

“VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY WILLIAM JAMES”:  
VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE  
WRITING OF URSULA K. LE GUIN

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This paper reads Ursula K. Le Guin’s utopian writing in the light of William James’s philosophy, approaching her celebrated novel *The Dispossessed* alongside James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*. While Le Guin’s explicit references to James in archival documents and published works are few, James’s essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” has long been acknowledged as a source for Le Guin’s celebrated short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” This paper seeks to deepen the connection between Le Guin and James, and to comment on James’s potential relevance for readings of utopian and speculative fiction more broadly.



At the conclusion of Ursula K. Le Guin's handwritten draft of "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," she includes a note identifying William James's essay "The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life" as the "inspiration for the tale."<sup>1</sup> As the manuscript page and later references to James in published editions of the story make clear, Le Guin wished to keep the connection between her utopian narrative and James's essay at the fore of her readers' minds. The story's most recent appearance in *The Unreal and the Real: The Selected Short Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin* includes the now standard parenthetical under the title: "Variations on a theme by William James."<sup>2</sup> In Le Guin's other utopias, however, overt references to James disappear. In the case of her novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, James's influence is only acknowledged in early notebook entries on the various theoretical formulations of time at play in her fictional universe.<sup>3</sup> As I argue, however, the subtlety of Le Guin's references to James belies the pervasiveness of his influence on her utopian thinking and writing.

As Le Guin acknowledges in a recent edited edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*, she has always rejected "the blueprint utopia, the builder's kit for a rationally conceived Good Society," in favor of a less "rationally conceived" model.<sup>4</sup> In order to create more satisfying utopian foundations, she reaches beyond the purely rational toward categories of belief that cannot be empirically observed or tested in everyday experience. Le Guin's formation and description of such foundational and structuring beliefs is heavily reliant on forms of thinking and feeling that James gathers into the category of "religious experience."<sup>5</sup> This essay will focus primarily on Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed* in relation to James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, attending first to Le Guin's engagement with "The Reality of the Unseen" as James examines it in Lecture III of the *Varieties*, and then to characterizations of the "Mystic" that find their way into *The Dispossessed* from Lectures XVI and XVII. Before approaching these larger texts, however, I will begin by examining Le Guin's one explicit reference to James in her published work. These initial

observations pave the way for the final section of the essay, where I will comment on the implications of reading Le Guin’s utopian fiction in the light of Jamesian philosophy for utopian studies more broadly.

### **THE STRENUOUS MOOD**

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” first published in 1973, features a utopian society founded on the suffering of one individual, a child imprisoned in a dark cell. Le Guin mirrors the scenario that James originally posits in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” in order to test the reader’s tolerance for the utilitarian position that the suffering of a few individuals is acceptable if it ensures the happiness of many. Most residents of Omelas accept the child’s suffering as the condition of their own happiness, which “is no vapid, irresponsible happiness,” but one deepened and strengthened by the knowledge of the suffering child, whom all residents are brought to see in their adolescence.<sup>6</sup> The child’s suffering plays a crucial role in the emotional and intellectual lives of Omelas’ inhabitants. As Le Guin writes, “it is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science.”<sup>7</sup> Some individuals, however, cannot accept this condition, and choose to leave the city. “Each alone,” Le Guin explains, “they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back.”<sup>8</sup> Le Guin does not explain the particular reasoning of these individuals, who reject the conditions of the society they were born into. She makes no claims regarding their particular abilities or strengths, but simply acknowledges that such individuals exist, and that they declare their rejection of utilitarianism by responding independently, affectively, rather than collectively or intellectually, to the moral test of the child’s existence.

