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Fredric Jameson

World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative

Huddled forms wrapped in furs, packed snow and sweaty faces, torches by day, a ceremonial trowel and a corner stone swung into place.... Such is our entry into the other world of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (LHD), a world which, like all invented ones, awakens irresistible reminiscences of this the real one—here less Eisenstein's Muscovy, perhaps, than some Eskimo High Middle Ages. Yet this surface exoticism conceals a series of what may be called "generic discontinuities,"¹ and the novel can be shown to be constructed from a heterogeneous group of narrative modes artfully superposed and intertwined, thereby constituting a virtual anthology of narrative strands of different kinds. So we find here intermingled: the travel narrative (with anthropological data), the pastiche of myth, the political novel (in the restricted sense of the drama of court intrigue), straight SF (the Hainish colonization, the spaceship in orbit around Gethen's sun), Orwellian dystopia (the imprisonment on the Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Agency), adventure-story (the flight across the glacier), and finally even, perhaps, something like a multi-racial love-story (the drama of communication between the two cultures and species).

Such structural discontinuities, while accounting for the effectiveness of LHD by comparison with books that can do only one or two of these things, at once raise the basic question of the novel's ultimate unity. In what follows, I want to make a case for a thematic coherence which has little enough to do with plot as such, but which would seem to shed some light on the process of world-construction in fictional narratives in general. Thematically, we may distinguish four different types of material in the novel, the most striking and obvious being that of the hermaphroditic sexuality of the inhabitants of Gethen. The "official" message of the book, however, would seem to be rather different than this, involving a social and historical meditation on the institutions of Karhide and the capacity of that or any other society to mount full-scale organized warfare. After this, we would surely want to mention the peculiar ecology, which, along with the way of life it imposes, makes of LHD something like an anti-*Dune*; and, finally, the myths and religious practices of the planet, which give the book its title.²

The question is now whether we can find something that all these themes have in common, or better still, whether we can isolate some essential structural homology between them. To begin with the climate of Gethen (known to the Ekumen as Winter), the first Investigator supplies an initial interpretation of it in terms of the resistance of this ice-age environment to human life:

The weather of Winter is so relentless, so near the limit of tolerability even to them with all their cold-adaptations, that perhaps they use up their fighting spirit fighting the cold. The marginal peoples, the races that just get by, are rarely the warriors. And in the end, the dominant factor in Gethenian life is not sex or any other human being: it is their environment, their cold world. Here man has a crueler enemy even than himself. (§7)

However, this is not the only connotation that extreme cold may have; the motif may have some other, deeper, disguised symbolic meaning that can perhaps best be illustrated by the related symbolism of the tropics in recent SF, particularly in the novels of J.G. Ballard. Heat is here conveyed as a kind of dissolution of the body into the outside world, a loss of that clean separation

from clothes and external objects that gives you your autonomy and allows you to move about freely, a sense of increasing contamination and stickiness in the contact between your physical organism and the surfaces around it, the wet air in which it bathes, the fronds that slap against it. So it is that the jungle itself, with its non—or anti-Wordsworthian nature, is felt to be some immense and alien organism into which our bodies run the risk of being absorbed, the most alarming expression of this anxiety in SF being perhaps that terrible scene in Silverberg's *Downward to Earth* (§8) in which the protagonist discovers a human couple who have become hosts to some unknown parasitic larvae that stir inside their still living torsos like monstrous foetuses.

This loss of physical autonomy—dramatized by the total environment of the jungle into which the European dissolves—is then understood as a figure for the loss of psychic autonomy, of which the utter demoralization, the colonial whisky-drinking and general dissolution of the tropical hero is the canonical symbol in literature. (Even more relevant to the present study is the relationship between extreme heat and sexual anxiety—a theme particularly visible in the non-SF treatments of similar material by Catholic novelists like Graham Greene and François Mauriac, for whom the identification of heat and adolescent sexual torment provides ample motivation for the subsequent desexualization experienced by the main characters.)

