

## 5.4. The Distances Between Utopia and Dystopia in Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas"

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### **Abstract**

Harold Bloom (1987) asserted that Ursula K. Le Guin was a mythological fantasist and that her narrative art worked to protect us from myth and its nightmarish consequences. Such characteristics become evident when we consider how close to the real world are the fictional universes she created, although apparently so distant in space and time. In Le Guin's sometimes inverted mirror of human societies we witness the depiction of our hopes for the future, but also of our fears for what is yet to come. Utopian idylls and dystopian horrors share the pages of a mimetic realm which invites the readers to a quest from which they may return with a renewed view of reality. Published in 1974, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" depicts a prosperous city whose wealth and joy depend on the suffering of a child locked in an underground room. The narrator invites us for a tour around Omelas and asks for help to design its specific aspects. The aim of this essay is to discuss the itinerary proposed by the author in her short story and investigate how the path inside and out of Omelas helps us clarify the sometimes unclear limits of utopia, dystopia, and the myth of their rigid opposition.

**Key words:** utopia, dystopia, Le Guin, Omelas, opposition

In the introduction to the issue of *Modern Critical Interpretations* dedicated to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Harold Bloom (1987: 1) asserts that Ursula K. Le Guin "is essentially a mythological fantasist". Either having chosen science fiction as a genre or being chosen by it as a writer, Le Guin created universes through what is called by some sci-fi critics as the vehicle for the articulation of a "new

mythology". Nevertheless, it seems that some of her narratives defy the very idea of a myth as a complete explanation to a social phenomenon.

Le Guin has always been an explorer of the limitations of possible worlds and an investigator of the potentialities of apparently impossible realms. In the first movement, we find the influence of the cultural diversity provided by her parents' friends and colleagues who often visited the family houses and turned the domestic environment into a utopian simulacrum of what the world could be without the social restrictions commonly imposed on the idea of difference. In the second movement, her childhood readings and writings inspired Le Guin's creative imagination to fill the gaps, to challenge the limits, and to expose the inconsistencies of a reality overshadowed by an excess of a certain type of rationality and realism. In a sense, she corrected the true imperfections and denounced the false qualities of what we call the real world, through the creation and analysis of other worlds. As Elizabeth Cummins highlights, "both Le Guin's biography and her publications reveal that she has always been at home in more than one world" (1993: 4).

If we understand that literature is, among other things, an aesthetic way to stray from reality and observe it from a different perspective, Le Guin's works transport her readers to a place far away from their houses, so that they might pay more attention to their own environment when they return. And once they're home, they may choose if they want to rearrange the furniture or to lie back on the armchair and observe the order of things with a renewed look. After all, the distance between the aesthetic and the ethic spheres is sometimes as vast as the one between conscience and action. As Cummins points out, "the worlds of science fiction and fantasy literature, then, offer readers a chance to stretch their minds by experiencing an alternate world and then a chance to return to consensus reality with a changed perspective" (1993: 7).

This inverted mirroring effect is similar to the journeys proposed by utopian and dystopian authors who seem to believe that an apparent evasion from reality through literature may trigger reflection and awareness of reality itself. Considering this premise, these writers create idealistic and nightmarish fictional worlds to explore the idealistic and nightmarish possibilities of the real world. As Vita Fortunati observes,

Utopianism is, thus, a tension, the aspiration to go beyond the fixity of the present, with a vision, which is radically alternative to the reality in which the writer lives and operates ... There is always a close link between the invented utopia and the social environment in which its author is situated, the alternatives offered, the representation of a radically

different society, invariably springing from a lucid critique of what the present is for the writer. (Fortunati, 2000: 635)

That does not mean that the result of the rearrangement of the signs around us will always be a utopia or a dystopia. It also does not mean that a literary recreation of these signs cannot be both. Taking this approach to Le Guin's works, we see more clearly how her texts discuss the rhetorical ambiguity that pervades utopianism, that is, a social criticism combined with a tendency to exacerbate its own social idealism. Sometimes nightmares are created through the extrapolation of dreams. Even though Le Guin felt at home in different worlds, the places she described are not always comfortable for readers.

We could question who sets the limits between a utopian nightmare and a dystopian dream. Le Guin's readers are trusted with some autonomy not only to tell light from darkness in a narrative, but also to help depict its reflexes and shadows:

Le Guin wishes to stimulate and encourage her readers to think in ethical terms even if, in the end, it should transpire that they make substantive ethical judgments that are different from her own ... she encourages her readers to think for themselves, and to engage with the complexities of the ethical dilemma in question, whatever it might be... Le Guin enjoins her readers to rise above each of these limited and partial perspectives of what is good and evil or right and wrong, and to see the strengths and weaknesses associated with "both sides" of the story (Burns, 2004: 140–3).

In the short story, "The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas", first published in 1973, we find a confluence of the author's characteristics presented so far (Le Guin, 2004: 275–84). Inspired by the text "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life", a lecture delivered at Yale by William James in 1891, the narrative discusses the ethical principles on which a utopian society is based and how these same principles might undermine its allegedly ideal structure.