In “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James proposes a similar test, and offers a clearer explanation for the possibility of independent resistance in the context of collective

complacency. James likewise locates this possibility in the affective responses of decision-making individuals, whom he places at the center of any truly ethical society. The utopian vision that James initially offers and Le Guin later develops is a particularly stark example of society built upon inequality. In each example, the happiness of some depends on the suffering of others. The strongest possible counter to such a system, for James and for Le Guin, lies not in the logical arguments of philosophers, but in the emotional repugnance of the feeling individual: the independent person in whom affective responsiveness has grown particularly strong, counterbalancing the weight of logically sound but morally repugnant systems of moral philosophy. “What,” James asks in reference to the collective happiness gained in return for the suffering of a single individual, “except a specific [sic] and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel ... how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?”<sup>9</sup> James calls this “specific and independent” emotion “the strenuous mood,” and asserts that only “the wilder passions ... the big fears, loves, and indignations” can awaken this affective ethical capacity.<sup>10</sup>

Such an awakening is also depicted in the draft of another of Le Guin’s short stories, untitled and never published on its own. Composed in the same notebook as the first recorded draft of “Omelas,” this second story follows an alien from a utopian world founded on socialist-anarchist principles as he is abducted by inhabitants of a neighboring planet, where he encounters structural inequality for the first time. This short story would grow into her 1974 *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, one of many novels set within Le Guin’s Hainish universe (an interlocking system of immense complexity and intricacy developed over many loosely grouped texts), which follows the life of Shevek, a theoretical physicist who works to unify two opposing theories of Time. The “Ambiguous Utopia” of the novel’s subtitle is not founded upon the suffering of this one individual, however, but upon socialist-pacifist-anarchist principles that demand shared

experience and therefore shared suffering.<sup>11</sup> On his planet Anarres, collective well-being is paramount, and Shevek’s unique approach to the physical sciences is interpreted as an inappropriate assertion of individuality – or “egoizing.”<sup>12</sup> The principles of cooperation and shared resources (including ideas) that pervade life on Anarres are collectively referred to as “Odonianism” after the writings of the movement’s revolutionary founder. Nearly two centuries before Le Guin’s novel is set, Odo’s followers rebelled against the capitalistic system of their home planet, Urras, and established an egalitarian society on its orbiting moon. Shevek is caught between his commitment to Odonian principles and his sense that the Anarresti revolutionaries have lost their way.

The Odonians living on the moon-planet Anarres are anarchists in the purist sense (in ideology if not always in practice). Odonianism admits of no fixed or unchangeable principles, is suggestive rather than prescriptive, and Odo’s original writings are available to all for interpretation and re-interpretation. The Anarresti are, in name and deed, responsible for perpetually recreating their society in all that they do, but in its efforts to do away with excess – with everything that is, in Odonian terms, “excremental” – Odonianism has succumbed to stagnation and censorship. Shevek’s work in theoretical physics and his attempts to share that work with scientists on Urras lands him before a government tribunal. Rather than give up his research, he chooses to leave Anarres – to walk away as from Omelas – and to travel to Urras in order to continue his work unfettered by Anarresti dedication to insularity and utility.

Shevek’s journey to Urras, and his efforts to reestablish communication between two separated cultures under the aegis of scientific discovery, causes controversy and disruption on both planets. The novel’s chapters alternate between Shevek’s childhood, leading up to his departure from Anarres, and his journey to Urras, leading to his return home. Le Guin structures the novel as a simultaneously developmental and circular narrative that is, like the theory of time that Shevek works to develop, both linear and recursive.

*The Dispossessed* is thus an embodiment as much as a depiction of the circularity of time and experience. Alternating chapters trace two parallel journeys; the first introduces Shevek at the moment of his departure from Anarres, and serves as both the reader's and Shevek's introduction to Urrasti life. The second begins with Shevek's childhood, and serves as his and the reader's introduction to Anarresti life. Both begin with the protagonist learning to orient himself within a new language, a new social structure, a new reality, and both end with a departure that might also be characterized as a return: one with Shevek's departure from Anarres and return to the "home" planet, and the other with his departure from Urras and return to the new circumstances coming into being on Anarres. The reader must alternate between these two paralleled trajectories throughout the novel, while numerous smaller and more intricate parallels continually insist on the circularity of experience throughout linear time, which forms the basis of Shevek's work in theoretical physics. *The Dispossessed* is not, like "Omelas," simply concerned with the act of walking away from an unethical society; Shevek's journey takes him full circle, and the novel concludes with his return to a reinvigorated and open-minded Anarres. Le Guin's utopian thinking finds more complete and, as I argue, more Jamesian expression in *The Dispossessed*, as she acknowledges the importance of return as well as progression: of finding new names for older ways of thinking and feeling that shaped, if not utopia, at least the desire for it.