Ballard's work is suggestive in the way in which he translates both physical and moral dissolution into the great ideological myth of entropy, in which the historic collapse of the British Empire is projected outwards into some immense cosmic deceleration of the universe itself as well as of its molecular building blocks.³ This kind of ideological message makes it hard to escape the feeling that the heat symbolism in question here is a peculiarly Western and ethnocentric one. Witness, if proof be needed, Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, where the systematic displacement of the action from Upstate New York to the Caribbean, from dehumanized American scientists to the joyous and skeptical religious practices of Bokononism, suggests a scarcely disguised meditation on the relationship between American power and the Third World, between repression and scientific knowledge in the capitalist world, and a nostalgic and primitivist evocation of the more genuine human possibilities available in an older and simpler culture. The preoccupation with heat, the fear of sweating as of some dissolution of our very being, would then be tantamount to an unconscious anxiety about tropical field-labor (an analogous cultural symbolism can be found in the historical echo of Northern factory work in the blue jeans and work-shirts of our own affluent society). The nightmare of the tropics thus expresses a disguised terror at the inconceivable and unformulable threat posed by the masses of the Third World to our own prosperity and privilege, and suggests a new and unexpected framework in which to interpret the icy climate of Le Guin's Gethen.

In such a reading the cold weather of the planet Winter must be understood, first and foremost, not so much as a rude environment, inhospitable to human life, as rather a symbolic affirmation of the autonomy of the organism, and a fantasy realization of some virtually total disengagement of the body from its environment or eco-system. Cold isolates, and the cold of Gethen is what brings home to the characters (and the reader) their physical detachment, their free-standing isolation as separate individuals, goose-flesh transforming the skin itself into some outer envelope, the sub-zero temperatures of the planet forcing the organism back on its own inner resources and making of each a kind of self-sufficient blast-furnace. Gethen thus stands as an attempt to imagine an experimental landscape in which our being-in-the-world is simplified to the extreme, and in which our sensory links with the multiple and shifting per-

ceptual fields around us are abstracted so radically as to vouchsafe, perhaps, some new glimpse as to the ultimate nature of human reality.

It seems to me important to insist on this cognitive and experimental function of the narrative in order to distinguish it from other, more nightmarish representations of the sealing off of consciousness from the external world (as, e.g. in the "half-life" of the dead in Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*). One of the most significant potentialities of SF as a form is precisely this capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe; and Le Guin has herself described her invention of Gethenian sexuality along the lines of just such a "thought experiment" in the tradition of the great physicists: "Einstein shoots a light-ray through a moving elevator; Schrödinger puts a cat in a box. There is no elevator, no cat, no box. The experiment is performed, the question is asked, in the mind."⁴ Only one would like to recall that "high literature" once also affirmed such aims. As antiquated as Zola's notions of heredity and as naive as his fascination with Claude Bernard's account of experimental research may have been, the naturalist concept of the *experimental novel* amounted, on the eve of the emergence of modernism, to just such a reassertion of literature's cognitive function. That his assertion no longer seems believable merely suggests that our own particular environment—the total system of late monopoly capital and of the consumer society—feels so massively in place and its reification so overwhelming and impenetrable, that the serious artist is no longer free to tinker with it or to project experimental variations.⁵ The historical opportunities of SF as a literary form are intimately related to this paralysis of so-called high literature. The officially "non-serious" or pulp character of SF is an indispensable feature in its capacity to relax that tyrannical "reality principle" which functions as a crippling censorship over high art, and to allow the "paraliterary" form thereby to inherit the vocation of giving us alternate versions of a world that has elsewhere seemed to resist even *imagined* change. (This account of the transfer of one of the most vital traditional functions of literature to SF would seem to be confirmed by the increasing efforts of present-day "art literature"—e.g., Thomas Pynchon—to reincorporate those formal capacities back into the literary novel.)

The principal techniques of such narrative experimentation—of the systematic variation, by SF, of the empirical and historical world around us—have been most conveniently codified under the twin headings of *analogy* and *extrapolation*.⁶ The reading we have proposed of Le Guin's experimental ecology suggests, however, the existence of yet a third and quite distinct technique of variation which it will be the task of the remainder of this analysis to describe. It would certainly be possible to see the Gethenian environment as extrapolating one of our own Earth seasons, in an extrapolation developed according to its own inner logic and pushed to its ultimate conclusions—as, for example, when Pohl and Kornbluth project out onto a planetary scale, in *The Space Merchants*, huckstering trends already becoming visible in the nascent consumer society of 1952; or when Brunner, in *The Sheep Look Up*, catastrophically speeds up the environmental pollution already underway. Yet this strikes me as being the least interesting thing about Le Guin's experiment, which is based on a principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality, something like a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification which we will henceforth term *world-reduction*. And once we grasp the nature of this technique, its effects in the other thematic areas of the novel become inescapable, as for instance in the conspicuous absence of other animal species on Gethen. The omission of a whole grid-

