1994: 23).

Although everyone seems kind at first, it turns out that they are only interested in his invention and in the material things they could gain from it. Once he realizes that the new world is also not perfect, he slowly slides into what he was taught back home, the concepts he grew up with turn out to be more powerful. Shevek begins to feel alienated because he realizes that he has only replaced the wall he faced at home with another wall on Urras. He manages to finish his research and the resulting formula will lead to the creation of an *ansible*, a device which will enable instantaneous messaging between distant planets in space, somewhat similar to our communication via internet. Shevek’s invention will help connect distant worlds and thus overcome the differences: “It would make a league of worlds possible. A federation. We have been held apart by the years, the decades between leaving and arriving, between question and response. ... We can talk – at last we can talk together” (Le Guin 1994: 450).

Shevek feels the need to crush the walls and change the fates of both planets with the help of science (Bernardo and Murphy 2006: 50, 52), because science, (unlike language) is always clear and precise. However, the way he was brought up remains strong within him, and, in accordance with it, he does not want to profit from his invention, so he decides to give it to everyone in his universe to use for free. Like a true anarchist, he says: “I have one lifetime and I will not spend it for greed and profiteering and lies. I will not serve *any* master” (Le Guin 1994: 452) and returns to Anarres just like he left it, empty-handed. His return “...clearly indicates his preference for his home-world,” but he “returns as a more critical and aware person...” (Theall 1975: 12).

5. Conclusion

We can conclude that the invented language, Pravic, used in the utopian society of the planet Anarres “...is a fair language and a just one. It encourages egalitarian thinking and actively works against the establishment of hierarchy. Yet it remains dry and sterile” (Call 2007: 101).

It is clear and straightforward but, since it has no style or registers, it frequently comes across as impolite and even too blunt. Although it was created as an artificial language, after two hundred years of usage it should not be considered as such, since it definitely influences its native speakers and their views of the world in the same way any natural language does.

Through the thoughts and actions of the main character of this novel, Shevek, the author tells us that isolation is never a good thing and that no society should exclude itself from the rest of the world in order to preserve its structure and its values. As Shevek puts it: “To lock out, to lock in, the same act...” (Le Guin 1994: 14). Learning the language of one’s adversary can be the first step towards true communication which can lead to overcoming the differences between the opposed parties. Ursula Le Guin indicates that learning about our differences is the only way to break down any wall, and that can be achieved only through communication. This applies both to her stories set in space as well as to us, on our planet, at present.

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