In an archival document in which Le Guin consolidates many months of drafting *The Dispossessed*, elements of Jamesian philosophy appear in two passages that critique traditional elements of utopian fiction. The first again places affect at the heart of her interest in larger social and political structures: "What is wrong with most utopias," Le Guin writes, is that "*They lack emotion.*"<sup>13</sup> The second reflects the principle of continuous societal change and adaptation that underlies James's understanding of ethical philosophy in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." As James writes, his "main purpose ... is to show that there is no

such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race’s moral life. In other words, there can be no final Truth in Ethics any more than in Physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say.”<sup>14</sup> Ethical philosophy, in Jamesian terms, is the product of a slow accretion of individual experiences and findings which, if shared, subsequently guides communities in reshaping their social and political environments. Knowledge of ethical philosophy will continue to adapt and evolve, James insists, for as long as new individuals come into being. As Le Guin posits, utopian writing traditionally suffers from the exclusion of such a principle of inevitable adaptation and change:

All utopias are postulated or pictured as unchanging . . . Of course the fact is nothing we can do is perfect, and therefore it will change, and there isn’t a bloody thing we can do about it, except educate ourselves and our children to seek harmony with the world and one another, to combine courage with caution, to dislike waste, to accept loss, to refuse to be bossed about, to refuse to boss others about, and to keep a religious attitude towards life and society: by which I mean – what do I mean? – A sense that things are larger, broader, and much longer than they seem on the surface.<sup>15</sup>

This passage signals a shift in Le Guin’s thinking about *The Dispossessed* that points toward James’s project in *Varieties*. Her solution to the problem of “unchanging” utopias involves, at least in part, an acknowledgment of the “religious attitude” that forms the foundation of tenets like the ones she lists here. Readers must turn to James’s *Varieties*, not “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” in order to examine the epistemological effects of the “religious attitude,” which James identifies at the beginning of Book III as “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our

supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”<sup>16</sup> Like James, Le Guin’s interest in the “religious attitude” and “the unseen order” it aims to harmonize with is driven by a more foundational concern with unverifiable but powerful beliefs, and the individuals that hold such beliefs in defiance of a lack of concrete evidence. Reading *The Dispossessed* alongside the *Varieties* widens the field of search for James’s influence on American literature, deepening our understanding of contemporary utopian fiction that explores the processes by which foundational beliefs – whether in ethics or in physics – come into being and find expression. Guided by Jamesian philosophy, Le Guin investigates the role such foundational beliefs come to play in the everyday experiences and actions of individuals who would work to create more defensible, even utopian, social and political environments.

#### **THE REALITY OF THE UNSEEN**

In Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, as in James’s *Varieties*, “religion” is postulated as a constant feature of human psychology that does not vanish with the removal of institutionalized or even formalized belief systems.<sup>17</sup> Like James, Le Guin does not investigate a particular system of belief, instead asking a larger question about the nature of unverifiable beliefs: how an individual comes to accept or deny certain foundational precepts without the ability to definitively test them. If James’s central project in the *Varieties* is to explain or rationalize the proliferation of unverifiable beliefs while “[ignoring] the institutional branch entirely,” Le Guin’s project in *The Dispossessed* is to ask what forms of “religious experience” exist in the absence of any institutional or formal religion as such.<sup>18</sup>

Like James, Le Guin approaches the topic through particular informants, focusing on the “personal religion” of individuals.<sup>19</sup> Shevek, referred to throughout drafting documents as “Saint Shevek,” is singled out and eventually ostracized from Anarresti social and scientific communities for his willingness to pursue knowledge outside the proscribed bounds of custom. Shevek’s academic advisor criticizes and later censors his work as