work of evolutionary phyla can, of course, be accounted for by the hypothesis that the colonization of Gethen, and the anomalous sexuality of its inhabitants, were the result of some forgotten biological experiment by the original Hainish civilization, but it does not make that lack any less disquieting: "There are no communal insects on Winter. Gethenians do not share their earth as Terrans do with those older societies, those innumerable cities of little sexless workers possessing no instinct but that of obedience to the group, the whole" (§13).

But it is in Le Guin's later novel, *The Dispossessed* (TD) that this situation is pushed to its ultimate consequences, providing the spectacle of a planet (Anarres) in which human life is virtually without biological partners:

It's a queer situation, biologically speaking. We Anarresti are unnaturally isolated. On the old World there are eighteen phyla of land animal; there are classes, like the insects, that have so many species they've never been able to count them, and some of these species have populations of billions. Think of it: everywhere you looked animals, other creatures, sharing the earth and air with you. You'd feel so much more a part (§6)

Hence Shevek's astonishment, when, on his arrival in Urras, he is observed by a face "not like any human face...as long as his arm, and ghastly white. Breath jetted in vapor from what must be nostrils, and terrible, unmistakable, there was an eye." (§1). Yet the absence, from the Anarres of TD, of large animals such as the donkey which here startles Shevek, is the negative obverse of a far more positive omission, namely that of the Darwinian life-cycle itself, with its predators and victims alike: it is the sign that human beings have surmounted historical determinism, and have been left alone with themselves, to invent their own destinies. In TD, then, the principle of world-reduction has become an instrument in the conscious elaboration of a utopia. On Gethen, however, its effects remain more tragic, and the Hainish experiment has resulted in the unwitting evolution of test-tube subjects rather than in some great and self-conscious social laboratory of revolution and collective self-determination:

Your race is appallingly alone in its world. No other mammalian species. No other ambisexual species. No animal intelligent enough even to domesticate as pets. It must color your thinking, this uniqueness...to be so solitary, in so hostile a world: it must affect your entire outlook. (§16)

Still, the deeper import of such details, and of the constructional principle at work in them, will become clear only after we observe similar patterns in other thematic areas of the novel, as, for instance, in Gethenian religion. In keeping with the book's antithetical composition, to the two principal national units, Karhide and Orgoreyn, correspond two appropriately antithetical religious cults: the Orgota one of Meshe being something like a heresy or offshoot of the original Karhidish Handdara in much the same way that Christianity was the issue of Judaism. Meshe's religion of total knowledge reflects the mystical experience from which it sprang and in which all of time and history became blindingly co-present: the emphasis on knowing, however, suggests a positivistic bias which is as appropriate to the commercial society of Orgoreyn, one would think, as was Protestantism to the nascent capitalism of western Europe. It is, however, the other religion, that of Karhide, which is most relevant to our present argument: the Handdara is, in antithesis to the later sect, precisely a mystique of darkness, a cult of non-knowledge parallel to the drastic reductionism of the Gethenian climate. The aim of its spiritual practice is to strip the mind of its non-essentials and to reduce it to some quintessentially simplified function:

The Handdara discipline of Presence...is a kind of trance—the Handdarate, given to negatives, call it an untrance—involving self-loss (self-augmentation?) through extreme sensual receptiveness and awareness. Though the technique is the exact opposite of most techniques of mysticism it probably is a mystical discipline, tending towards the experience of Immanence. (§5)

Thus the fundamental purpose of the ritual practice of the foretelling—dramatized in one of the most remarkable chapters of the novel—is, by answering answerable questions about the future, “to exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question” (§5), and indeed, ultimately, of the activity of asking questions in general. What the real meaning of these wrong or unanswerable questions may be, we will try to say later on; but this mystical valorization of ignorance is certainly quite different from the brash commercial curiosity with which the Envoy is so pleasantly surprised on his arrival in Orgoreyn (§10).