From the very beginning of the narrative, the reader is invited to explore the fictional space of Omelas: its streets, squares, and a very specific basement. As we approach the city, we are welcomed by a narrator who describes a joyful summer festival. Its description is as radiant as the day itself and the reader takes his/her first steps in Omelas at the sound of bells, flutes, and songs that drive the processions to green valleys. An idyllic place is revealed to the reader who might think that 'nowhere' has finally found its place. However, one's attention is called

to the fact that the narrator cannot find the words to depict all the happiness in Omelas: "Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?" (277).

From this point, the narrator starts a constant dialogue with the reader that progressively demands more and more involvement. This narrative strategy asserts the text's references to itself, and the reader is reminded that they are in the flexible limits of fiction and that their actions and reactions help determine how flexible they are. The reader is guided to build what they are supposed to build with their own hands. The narrator's hesitations, doubts, and lack of knowledge make some of the descriptions vague and the utopian city stands without precise location or form. Allowing visitors to follow his own ideal of verisimilitude, the narrator asks them to design their own utopias. This process creates a sense of belonging that turns the reader into a citizen of Omelas and a person responsible for what the city is (and what it is not), since they contributed to its formation and shared their own dreams with its population:

O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? ... But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate (278-9).

However, there are signs of Omelas' structural and cultural organization along the way, and the narrator is very clear when he claims that they must be taken into consideration. "Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland Utopians. They were not less complex than us" (277-8). Or when the narrator, who sometimes sounds as foreign as the reader, categorically states: "One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt" (279). This characterization of the citizens prevents the reader from prejudging their behaviour or from finding a simple explanation for what is about to be told. The interaction between the narrator and the reader exposes the blanks and the points of determination that form not only Le Guin's text but any text. The visitors to Omelas may roam freely up to a certain point, but there are limits to their freedom. In the collaborative map drawn of Omelas, the orientation is exposed and not concealed behind the lines as in the depiction of the spaces of other ideal societies.

Apart from the story's referential and theoretical aspects mentioned above, the reader's engagement in the depiction of Omelas also addresses an issue commonly raised in utopian studies: a good or even an allegedly perfect society is a creation of a single individual who observes their reality and understands that their solutions or proposals are suitable for a specific social group or for different ones. That is why the narrator cannot define the word joy. Not only because, according to the text, it is old-fashioned, but also because the concept of happiness is rarely consensual. When the text permits different readers to design Omelas in different ways, it also allows different views of perfection to be integrated into the city. However, this authority that we gradually exercise over the territory of Omelas turns into an internal revolt when, still in the name of verisimilitude, the narrator interrogates us: "Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing" (280).

As the narrator points out at the beginning of the text, the exaltation of happiness is considered frivolous without the counterpart of pain, whether in literature or in life. Similarly, a utopia always charges its members a price for inhabiting the ideal society, which can range from collective homogenization to the loss of individual freedom, an aspect that again blurs the distinction between utopias and dystopias.

In Omelas, all the luminous happiness that dominates the city's surface is sustained by the suffering of an unfortunate child locked up in a dark underground. Frightened, hungry, and dirty, she or he is kept in a state of solitary misery so that prosperity is collectively shared right above the room. The child is visited by young people so that they understand how valuable is the life they enjoy, because there is a helpless human being who makes this way of life possible. It is because of the child's crying that the flautist's joyful music can be heard.

All city inhabitants are aware of the child's existence and understand their commitment to the one who suffers on their behalf. Despite the initial perplexity, the citizens are convinced that the child is better off where he or she is and that the order of things is the most rational that a utopia can allow. As we have seen, there is no guilt in Omelas.

This is an essential phase of the reader's journey through Omelas' illuminated and gloomy landscapes, from which they face the very idea of rationalism that underlies not only Le Guin's fictional society, but utopian and dystopian creations in general. What would be the costs for a society to come closer to perfection? What price would each of us be willing to pay for the world's injustices to be solved? What price would we be willing to let others pay in our names? Would the cost be less, if we did not have to see them? What if we could pretend that they do not exist, or that their existence is part of the rational and natural order of things, while observing the world comfortably from an armchair?

After such a long dialogue, these questions are not asked by the narrator, but are probably raised by readers who have seen their journey through the happy festival leads them to a gloomy subterranean zone (certainly the city's, possibly their own). Omelas was also built by the ones who attached their own ideals on it and who now have to face the terrible downside of their own idealizations. However, like many outraged reader-travelers, some citizens of Omelas wait for nightfall and simply walk away. In silence, these people leave the city and never return. But, as the narrator states: "The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas" (284).

We wonder what this place to where these dissidents emigrate would be like. Would it not be the same one the reader returns to when they also walk away from Omelas? It is a less imaginable place because it is still trying to find its own social model, even though the costs borne by many are even greater than those borne by the citizens of Le Guin's fictional city. In this reality, instead of one child, millions of children starve every day, so a few fortunate adults can live their personal utopias. According to this view, travel to Omelas represents a journey to a place caught between a dream and a nightmare, between the light of its surface and the darkness of its underground. But, when the reader puts down the book, the world they see is probably even worse than the one they have just visited. After we have taken a look at reality, is Omelas still a dystopia?

Once the voice of the narrator becomes silent, we have only the imperfection of our convictions of perfection to guide us towards a possible answer. And, once again, we realize how flexible the line between utopias and dystopias proves to be; and how short the distance that brings us closer to and farther from Omelas.

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