“superstitious-religious speculations,” adding Shevek to a growing list of Anarresti citizens who are unofficially but effectively punished for expressing individual initiative outside established norms.<sup>20</sup> The punitive actions taken by members of the central Anarresti bureaucracy strengthen Shevek’s view that Odonian principles of equality and cooperation have calcified into a tyranny of the majority. His decision to leave Anarres and attempt to reestablish communication with Urras becomes necessary for the continuation of his work, but also leaves him branded as a traitor, unsure of whether he will be allowed to return.<sup>21</sup>

In one of Le Guin’s first depictions of Shevek, he converses with Kimoe, an Urrasti doctor (resident of the home planet) on his journey from Anarres to Urras. The two men speak to each other in Iotic, one of the dominant languages on Urras, as Kimoe has no familiarity at all with Pravic, the first “rationally invented language that has become the tongue of a great people.”<sup>22</sup> Pravic contains few possessive pronouns, lacks most transitive verbs, and has no words for things like “hell,” “damn,” or “prison.” These entities, and the ideas behind them, do not exist on Anarres. As Le Guin’s narrator explains:

The singular forms of the possessive pronoun in Pravic were used mostly for emphasis; idiom avoided them. Little children might say “my mother,” but very soon they learned to say “the mother.” Instead of “my hand hurts,” it was “the hand hurts me,” and so on; to say “this one is mine and that’s yours” in Pravic, one said, “I use this one and you use that.”<sup>23</sup>

The effect of Le Guin’s banishment of possessive pronouns is a prioritization of function over essence: of what a thing does instead of what it is. A person (like a mother) or an object (like a hand) is defined by the activity it performs, not to whom it belongs. Like James’s distinction between transitive and substantive parts of thinking in “The Stream of Thought” chapter of *Principles of*

*Psychology*, Le Guin's rethinking of object and agency urges readers to resist the ease with which our language collapses form and function.

The absence of ownership and hierarchy in the social structure of Anarres is mirrored in its speech; the ideal is practiced and reinforced in the communicative practices of all its inhabitants. Odonian philosophy is woven, and can be unraveled, on the basis of linguistic framing, and Le Guin's novel immediately brings this principle to bear on questions of religious knowledge and religious experience. What would such experience look like, she implicitly asks, within a linguistic structure that does not admit of fundamental essence: that does not entertain the notion of a "soul" apart from a functioning body? As Shevek and Kimoe continue to converse, it becomes clear that each man "took for granted certain relationships that the other could not even see. For instance, this curious matter of superiority, of relative height, was important to the Urrasti; they often used the word 'higher' as a synonym for 'better' in their writings, where an Anarresti would use 'more central.'"<sup>24</sup> The Urrasti conflation of "higher" with "better" is, of course, familiar to Le Guin's readers in English.

One of the uses of a constructed (or in Le Guin's case, partially constructed) language is, of course, to comment on her reader's own habitual linguistic practices, and reveal the hidden or unseen forces at play in ordinary language. The most important miscommunication between Shevek and the doctor concerns Kimoe's conflation of the word "religion" with the idea of institution or a fixed organizing body. Because the Odonians acknowledge no deity and have no institutions that could resemble a church, Kimoe assumes that there is no religion on Anarres. Shevek attempts to correct him:

"The vocabulary makes it difficult," Shevek said ...  
"In Pravic the word *religion* is seldom. No, what do you say – rare. Not often used. Of course, it is one of the Categories: the Fourth Mode. Few people learn to practice all the Modes. But the Modes are

built of the natural capacities of the mind, you could not seriously believe that we had no religious capacity? That we could do physics while we were cut off from the profoundest relationship man has with the cosmos?”<sup>25</sup>

Shevek’s description of “religion” on Anarres comes close to paraphrasing the definition James offers in his “Circumscription of the Topic.” “Religion,” he writes, “shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”<sup>26</sup> Although “solitude” is as rare on Anarres as the word “religion,” Shevek likewise frames his thoughts on the religious capacity in terms of individual experience: one’s experience of relationality to a “cosmos” that surrounds and involves the self. In the absence of prescription or institution, Le Guin postulates, religious experience or “the religious capacity” becomes one of many equivalent “Modes” of understanding.