Now we must test our hypothesis about the basic constructional principle of LHD against that picture of an ambisexual species—indeed, an ambisexual society—which is its most striking and original feature. The obvious defamiliarization with which such a picture confronts the *lecteur moyen sensuel* is not exactly that of the permissive and countercultural tradition of male SF writing, as in Farmer or Sturgeon. Rather than a stand in favor of a wider tolerance for all kinds of sexual behaviour, it seems more appropriate to insist (as does Le Guin herself in a forthcoming article) on the feminist dimension of her novel, and on its demystification of the sex roles themselves. The basic point about Gethenian sexuality is that the sex role does not color everything else in life, as is the case with us, but is rather contained and defused, reduced to that brief period of the monthly cycle when, as with our animal species, the Gethenians are in “heat” or “kemmer.” So the first Investigator sent by the Ekumen underscores this basic “estrangement-effect” of Gethen on “normally” sexed beings:

The First Mobile, if one is sent, must be warned that unless he is very self-assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. On Winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience. (§7)

That there are difficulties in such a representation (e.g., the unavoidable designation of gender by English pronouns), the author is frank to admit in the article referred to.⁷ Still, the reader's failures are not all her own, and the inveterate tendency of students to describe the Gethenians as “sexless” says something about the limits imposed by stereotypes of gender on their own imaginations. Far from eliminating sex, indeed, Gethenian biology has the result of eliminating sexual repression:

Being so strictly defined and limited by nature, the sexual urge of Gethenians is really not much interfered with by society: there is less coding, channeling, and repressing of sex than in any bisexual society I know of. Abstinence is entirely voluntary; indulgence is entirely acceptable. Sexual fear and sexual frustration are both extremely rare. (§13).

The author was in fact most careful not merely to say that these people are not eunuchs, but also—in a particularly terrifying episode, that of the penal farm with its anti-kemmer drugs—to show by contrast what eunuchs in this society would look like (§13).

Indeed, the vision of public kemmer-houses (along with the sexual license of utopia in TD) ought to earn the enthusiasm of the most hard-core Fourierist or sexual libertarian. If it does not quite do that, it is because there is another,

rather different sense in which my students were not wrong to react as they did and in which we meet, once again, the phenomenon we have called world-reduction. For if Le Guin's Gethen does not do away with sex, it may be suggested that it does away with everything that is *problematical* about it. Essentially, Gethenian physiology solves the problem of sex, and that is surely something no human being of our type has ever been able to do (owing largely to the non-biological nature of human desire as opposed to "natural" or instinctual animal need). Desire is permanently scandalous precisely because it admits of no "solution"—promiscuity, repression, or the couple all being equally intolerable. Only a makeup of the Gethenian type, with its limitation of desire to a few days of the monthly cycle, could possibly curb the problem. Such a makeup suggests that sexual desire is something that can be completely removed from other human activities, allowing us to see them in some more fundamental, unmixed fashion. Here again, then, in the construction of this particular projection of desire which is Gethenian ambisexuality, we find a process at work which is structurally analogous to that operation of world-reduction or ontological attenuation we have described above: the experimental production of an imaginary situation by excision of the real, by a radical suppression of features of human sexuality which cannot but carry a powerful fantasy-investment in its own right. The dream of some scarcely imaginable freedom from sex, indeed, is a very ancient human fantasy, almost as powerful in its own way as the outright sexual wish-fulfillments themselves. What its more general symbolic meaning in LHD might be, we can only discover by grasping its relationship to that other major theme of the novel which is the nature of Gethenian social systems, and in particular, their respective capacities to wage war.

It would seem on first glance that the parallelism here is obvious and that, on this particular level, the object of what we have been calling world-reduction can only be institutional warfare itself, which has not yet developed in Karhide's feudal system. Certainly Le Guin's work as a whole is strongly pacifistic, and her novella "The Word for World is Forest" is (along with Aldiss' *Dark Light-Years*) one of the major SF denunciations of the American genocide in Vietnam. Yet it remains an ethical, rather than a socioeconomic, vision of imperialism, and its last line extends the guilt of violence to even that war of national liberation of which it has just shown the triumph: "Maybe after I die people will be as they were before I was born, and before you came. But I do not think so" (§8). Yet if there is no righteous violence, then the long afternoon and twilight of Earth will turn out to be just that onerous dystopia SF writers have always expected it would.

This properly liberal, rather than radical, position in Le Guin seems to be underscored by her predilection for quietistic heroes and her valorization of an anti-political, anti-activist stance, whether it be in the religion of Karhide, the peaceable traditions of the "creechies," or in Shevek's own reflective temperament. What makes her position more ambiguous and more interesting, however, is that Le Guin's works reject the institutionalization of violence rather than violence itself: nothing is more shocking in TD than the scene in which Shevek is beaten into unconsciousness by a man who is irritated by the similarity between their names:

"You're one of those little profiteers who goes to school to keep his hands clean," the man said. "I've always wanted to knock the shit out of one of you." "Don't call me profiteer!" Shevek said, but this wasn't a verbal battle. Shevek knocked him double. He got in several return blows, having long arms and more temper than his opponent expected: but he was outmatched. Several people paused to watch, saw that it was a fair fight but not an interesting one, and went on. They were neither offended nor attracted

by simple violence. Shevek did not call for help, so it was nobody's business but his own. When he came to he was lying on his back on the dark ground between two tents. (§2)

Utopia is, in other words not a place in which humanity is freed from violence, but rather one in which it is released from the multiple determinisms (economic, political, social) of history itself: in which it settles its accounts with its ancient collective fatalisms, precisely in order to be free to do whatever it wants with its interpersonal relationships—whether for violence, love, hate, sex or whatever. All of that is raw and strong, and goes farther towards authenticating Le Guin's vision—as a return to fundamentals rather than some beautification of existence—than any of the explanations of economic and social organization which TD provides.

What looks like conventional liberalism in Le Guin (and is of course still ideologically dubious to the very degree that it continues to “look like” liberalism) is in reality itself a use of the Jeffersonian and Thoreauvian tradition against important political features of that imperializing liberalism which is the dominant ideology of the United States today—as her one contemporary novel, *The Lathe of Heaven*, makes plain. This is surely the meaning of the temperamental opposition between the Tao-like passivity of Orr and the obsession of Haber with apparently reforming and ameliorative projects of all kinds:

The quality of the will to power is, precisely, growth. Achievement is its cancellation. To be, the will to power must increase with each fulfillment, making the fulfillment only a step to a further one. The vaster the power gained, the vaster the appetite for more. As there was no visible limit to the power Haber wielded through Orr's dreams, so there was no end to his determination to improve the world. (§9)

The pacifist bias of LHD is thus part of a more general refusal of the growth-oriented power dynamics of present-day American liberalism, even where the correlations it suggests between institutionalized warfare, centralization, and psychic aggression may strike us as preoccupations of a characteristically liberal type.

I would suggest, however, that beneath this official theme of warfare, there are details scattered here and there throughout the novel which suggest the presence of some more fundamental attempt to reimagine history. What reader has not indeed been struck—without perhaps quite knowing why—by descriptions such as that of the opening cornerstone ceremony: “Masons below have set an electric winch going, and as the king mounts higher the keystone of the arch goes up past him in its sling, is raised, settled, and fitted almost soundlessly, great ton-weight block though it is, into the gap between the two piers, making them one, one thing, an arch” (§1); or of the departure of the first spring caravan towards the fastnesses of the North: “twenty bulky, quiet-running, barge-like trucks on caterpillar treads, going single file down the deep streets of Erhenrang through the shadows of morning” (§5)? Of course, the concept of *extrapolation* in SF means nothing if it does not designate just such details as these, in which heterogeneous or contradictory elements of the empirical real world are juxtaposed and recombined into piquant montages. Here the premise is clearly that of a feudal or medieval culture that knows electricity and machine technology. However, the machines do not have the same results as in our own world: “The mechanical-industrial Age of Invention in Karhide is at least three thousand years old, and during those thirty centuries they have developed excellent and economical central-heating devices using steam, electricity, and other principles; but they do not install them in their houses” (§3). What makes all this more complicated than the usual extrapolative

projection is, it seems to me, the immense time span involved, and the great antiquity of Karhide's science and technology, which tends to emphasize not so much what happens when we thus combine or amalgamate different historical stages of our own empirical Earth history, but rather precisely *what does not happen*. That is, indeed, what is most significant about the example of Karhide, namely that *nothing* happens, an immemorial social order remains exactly as it was, and the introduction of electrical power fails—quite unaccountably and astonishingly to us—to make any impact whatsoever on the stability of a basically static, unhistorical society.