Shevek’s decision to leave Anarres is conditioned by his commitment to Odonian, though originally Jamesian, principles of continuous societal change and adaptation. That his commitment to such principles necessitates a break with and eventual exile from his native culture also aligns him with the saints and mystics under consideration in James’s text. As James Campbell notes in his recent consideration of the early reception of the *Varieties*, James framed his lectures as an investigation of “the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate.”<sup>27</sup> That such persons based their beliefs upon hypotheses that could not be validated by scientific experimentation was, as Campbell notes, a difficulty for James’s early readers. The data upon which James’s informants construct their concept of the unseen constituted an affront to empirical scientific discovery. However, as James demonstrates throughout *Varieties*, the spiritual and the scientific coexist at the point where the scientific pursuit of humanity’s

“profoundest relationship ... with the cosmos” touches the neighboring field of religious experience.<sup>28</sup>

Le Guin’s novel is one example of a larger body of utopian fiction that takes the proximity of theoretical science and religious experience as a given, and highlights the experiences of individual protagonists working through tensions between experiential and empirically demonstrable versions of what might be called “the real.” In doing so, protagonists like Shevek rely upon a hybrid of speculative and scientific methodology that mirrors what Frederic Jameson has recently called Einstein’s “thought experiments” or “pedagogical demonstrations.”<sup>29</sup> As Jameson writes, these are “texts more closely related to children’s books than to applications for a grant. Yet these ‘examples’ are not to be understood as mere rhetoric: they pioneered a form of schematism which authorised the early writers of science fiction to take their cosmological fantasies literally.”<sup>30</sup> Jameson is far from the only critic to identify overlaps between Einstein’s theories and the development of utopian science fiction as a popular genre. He is also not the first to draw connections between science fiction and the scientific and philosophical movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of which Jamesian Pragmatism played such a major role.<sup>31</sup> The connection Jameson draws between Einstein’s writing and “children’s books” merely deepens the larger question of genre and influence that I attend to in the case of Le Guin. Just as Einstein’s texts provide theoretical scaffolding within which science fiction writers could postulate new worlds and new forms of social and political life, James’s writing proves foundational for speculative projects that attempt to portray both the rational and irrational elements that imbue all such reimaginings.

#### **ACTING ‘AS IF’**

In *Pragmatism and American Experience*, Joan Richardson reminds readers of James that a central feature of what he called “religious experience” was its adaptive potential. As Richardson writes, religious experience was for James “an aspect of human nature serving as successful adaptation to changing

environments.”<sup>32</sup> The content of religious belief, and the appearance of the religious figure, should necessarily evolve as individual believers find themselves in new circumstances. Toward that end, Richardson asserts, James sought to identify or offer “a new mythology ... a new kind of imagining, a new kind of spiritual exercise” that would satisfy the spiritual needs of modern individuals.<sup>33</sup> Such a mythology is offered up, I argue, by the speculative writer, who re-imagines the saint or the mystic as the impassioned scientist, driven onward by a theory that they are (as yet) unable to prove.

Shevek is one of Le Guin’s many contributions to this relatively new mythological category. He investigates Time, and seeks to develop a mathematical formula that reconciles two competing concepts of its shape as linear (Sequency) and as circular (Simultaneity). In the midst of narrating Shevek’s work on his second book, Le Guin offers the one explicit connection between Shevek’s experience as a scientist and the experience of the religious believer. His partner, Takver, recognizes but does not have words to describe his condition:

On days when he had no classes, when she came in he might have been sitting at the table for six or eight hours straight. When he got up he would lurch with fatigue, his hands would shake, and he was scarcely coherent. The usage the creator spirit gives its vessels is rough, it wears them out, discards them, gets a new model. For Takver there were no replacements, and when she saw how hard Shevek was used she protested. She would have cried out as Odo’s husband, Asieo, did once, “For God’s sake, girl, can’t you serve Truth a little at a time?” – except that she was the girl, and was unacquainted with God.<sup>34</sup>

Le Guin reaches back into Odonian history to find a parallel for Shevek’s zealous dedication to the “Truth.” Although Takver is

“unacquainted with God,” her world was founded by one of those chosen by “the creator spirit” that Le Guin names in this passage, and that returns to take control of Shevek while he is working. Odonian ontology dictates that such a “spirit” becomes discernible not in essence but in function; Takver and Shevek recognize it for what it does in relation to themselves as individuals, and do not concern themselves with what it is outside of that relation. In this scene, connections to James’s *Varieties* become especially pertinent, since he prioritizes the effects of religious experience on “our practice” rather than a connection to an identifiable deity. As James writes:

Our conceptions always require a sense-content to work with, and as the words ‘soul,’ ‘God,’ ‘immortality,’ cover no distinctive sense-content whatever, it follows that theoretically speaking they are words devoid of any significance. Yet strangely enough they have a definite meaning *for our practice*. We can act *as if* there were a God; feel *as if* we were free; consider Nature *as if* she were full of special designs; lay plans *as if* we were to be immortal; and we find then that these words do make a genuine difference in our moral life.<sup>35</sup>

James’s reiteration of Kantian principles is limited to the “use” of religious concepts for “our moral life.” It is Le Guin’s license as a writer of fiction, rather than philosophy, to illuminate their potential use in matters of science. While Shevek’s research does not directly probe the conceptions James identifies in this passage, his chosen area of study is similarly devoid of “sense-content.” In conversation with Shevek, an Ioti citizen accuses the Simultaneity view of denying the “most obvious fact about time, the fact that time passes.” Noting that “in physics one is careful about what one calls ‘facts,’” Shevek explains:

We think that time ‘passes,’ flows past us, but what if it is we who move forward, from past to future, always discovering the new? It would be a little like reading a book, you see. The book is all there, all at once, between its covers. But if you want to read the story and understand it, you must begin with the first page, and go forward, always in order.<sup>36</sup>

Time, here, is a function of consciousness. We are conscious of particular moments, while all around us the “book” of time spreads out in every direction. Shevek’s rejoinder is drawn from James’s notion of the “block universe,” which Le Guin cites in her single explicit reference to his writing in early notes toward *The Dispossessed*. Toward the conclusion of his lectures on mysticism, James reflects on the existence of experiential realities apart from the particular page we find ourselves on – or, in his words, the particular “frames exhibited to us” at any particular moment.<sup>37</sup> “Rational consciousness,” he writes, “is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.”<sup>38</sup> James reflects on the subtlety of such timeless or unconscious states of being in Lectures XVI and XVII, noting that “we may go through life without suspecting their existence,” but “apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation.”<sup>39</sup> James’s project can be characterized, in some ways, as an attempt to identify the “requisite stimulus” by which these modes of understanding come into play. It is the occasion of religious experience that primarily interests him, and any knowledge gained as a result of these experiences is secondary.

Shevek’s culminating discovery takes the form of a spiritual revelation that hinges on the “as if” function that James figures as the “use” or practical function of concepts, like religious concepts, that lack sense-content:

[Did] the unprovability of the hypothesis of real coexistence – the problem which Shevek had been pounding his head against desperately for these last three days, and indeed these last ten years – really matter? He had been groping and grabbing after certainty, as if it were something he could possess. He had been demanding a security, a guarantee, which is not granted, and which, if granted, would become a prison. By simply assuming the validity of real coexistence he was left free to use the lovely geometries of relativity; and then it would be possible to go ahead. The next step was perfectly clear ... The wall was down, the vision was both clear and whole. What he saw was simple, simpler than anything else. It was simplicity: and contained in it all complexity, all promise. It was revelation.<sup>40</sup>