Now there is surely room for debate as to the role of science and technology in the evolution of the so-called West (i.e., the capitalist countries of western Europe and North America). For Marxists, science developed as a result both of technological needs and of the quantifying thought-modes inherent in the emergent market system; while an anti-Marxist historiography stresses the fundamental role played by technology and inventions in what now becomes strategically known as the Industrial Revolution (rather than capitalism). Such a dispute would in any case be inconceivable were not technology and capitalism so inextricably intertwined in our own history. What Le Guin has done in her projection of Karhide is to sunder the two in peremptory and dramatic fashion:

Along in those four millennia the electric engine was developed, radios and power looms and power vehicles and farm machinery and all the rest began to be used, and a Machine Age got going, gradually, without any industrial revolution, without any revolution at all. (§2)

What is this to say but that Karhide is an attempt to imagine something like a West which would never have known capitalism? The existence of modern technology in the midst of an essentially feudal order is the sign of this imaginative operation as well as the gauge by which its success can be measured: the miraculous presence, among all those furs and feudal *shift-grethor*, of this emblematically quiet, peacefully humming technology is the proof that in Karhide we have to do not with one more specimen of feudal SF, but rather precisely with an alternate world to our own, one in which—by what strange quirk of fate?—capitalism never happened.

It becomes difficult to escape the conclusion that this attempt to rethink Western history without capitalism is of a piece, structurally and in its general spirit, with the attempt to imagine human biology without desire which we have described above; for it is essentially the inner dynamic of the market system which introduces into the chronicle-like and seasonal, cyclical, tempo of pre-capitalist societies the fever and ferment of what we used to call *progress*. The underlying identification between sex as an intolerable, wellnigh gratuitous complication of existence, and capitalism as a disease of change and meaningless evolutionary momentum, is thus powerfully underscored by the very technique—that of world-reduction—whose mission is the utopian exclusion of both phenomena.

Karhide is, of course, not a utopia, and LHD is not in that sense a genuinely utopian work. Indeed, it is now clear that the earlier novel served as something like a proving ground for techniques that are not consciously employed in the construction of a utopia until TD. It is in the latter novel that the device of world-reduction becomes transformed into a sociopolitical hypothesis about the inseparability of utopia and scarcity. The Odonian colonization of barren Anarres offers thus the most thoroughgoing literary application of the technique, at the same time that it constitutes a powerful and timely rebuke to present-day attempts to parlay American abundance and consumers' goods into some ultimate vision of the "great society."⁸

I would not want to suggest that all of the great historical utopias have been constructed around the imaginative operation which we have called world-reduction. It seems possible, indeed, that it is the massive commodity environment of late capitalism that has called up this particular literary and imaginative strategy, which would then amount to a political stance as well. So in William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, the hero—a nineteenth-century visitor to the future—is astonished to watch the lineaments of nature reappear beneath the fading inscription of the grim industrial metropolis, the old names on the river themselves transfigured from dreary slang into the evocation of meadow landscapes, the slopes and streams, so long stifled beneath the pavements of tenement buildings and channeled into sewage gutters, now reemerging in the light of day:

London, which—which I have read about as the modern Babylon of civilization, seems to have disappeared.... As to the big murky places which were once, as we know, the centres of manufacture, they have, like the brick and mortar desert of London, disappeared; only, since they were centres of nothing but "manufacture," and served no purpose but that of the gambling market, they have left less signs of their existence than London.... On the contrary, there has been but little clearance, though much rebuilding, in the smaller towns. Their suburbs, indeed, when they had any, have melted away into the general country, and space and elbow-room has been got in their centres; but there are the towns still with their streets and squares and market-places; so that it is by means of these smaller towns that we of today can get some kind of idea of what the towns of the older world were alike,—I mean to say, at their best.⁹

Morris' utopia is, then, the very prototype of an aesthetically and libidinally oriented social vision, as opposed to the technological and engineering-oriented type of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*—a vision thus in the line of Fourier rather than Saint Simon, and more prophetic of the values of the New Left rather than those of Soviet centralism, a vision in which we find this same process of weeding out the immense waste-and-junk landscape of capitalism and an artisanal gratification in the systematic excision of masses of buildings from a clogged urban geography. Does such an imaginative projection imply and support a militant political stance? Certainly it did so in Morris's case; but the issue in our time is that of the militancy of ecological politics generally. I would be inclined to suggest that such "no-places" offer little more than a breathing space, a momentary relief from the overwhelming presence of late capitalism. Their idyllic, yet elegiac, sweetness, their pastel tones, the rather pathetic withdrawal they offer from grimmer Victorian realities, seems most aptly characterized by Morris' subtitle to *News from Nowhere*: "An Epoch of Rest." It is as though—after the immense struggle to free yourself, even in imagination, from the infection of our very minds and values and habits by an omnipresent consumer capitalism—on emerging suddenly and against all expectation into a narrative space radically other, uncontaminated by all those properties of the old lives and the old preoccupations, the spirit could only lie there gasping in the fresh silence, too weak, too new, to do more than gaze wanly about it at a world remade.

Something of the fascination of LHD—as well as the ambiguity of its ultimate message—surely derives from the subterranean drive within it towards a utopian "rest" of this kind, towards some ultimate "no-place" of a collectivity untormented by sex or history, by cultural superfluities or an object-world irrelevant to human life. Yet we must not conclude without observing that in this respect the novel includes its own critique as well.

It is indeed a tribute to the rigor with which the framework has been imagined that history has no sooner, within it, been dispelled, than it sets fatally in again; that Karhide, projected as a social order without development, begins

to develop with the onset of the narrative itself. This is, it seems to me, the ultimate meaning of that *motif* of right and wrong questions mentioned above and resumed as follows: "to learn which questions are unanswerable, and not to answer them: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness." It is no accident that this maxim follows hard upon another, far more practical discussion about politics and historical problems:

To be sure, if you turn your back on Mishnory and walk away from it, you are still on the Mishnory road.... You must go somewhere else; you must have another goal; then you walk a different road. Yegey in the Hall of the Thirty-Three today: 'I unalterably oppose this blockade of grain-exports to Karhide, and the spirit of competition which motivates it.' Right enough, but he will not get off the Mishnory road going that way. He must offer an alternative. Orgoreyn and Karhide both must stop following the road they're on, in either direction; they must go somewhere else, and break the circle. (§11)

But, of course, the real alternative to this dilemma, the only conceivable way of breaking out of that vicious circle which is the option between feudalism and capitalism, is a quite different one from the liberal "solution"—the Ekumen as a kind of galactic United Nations—offered by the writer and her heroes. One is tempted to wonder whether the strategy of not asking questions ("Mankind," according to Marx, "always [taking] up only such problems as it can solve")¹⁰ is not the way in which the utopian imagination protects itself against a fatal return to just those historical contradictions from which it was supposed to provide relief. In that case, the deepest subject of Le Guin's LHD would not be utopia as such, but rather our own incapacity to conceive it in the first place. In this way too, it would be a proving ground for TD.

NOTES

1. See my "Generic Discontinuities in SF: Brian Aldiss' *Starship*," *SFS* 1(1973):57-68.
2. I find justification for omitting from this list the theme of communication—mind-speech and foretelling—in Ian Watson's important "Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven* and the Role of Dick," *SFS* 2(1975):67-75.
3. Entropy is of course a very characteristic late-19th-century bourgeois myth (e.g., Henry Adams, Wells, Zola). See, for further justification of this type of interpretation, my "In Retrospect," *SFS* 1(1974):272-76.
4. Ursula K. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary?" In *Aurora: Beyond Equality*, ed. Susan J. Anderson and Vonda McIntyre (in press at Fawcett).
5. I have tried to argue an analogous reduction of possibilities for the historical novel in *Marxism and Form* (Princeton 1971), pp. 248-52.
6. See Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," *College English* 34(1972):372-82, and "Science Fiction and the Genological Jungle," *Genre* 6(1973):251-73.
7. See Note 4. Some problems Le Guin does not notice—e.g., synchronization of kemmer and continuity of sex roles between love partners—are pointed out by the relentlessly logical Stanislaw Lem in "Lost Opportunities," *SF Commentary* No. 24, pp. 22-24.
8. Inasmuch as *The Dispossessed*—sure the most important utopia since Skinner's *Walden Two*—seems certain to play a significant part in political reflection, it seems important to question her qualification of Anarres as an "anarchist" Utopia. Thereby she doubtless intends to differentiate its decentralized organization from the classical Soviet model, without taking into account the importance of the "withering away of the state" in Marxism also—a political goal most recently underscored by the Cultural Revolution and the experimental Communes in China and the various types of workers' self-management elsewhere.
9. William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (London 1903), pp. 91, 95, 96.
10. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), p.44.