The “unprovability” of Simultaneity physics, its lack of “sense-content” and the necessity of “assuming” rather than demonstrating its validity, is ultimately what allows Shevek to establish a unified theory. Like James’s informants, and like pragmatist philosophers, Shevek must put aside the question of absolute provability and assess his theory according to its results, proceeding *as if* coexistence between opposing principles is valid and testing its validity in terms of its applicability. Belief in that which we cannot yet see is at the root, Le Guin contends, not only of the “religious attitude,” but also of the attitude maintained by the visionary: the individual who would defy the conventional or customary and seek alternative forms. Such belief is also shared by the writer of utopian fiction. If we would envision a more ideal way of life, Le Guin contends, we must enter the realm of the unproveable, and proceed as if it might be possible.

#### **WIDENING THE FIELD OF SEARCH**

Speculative texts like Le Guin’s are at liberty to create a version of scientific exploration and discovery that mirrors the actual

functioning of the theoretical sciences enough to shed light on their inherent mysticisms, and to suggest that new scientific principles, like religious ones, must be felt as well as understood in order to take hold in the minds of ordinary individuals. While James postulates, “science in many minds is genuinely taking the place of a religion,” texts like *The Dispossessed* allow contemporary readers to more fully understand the inverse scenario: how and why religious principles are so often mistaken for scientific ones.<sup>41</sup> While the religious and the scientific are never conflated in the *Varieties* in the way Le Guin is free to blend them in *The Dispossessed*, James nevertheless confesses to a heartfelt conviction regarding the potential offerings of revelatory experiences for our practical, in addition to our moral, life. Such experiences, he insists, “converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity.”<sup>42</sup> The value of texts like *The Dispossessed*, in Jamesian terms, is that they continue to offer such unifying experiences, creating what Jane Bennett calls “the right mood or landscape of affect” for “ethical will formation.”<sup>43</sup>

The search for James’s continuing influence leads in many directions, but Le Guin’s explicit engagement with his work widens the field to encompass contemporary speculative and utopian literature. Writers like Le Guin engage with Jamesian philosophy in a genre of literature better known for its popularity than its literary merit, implicitly demonstrating a further affinity with Jamesian philosophy: a commitment to popular forms. Perhaps because of its poor literary reputation, interviewers often inquire whether Le Guin is comfortable with the term “science fiction.” The name, she insists, is perfect; the problem is with writers who poorly officiate the marriage of empiricism and imagination in the making of new worlds. Speculative fiction that explores the various mysticisms of scientific practice, therefore, might draw close to what Paul Stob calls James’s “different

epistemology, a view of science, religion, and philosophy that revolved around ordinary people and their experiences and perceptions.”<sup>44</sup> The blend of science, religion, and philosophy that permeates utopian texts like Le Guin’s encourages readers to consider the various ways in which they too blend forms of understanding in their own thinking and feeling. As Jameson observes, “utopias are non-fictional, even though they are also non-existent. Utopias in fact come to us as barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being.”<sup>45</sup> Like James’s *Varieties*, utopian texts entertain possible worlds in which individuals contemplate their relationship to the universe in ways that allow readers to investigate and seek to revise existing forms.

Ultimately, reading utopian speculative fiction like Le Guin’s alongside James’s *Varieties* results in the emergence of a particular and relatively unexplored subgenre. Writers in this subgenre draw upon varieties of religious experience in order to schematize, in Jameson’s words, “worlds either too large or too small” to be depicted by realists, featuring protagonists that blend scientific and spiritual modes in their efforts to learn more about our relationship to the cosmos.<sup>46</sup> Shevek is joined in this category by figures like Carl Sagan’s Eleanor Arroway and Philip Pullman’s Mary Malone. Both, like Shevek, are alienated from surrounding social and intellectual communities on the basis of their quasi-religious approach to scientific study. Each protagonist struggles to justify their work in the face of rationalistic or utilitarian opposition, committed to not-quite-provable theories that involve continuous leaps of faith. These protagonists, like James’s informants, are ultimately rewarded in the form of a revelation framed in religious terms.

That such protagonists constitute a distinguishable type in speculative utopian fiction is less important than what readers of spirituo-speculative texts might gain by considering them in the light of James’s *Varieties*. Texts like *The Dispossessed* trace one individual’s continuous struggle to reconcile the speculative with the experimental, the seen with the unseen, and frame belief in as-yet-indemonstrable theories as one of many epistemological tools

at their disposal. As an alternative to “demystification,” which Bennett and so many others acknowledge as an “indispensable tool in a democratic, pluralist politics,” writers like Le Guin offer readers a form of re-mystification that posits “positive, utopian alternatives” to the unsatisfactory conditions in which we so often find ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Le Guin, Handwritten draft.

<sup>2</sup> Le Guin, *The Unreal and the Real*, 329.

<sup>3</sup> Le Guin, Notebook entry.

<sup>4</sup> Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be,” 163.

<sup>5</sup> Religious themes in speculative and utopian fiction are elucidated more fully in the work of Kreuziger, List, Cowan, McGrath, and Hrotic. Critical work on Le Guin’s approach to SF and speculative genres, especially studies that investigate her

literary and philosophical influences, include Jameson, Rabkin, and Myers, as well as the more recent critical approaches to Le Guin by Knapp, Tshachler, Jaekle, and Jones.

<sup>6</sup> Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” 334.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid..

<sup>8</sup> Ibid..

<sup>9</sup> James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” 333.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>11</sup> In “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be,” Le Guin accounts for her turn to anarchist political ideology in *The Dispossessed* as an effort to “[reject] the identification of civilization with the state, and the identification of power with coercion ... anarchism and Taoism converge both in matter and manner, and so I came there to play my fictional games.” See Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View,” 186.

<sup>12</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Le Guin, Notebook entry, 3.

<sup>14</sup> James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” 330.

<sup>15</sup> Le Guin, Notebook entry, 3.

<sup>16</sup> James, *Varieties*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> The leap from Le Guin’s engagement with “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” to a possible engagement with the *Varieties* demands further support. Fortunately, Le Guin substantiates the connection in archival documents. In an essay from her time as a graduate student at Columbia University, she compares Freud’s concept of “the Oceanic Feeling” to James’s description of “the Yes function” in Lectures XVI and XVII of the *Varieties*, indicating at the very least that Le Guin had read and written about James’s *Varieties* before she wrote *The Dispossessed*. See Le Guin, “The ‘Oceanic Feeling,’” 8.

<sup>18</sup> James, *Varieties*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> James begins to refer to his subjects as “informants” in Lecture III of the *Varieties* (62), though it is in Lecture II (Circumscription of the Topic) that he locates his interest in the “personal” rather than collective or institutional realm (35).

<sup>20</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 239

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> James, *Varieties*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Campbell, *Early Reception of the Varieties*, 74.

<sup>28</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Jameson, “In Hyperspace,” 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Freeman-Moir considers utopian writing “from the perspective of Dewey’s pragmatist understanding of action, habit, and artful experience,” while Partington draws a direct line from William James to H.G. Wells. Freeman-Moir, “Crafting Experience,” 202.

<sup>32</sup> Richardson, *Pragmatism and American Experience*, 34.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 188.

<sup>35</sup> James, *Varieties*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 221.

<sup>37</sup> “Passage of time is a feature of consciousness w no objective counterpart. Weyl + Einstein’s universe is the “block universe” (Wm James’ term) -- The film is all there, tho’ we see only the frames exhibited to us” [sic]. Le Guin, Notebook entry.

<sup>38</sup> James, *Varieties*, 350.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>43</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xii.

<sup>44</sup> Stob, *William James*, xv-xvi.

<sup>45</sup> Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia,” 54.

<sup>46</sup> Jameson, “In Hyperspace,” 19.

<sup>47</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv.