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Tradition

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# Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* and the *Künstlerroman* Tradition

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If science fiction is ... capable of being this, a true metaphor to our strange times, then surely it is rather stupid and reactionary to try to enclose it in the old limits of an old art—like trying to turn a nuclear reactor into a steam engine.

*Ursula K. Le Guin*  
*"Science Fiction and Mrs Brown"*

**T**HE TWENTIETH CENTURY did much to reinvent the idea of art by breaking down boundaries between art and everyday objects, with a concomitant shift in who creates art as an artist. We now inhabit a world of "artisanal" coffee and "bespoke" salads; it would seem that William Morris's arts and crafts movement is with us yet, with a comically exaggerated neoliberal twist. As Ursula K. Le Guin warned in 2014, "we need writers who know the difference between production of a market commodity and the practice of an art. The profit motive is often in conflict with the aims of art. We live in capitalism" (Arons 114). For Le Guin, then, it would seem that art—no matter the medium, no matter the art object (or lack

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thereof)—is valuable to a large extent because “resistance and change often begin in art.” But on this occasion, as a writer addressing other writers, Le Guin emphasized “our art—the art of words” (Arons).

The role of art as something both embedded in and capable of subverting dominant ideologies broaches my reading of Le Guin’s multiple award-winning science fiction (SF) novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974). The text hinges on its protagonist’s attempts to effect revolutionary change through his own art: the art of numbers, of physics. This art occupies a special place in the text; it is not commercial, nor is it “ephemeral” like “the arts of words, poetry and storytelling” (157), since its theories have obvious practical applications. But its most notable application is the invention of the “ansible,” a device that facilitates the instantaneous transmission of *words*. Still, more is at stake here than the utopian potential of Le Guin’s writing. Like *The Dispossessed*’s protagonist, Shevek, Le Guin revolutionized her field and galvanized action by bridging disparate spheres of knowledge. I argue Le Guin’s dramatization of this kind of revolutionary synthesis in *The Dispossessed* was timely not only because of its intervention in contemporary debates about science and art, but in its depiction of the scientist as an artist to creatively reimagine the *Künstlerroman* (“artist’s novel”) subgenre.

After outlining the aesthetic and literary contexts for this discussion, I show how Le Guin presses the *Künstlerroman*’s traditionally Romantic tropes and central figure into the service of an ambitious theory of art—one that appears aimed at ushering in a climate of detente between art and science. In the process, this theory also interweaves SF’s pronounced but seemingly incompatible strands of utopian and Marxist thought.<sup>1</sup> Leveraging the revolutionary, utopian potential linked to the figure of the Romantic artist but frequently denied art (for example, by those theorists for whom art serves largely to reproduce ideology), *The Dispossessed* parlays science’s utilitarian function into an artistic process that imaginatively transcends its material and political origins, rehabilitating both science and art within a generic frame that is at once familiar and alien, conventional and revisionary. Recognizing the *Künstlerroman* form changes how we read Le Guin’s narrative and its relationship to the intellectual debates of its time and also alters our understanding of the *Künstlerroman* tradition itself.

1 Aaron Santesso points out that many critics unquestioningly regard the genre of SF “as inherently Marxist or at least liberatory” (138), for example, and countless others have documented the longstanding relationship between utopian literature and SF.

Le Guin's novel rehabilitates science and art in ways that both reaffirm and complicate the theory of art developed in her dispersed essays and interviews. By giving her protagonist an urgent sense of moral purpose, for example, she ascribes to "objective" science an ethical function she elsewhere associates only with "subjective" art. This reconciliatory gesture seems deliberate, considering Le Guin's doubly critical view of SF, and of science more generally, in "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown" (first delivered as a lecture in 1975, just one year after the publication of *The Dispossessed*): "Science fiction has mostly settled for a pseudo-objective listing of marvels and wonders and horrors which illuminate nothing beyond themselves and are without real moral resonance" (118). By contrast, her novel depicts a humanized—although not human—scientist whose mission is inseparable from its moral imperative. The text's form enables it to "illuminate" much "beyond [itself]." For instance, the *Künstlerroman*'s protracted treatment of an individual's creative maturation uniquely captures a paradox at the heart of Le Guin's novel: how the process of *Bildung* and a commitment to the life of the imagination can make a character more believable as a fleshed-out individual (like the eponymous "Mrs Brown" of her essay), yet also more compelling as a creative "genius" whose other-worldly coming-of-age transcends our own experiences, understandings, and capabilities—in short, both fully realized and unrealizable.

At the same time, Le Guin uses her novel to present a theory of art in which traditionally "artistic" processes underwrite scientific achievement. Art in its ideal form becomes a synthesis of artistic means and scientific ends with the *potential* to transcend existing ideologies altogether, which is perhaps to say that the novel's utopian politics—long the focal point of literary criticism about *The Dispossessed*—proceed from its theory of art, not vice versa.

To understand this theory of art, I suggest, one must consider the mid-century contexts in which it came into being; the sub-genre most suited to its further development and to the articulation of its intended extra-political implications; and the novel's generic innovations and contributions to discussions about art and science. While the novel may leave readers with an ambiguous vision of utopia's scientific ends, and while my own analysis may introduce new tensions between the competing cultures, theories of art, and political dispensations that condition these ends, it is unambiguous enough about the value of the artistic processes that have made these outcomes a possibility in the first place.

## Art and/versus science: contexts for *The Dispossessed* as a modern *Künstlerroman*

*The Dispossessed*'s conflation of art and science allows Le Guin to imbue both—the two constitutive ingredients of SF—with utopian potential, reconciling them at a time when so much popular and discipline-specific discourse championed one at the expense of the other. For this reason alone, it might still be considered radical today. Debates about the merits of the sciences versus the arts, or “STEM” versus “STEAM” approaches to education, rage on.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, far from attempting to dissolve art and science in a blissful union, the theory of art advanced in Le Guin's essays occasionally appears to reinscribe stereotypes that render science and art in antithetical terms. In “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown,” for instance, Le Guin separates scientific from artistic practices: the scientist is a fact-finder and cold rationalist bent on utilitarian ends, whereas the artist is a truth-teller who plumbs the depths of human consciousness. Yet, in spite of these rather conventional distinctions, she goes on to write that her image of Shevek “may have come from a childhood memory of Robert Oppenheimer” (111), a polymath physicist who, as Lindsey Michael Banco notes in *The Meanings of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, has frequently been compared to “the figure of the Romantic artist” (219). While Banco rightly distinguishes “between the Romantic artist and the Romantic scientist” (219), Le Guin blurs these two identities in the figure of Shevek. Of course, Shevek's formulas never actually make an appearance in Le Guin's narrative; they fulfil what Le Guin, in “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown,” describes as an artistic rather than scientific function. That is, we get no facts, no actual formulas, but we do get insights about interpersonal and interstellar relationships, ethics, and politics. Still, Le Guin does not simply use the figure of the artist to make fictive science understandable or even alluring to the public, as other postwar writers or even scientists had done in the preceding decades (the latter as if out of an acute sense of pen envy).<sup>3</sup> She also uses science and the figure of the scientist as metaphors to make art and the role of the artist comprehensible to her own world—a world where art, not science, seemed to be in need of the most justification.

If one takes Le Guin for her word, “science and technology” in SF are merely metaphors that serve fictional means rather than scientific ends: they “are not used as ends in themselves, but as metaphors. Metaphors for what? For what is not given; an X; an X which the writers are pursuing”

<sup>2</sup> In current discourse, “STEM” stands for “Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics”; “STEAM” adds in the “Arts” (variously construed).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jones (140).

("Science Fiction" 109). In *The Dispossessed*, then, Shevek's science is not science at all, but an extension of Le Guin's art. Crucially, though, Shevek's work does fulfil two functions central to his creator's theory of art: first, it participates in the ongoing process of truth-telling—a theme developed throughout Le Guin's career.<sup>4</sup> His journey of discovery reveals hidden truths or realities about his world as well as Le Guin's mid-century one. Just as Oppenheimer functions for Banco "as a 'principal metaphor' in a wide range of cultural productions," Shevek serves as a metaphor Le Guin deploys to speak to but also "to unify what C.P. Snow famously called 'the two cultures,' referring to the supposed antipathy between the sciences and the humanities" (Banco 2).<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of this discursive rift—and Snow's memorable term for it—on popular culture or the academy. Given the visibility and number of public sparring matches generated by Snow's 1959 lecture in its various published forms, it is very possible that, unwittingly or no, Le Guin's novel may be her own contribution to this hotly contested debate, which continued to impact the public's perception of the sciences and humanities well into the 1960s and 1970s.

Shevek's work also carries out a second function central to Le Guin's theory of art: it offers hope. In "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown," she writes, "Most of us these days could do with a little hope; and I incline to think that you as readers have a right to ask—not to demand, never to demand, but to ask—for some hope from our arts. We really cannot ask for it from science. Science isn't in the hope business, and never was" (117). On the one hand, these remarks further echo Snow in drawing a sharp line of distinction between art, which for Le Guin occupies "its own domain of subjectivity," and science, which moves "toward an ever closer imitation of nature, an ever completer objectivity" (117); on the other, in contradistinction to Snow's position, which advocates for a greater understanding of modern science and its particulars, her novel's conflation of art and science effectively undermines the role of science *qua* science, reducing it to its purely instrumental function as a kind of newly conceived rhetorical device. Perhaps this explains why, in Samuel Delany's view, the theory laid out in the moment of Shevek's climactic breakthrough fails from an artistic standpoint: it is "not opaque enough" (123). But neither is it convincing as science: it conveys only "the essence of the unscientific" (122). Even if the novel fails as good SF for these reasons, though, what Delany understands

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4 See, for example, "Science Fiction" (109), "Talking about Writing" (198), "The View In" (7), and "Why" (45).

5 Banco borrows the phrase "principal metaphor" from Jeff Porter's *Oppenheimer Is Watching Me: A Memoir*.

to be its failure as convincing *science*, including its unacceptable conflation of “that inner nut of consciousness where subjectivity becomes one with the objective validity of the theory itself” (122), nevertheless contributes to its recognizability as a narrative of *artistic* development in which artistic subjectivity fuses (however unconvincingly) with scientific objectivity. Put differently, if Shevek’s theory fails as science, it succeeds as art under the imaginative conditions established by Le Guin, which is to say that she frees it from the conditions that, in her own world and theory of art, had established it in opposition to art. She makes Shevek, a physicist, the instrument of her utopian (hope-filled) project, even if she must cloak him in the conventional vestments of the Romantic artist-hero to do so.

This provisional rapprochement between “the two cultures” is also possible because of the novel’s redeployment of much more inclusive definitions of both art and science than contemporary audiences would have had reason to expect. Carl Malmgren maintains that “the discourse of SF is grounded in a scientific epistemology which assumes that there is an inherent order to nature that can be discovered through the systematic application of the scientific method” (22). However, in turn, this foundational epistemology can be traced back beyond the nineteenth century into the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, when science was not “science” but “natural philosophy” and art included not only what Robert Stecker calls the “central art forms, such as poetry, painting, and music” (5) but any craft or refined skill, including those directed toward pragmatic or commercial ends. Looking back even further, one can find other evidence demonstrating that the idea of what constitutes art has evolved dramatically: alluding to Book X of Plato’s *Republic*, Stecker explains that “the Greek word usually translated as ‘art,’ *technē*, is thought by no one to express ‘our’ concept of art, else contemporary aestheticians would give much more attention to navigation and bridle making than they in fact do” (16). Le Guin, who in “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” collapses art and science to the extent that she emphasizes their shared roots in quasi-mystical imaginative processes (41), is one such aesthetician. To trace the origins of SF’s scientific epistemology to its historical roots, as *The Dispossessed*’s theory of art invites us to do, is also to trouble current definitions of art or of the hybrid figure Malmgren calls “the SF artist” (29).

This theory, which Le Guin develops in essays such as “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown,” “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?,” “The View In,” “On Theme,” and “The Stalin in the Soul,” is arguably the most utopian element of *The Dispossessed*, but not because it grants to art and science a flexibility and range of application they had not already enjoyed

in previous eras. Even in the eighteenth century, when art had increasingly come to be defined (by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, among others) in terms of aesthetics, polymaths such as Benjamin Franklin and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe continued to blur the lines between the arts and sciences, just as Leonardo da Vinci had done in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries or Hildegard von Bingen had done in the twelfth. In their hands, science tackled ethics—as in the idealized, question-driven form of scientific practice Le Guin advocates in “The Stalin in the Soul” (219)—and the arts accumulated a store of practical and material as well as aesthetic applications; in the process, such figures carved out a middle ground between competing theories of art which, traditionally, have been premised on the intrinsic versus instrumental value of art. In Le Guin’s theory of art, similarly, the non-quantifiable faculty of imagination is central to all such pursuits, whether artistic or scientific, material or aesthetic: “As for the free play of an adult mind, its results may be *War and Peace*, or the theory of relativity,” she notes, before adding that “the discipline of the imagination may in fact be the essential method or technique of both art and science” (“Why” 41). In this formulation, art and science are siblings—an historical kinship re-enacted in *The Dispossessed*: Shevek synthesizes and thereby revolutionizes competing intellectual domains, as well as multiple perspectives on art in particular.

By drawing on aesthetic and literary precedents in this way, Le Guin is able to fashion the SF *Künstlerroman* as a hybrid literary form capable of addressing the postwar impasse between art and science, wedding scientific product to artistic process under a utopian banner at precisely the moment of this impasse’s crystallization in public discourse. However, in line with her theory of art, which is premised on the “deeply human, and humane” faculty of imagination (“Why” 44), Shevek is successful as a physicist only insofar as his work benefits others without regard for profit or to the extent that he embraces something more commonly associated, in our world and in his, with artistic pursuits: “intuition” (*Dispossessed* 279). Conversely, the failure of science is represented in the novel by his colleagues’ unyielding positivism, which, in light of the theory of art just described, is significantly pronounced “a catastrophic failure of *imagination*” (emphasis added, 279). To demonstrate how Shevek learns to harness this faculty for the greater good and avoid such a failure, I turn now to a more focused discussion of the novel’s generic resonances and the role Le Guin’s theory of art plays within it.



## The changing face(s) of the *Künstlerroman* tradition

Since its publication in 1974, *The Dispossessed* has elicited an impressively diverse array of critical responses. Set on the planet of Urras and its moon, Anarres, it is the fifth novel in Le Guin's Hainish Cycle, which includes *Rocannon's World* (1966), *Planet of Exile* (1966), *City of Illusions* (1967), and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and it has continued to be the subject of a wide range of scholarly discussions, as a brief sampling of criticism from the last quarter-century suggests: Darren Jorgensen and Daniel P. Jaeckle have written on various politic aspects of the novel; Mario Klarer has written on the issue of gender in the novel; Dan Sabia, Mark Tunick, Winter Elliott, and Avery Plaw have addressed problems related to notions of community and the individual; and Donna Glee Williams has touched on the text's Taoist overtones. Despite this wealth of criticism, few critics have carried out protracted analyses of another of the novel's salient themes: the role of the artist figure in maintaining—or actively creating—a “free,” utopian society. While critics such as Malmgren and Richard D. Erlich have read other Le Guin novels in relation to the *Künstlerroman* tradition, to my knowledge, the same generic identification has not yet been made regarding *The Dispossessed*.<sup>6</sup> In the sections that follow, I limn this neglected aspect of Le Guin studies to argue that *The Dispossessed* can and should be read as a modern portrait-of-the-artist narrative that traces its hero's intellectual and artistic maturation as well as his actual trajectory in time and space.

My reading of Le Guin's text refers to the *Künstlerroman* tradition as outlined by Maurice Beebe, while also gesturing to the need to update his framework in light of more recent scholarship. *The Dispossessed* bears a striking resemblance to the *Künstlerroman* as it is described in *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts*, Beebe's seminal study of the “portrait-of-the-artist novel” (v). While Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* usefully dilates Beebe's comparatively restricted narrative of the *Künstlerroman* sub-genre, Beebe's portrait of the artist in Romantic terms represents one of the most recognizable of the *Künstlerroman*'s many forms and stages of development, and it is this particular model to which Le Guin seems to be responding in *The Dispossessed*. Read as a *Künstlerroman*—and specifically the Romantic notion

<sup>6</sup> Erlich, for example, reads the Earthsea trilogy as “a *Künstlerroman* (artist novel) with magic as the art” (95), and Malmgren suggests briefly that *The Lathe of Heaven* could “be seen as a *Künstlerroman*” because it features “an exceptional young artist troubled by his oneiric powers, trying to figure out what to do with them” (26).

of the artist on which Beebe relies—the novel sheds additional light on the recurring themes of individual and collective freedom, utopia, community, revolution, and exile, themes with which a majority of the text’s critics are concerned. More importantly, by offering an unexpected model of the artist figure—that is, by staking its claim as a novel of the scientist-cum-artist—*The Dispossessed* tacitly foregrounds the inadequacy of the predominant yet predominantly outdated and narrowly circumscribed assumptions with which many literary critics have approached a still-vibrant sub-genre.

Despite its sf trappings, *The Dispossessed* fits well with the conventional Romantic *Künstlerroman* narrative of an individual’s artistic development. As Beebe explains, writers are faced with a choice between two modes of artistic production: the “Sacred Fount” tradition, in which art is created in response to lived experience, human relationships, or direct encounters with nature, and the “Ivory Tower” tradition, in which art is the end result of protracted study, introspection, or isolation. Although Beebe’s analysis focuses primarily on a traditional literary canon of “Four Masters” (173)—Balzac, Henry James, Proust, and Joyce—more recent critics such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Helena Gurfinkel, Madelyn Jablon, and Roberta Sellinger Trites have demonstrated that a similar kind of interpretive framework can be applied productively to *Künstlerromane* by women, by non-white or other marginalized artists, and in genres such as children’s literature. But in many ways, the myriad implications of Susan Gubar’s challenges to what, in 1983, she rightly saw as a narrowly defined and predominantly male-centric genre have yet to be responded to and reflected fully in contemporary *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Increasingly, however, definitions of the *Künstlerroman* given by literary critics seem to accommodate twenty-first-century novels by female authors as easily as they do canonical, male-authored texts such as Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–1796). While Beebe claims that, regardless of differences in factors such as publication date or authorship, “the most surprising fact about portrait-of-the-artist novels is their similarity” (5), such a comment risks obscuring the synchronic diversity and generic development represented by this body of literature.

At base, the *Künstlerroman* can still be said to offer an account of “the protagonist’s development into an artist” (Seret 5), although not all of these are tales of youth leaving rural homes for the metropolis, of artists

7 For some notable exceptions, including recent treatments of the issue of female artists and their relation to the *Künstlerroman* tradition, see, for example, Hankins, DuPlessis, Cowdy, and Usandizaga.

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attempting to find their way in society, or of bourgeoisie yearnings for “an aristocratic universe” (Moretti ix), despite what Moretti tells us about the *Bildungsroman*’s origins.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these expected narratives, there are also *Künstlerroman* novels featuring mature women (such as Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*) and men who are young but who live at home (as is the case in J.R. Ackerley’s “queer *Künstlerroman*” [Gurfinkel 556], *My Father and Myself*). Even so, in Le Guin’s text, which features a non-human protagonist and takes place in a setting and time at least superficially foreign to its readers, the process of artistic growth is clearly depicted in relation to the stereotypically Romantic and by now quite familiar kind of Ivory Tower-Sacred Fount dialectic that Beebe describes, or that some mid-century representations of Oppenheimer tacitly embraced as part of their attempts to capture his creativity and genius.

And yet the novel is also more innovative than these borrowings might suggest. While it repurposes the forms and figures of the Romantic *Künstlerroman* undergirding Moretti’s study, it also substitutes a scientist for an artist not merely to help science’s cause, as in the case of certain biographical accounts of Oppenheimer, but to validate art—namely, SF. Violating one of the *Künstlerroman*’s definitional premises, Le Guin’s narration of the life of an individual *scientist* helps her to do what, according to her own theory of art, all good SF does: correct the deficiencies of both science and “[t]he technical arts” by humanizing their practitioners, making them the bearers of essential truths about reality (“Science Fiction” 112). Both science and art benefit from this treatment, but in the case of *The Dispossessed* it is SF, specifically, that stands to gain from the novel’s proximity to the *Bildung* tradition: “at the heart of” an effective SF novel, she argues, “you will not find an idea, or an inspirational message, [...] but something much frailer and obscurer and more complex: a person” (112). At the heart of *The Dispossessed*, of course, readers find one such figure. However, as a complex individual, Shevek embodies contradictions as a paradoxical symbol—of both an idea and its implementation, of both proximity and distance—simultaneously identifiable within, and a radical challenge to, an established literary tradition.

8 Jerome H. Buckley offers a similar definition to Seret’s, although, as Hankins explains, in identifying the period of an artist’s crucial formation as “early childhood through adolescence” (14), definitions such as Buckley’s have effectively excluded many female protagonists from the *Künstlerroman* tradition, since “the female artist in the nineteenth and early twentieth century usually had to undergo an additional preliminary interrogation of gender-identity even to choose to have a vocation outside of the domestic sphere” (394).

## “Between Two Worlds”: the SF scientist as artist

Although Shevek self-identifies as a scientist (331), he is portrayed as an artist figure in Le Guin’s text in several important ways. To begin with, the similarities between Shevek and other artists—as portrayed either by Le Guin or by Beebe—are too striking to ignore. Beebe, who defines an artist as “anyone capable of creating works of art, whether literary, musical, or visual” (v), also states more broadly (although in problematically gendered terms) that, “[j]ust as every artist is a man, every man is to some extent an artist, a maker of things, and the alienation of the artist is not unlike that of many men in a world where the center does not hold and where even the crowd is a lonely one” (313). Similarly, Laurence Davis, who explores the subject of art in *The Dispossessed* as well as works by William Morris and Oscar Wilde, posits that Le Guin “dramatises everyday life in an anarchist communist society in such a way as to render believable and appealing the revolutionary romantic ideal of everyone an artist” (240). Le Guin herself writes that, on Anarres, “[n]o distinction was drawn between the arts and the crafts; art was not considered as having a place in life, but as being a basic technique of life, like speech” (156). Because the arts and crafts are “pragmatic” (156) and because art is seen as a ubiquitous and “basic technique of life,” distinctions between art and science, or between artists and scientists, would appear to be irrelevant. The Anarresti philosophy of art itself serves as precedent for my own sleight-of-hand substitution of “artist” for “physicist.”<sup>9</sup> Like other members of his society, Shevek is an artist, even if only in the enlarged sense of that term. Significantly, though, not all of these artists take up Le Guin’s call to embrace art as a utopian instrument for “resistance and change” (Arons); few, in fact, attempt to disrupt the status quo.

Shevek is openly referred to as a “creator spirit” (188), and his development as an artist-physicist mirrors that of the sensitive writer or poet of the Romantic *Künstlerroman* tradition. In the larger context of Le Guin’s oeuvre, this should hardly come as a surprise. As William Burling observes, “Le Guin is perhaps the most persistent of all authors to explore the conditions, social function and meaning of artistic practice in utopian SF” (48). However, neither Burling nor Davis explicitly identify Shevek as an art-

9 A similar substitution is performed by Malmgren in his discussion of *The Lathe of Heaven* as a *Künstlerroman*: the protagonist’s “imagination” becomes “his art” (26). Yet Malmgren observes that in this novel, too, Le Guin herself provides the hints and parallels that make such a conflation seem not only plausible but deliberate.

ist, despite the many clues that invite such an association.<sup>10</sup> For example, like other artists in the *Künstlerroman* tradition, Shevek quickly realizes that he is different from his peers: “Since he was very young,” he recalls, “he had known that in certain ways he was unlike anyone else he knew” (106). Like Stephen Dedalus and many other *Künstlerroman* protagonists, Shevek also suffers from chronic health problems (161) as well as from a number of physical and mental breakdowns (9, 118–20, 282–83). During the first of these episodes, Shevek “thought ... that he was going insane” (118), a comment that is particularly significant in light of Shevek’s later association of insanity with art and the artistic process through Tirin, whom Shevek describes as “a born artist. Not a craftsman—a creator. An inventor-destroyer, the kind who’s got to turn everything upside down and inside out” (328). That Shevek himself is “a born artist” is implied when a Urrasti physicist similarly describes Shevek as a “destroyer”<sup>11</sup> whose ideas turn colleagues “on their heads” (67, 70).

Indeed, Shevek’s life and physics parallel the lives and artistic output of Tirin and Salas, two artists who are clearly identified as such within the novel. Salas’s composition is, in effect, the musical equivalent of Shevek’s later *magnum opus*, his General Temporal Theory, which neatly demonstrates “[t]he fundamental unity of the Sequency and Simultaneity points of view” (280)—that is, the paradoxical unity or synthesis of linear and cyclical notions of time—using “Saeba variables and the theories of infinite velocity and complex cause” (279). But again, according to the inclusive and pragmatic Anarresti philosophy of art that Le Guin imagines, Shevek’s theories paradoxically fulfil the conditions of art. Furthermore, Takver points out that the playwright Tirin, who ends up in an asylum on Segvina Island, “haunts” Shevek (331). In doing so, she makes an implicit connection between these two artists’ creative projects—and therefore alludes to her partner’s possible fate—by conflating Shevek’s book, *Principles of Simultaneity*, and Tirin’s play (331).

<sup>10</sup> Burling draws from the novel in referring to music as Shevek’s art, “the art that is made out of time” (Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* 157), but he does not move beyond his claim that music is the art that Shevek enjoys most as an observer (56) to discuss either the art that Shevek himself creates “out of time” or the generic implications of identifying him as an artist. In Davis’s essay, too, he discusses Shevek only as someone who “distinguishes between artists and craftspeople” (239), not as an artist in his own right.

<sup>11</sup> This reference to Shevek as a “destroyer” also underscores the fact that Shevek was modeled on Oppenheimer: as Charles Thorpe notes, Oppenheimer—reflecting on the invention of the atomic bomb—famously “summed up the new place of the scientist in the atomic age by quoting a line from the *Bhagavad Gita*, ‘I am become Death, [the] destroyer of worlds’” (12).

Even apart from Anarresti society, Shevek's dual identity as an artist-scientist allows him to claim for art pragmatic functions more commonly associated with science while also acknowledging art's intrinsic value prior to, and outside of, a market economy. On Urras, Shevek denies that he is an artist when he wanders into an art gallery, but it is clear that he does so only because, in this moment, he is reacting against the dealer's description of his collection in monetary terms. What Shevek sees as "a skillfully painted nude" is, in the dealer's eyes, "a sure investment" (209). Embedded in Shevek's critique of the financial motivations of the Urrasti "art market"—and his corresponding retort that "[a] man makes art because he has to" (209)—is an invocation not only of the Anarresti definition of art but of Le Guin's own plea, in her 2014 National Book Awards speech, for a distinction "between production of a market commodity and the practice of an art" (Arons). When he denies that he is an artist, saying, "No, I am a man who knows shit when he sees it!" (210), he is merely refusing to align himself with the *Urrasti* definition of artists; he is still an artist according to the pragmatic definition of art he himself provides. What he rejects as "shit" is the dealer's commercialized philosophy of art, the commodification of art and the artistic process.

Shevek soon discovers that, to create, he must become an exile; he must sequester himself from the outside world and from the demands of Anarresti society. Like the hero of the traditional Romantic *Künstlerroman* narrative, he must also grapple with the question of whether—and how—to reintegrate into that society. According to Beebe, "creative man is a divided being, man *and* artist" (6), but "the artist *as artist* must turn his back on life" (308).<sup>12</sup> It should be noted, then, that Shevek's exile in his private room in Abbenay, and his subsequent exile to Urras and the ivory towers of Ieu Eun University, are both self-imposed. Recognizing his need to create and the particular demands of that need, he relinquishes temporarily the possibility of "personal fulfillment in experience" in favour of "freedom from the demands of life" (Beebe 13). When Shevek begins his studies at the Central Institute of the Sciences, the narrator observes that, "for the first time in his life, he closed the door of his own room" (103). Working toward his goal as an artist, he severs ties with the outside world. As Beebe reminds readers, "whatever it may be called, the Ivory Tower is always the artist's private retreat" (56), and Shevek's symbolic retreat behind closed doors on multiple occasions betokens not only his

<sup>12</sup> For further remarks on the isolation of the artist in the *Künstlerroman* tradition, see also Seret (1, 10–11).

self-exile but also his preference for working alone. Accordingly, because Anarres's society is premised on the idea of complete individual freedom and equality, he occasionally appears guilty of what Banco, describing Victor Frankenstein, the most famous fictional exemplar of the Romantic scientist, calls "irresponsible shirking of social and ethical obligations" (219).

In other words, Shevek's exile at times prefigures his paradoxical desire to live out Anarresti's Odonian philosophy by flouting the unwritten rules of Anarresti society that impede his artistic progress. He must rupture this system to reform it along the lines suggested by its utopian blueprint. And Shevek is well aware that his preference for isolation appears transgressive on a moral as well as an economic level: the text mentions that, in Odonian society, "privacy was a value only where it served a function" (111), and, moreover, that "[t]he economy of Anarres would not support the building, maintenance, heating, lighting of individual houses and apartments" (110). Shevek is therefore forced to question whether the time he invests in his work can be justified. "Privacy," he reflects, "was almost as desirable for physics as it was for sex. But all the same, was it necessary?" (111). Ultimately, he decides that his "job was worth doing and he was doing it well. It was centrally functional to his society. The responsibility justified the privilege" (112). Even so, Shevek continues to feel the burden of what Williams terms his "interrelated responsibility towards his talents and his community" (167). Beebe's comments on this dual responsibility, which is, according to Beebe's own theory, an inevitable and direct result of "the divided nature of the artist" (13), are particularly helpful in an analysis of Shevek's artistic dilemma: he writes that, "when the artist denies his own humanity and rejects the need for social engagement, he loses the ability to produce" (16). As long as Shevek remains locked away in an ivory tower, he finds himself without distractions, but he also finds himself without the kind of balance he requires to create, to avoid "egoizing,"<sup>13</sup> and to avoid physical or mental collapse.

As the above analysis indicates, the interrelated concepts of exile, identity, home, return or reintegration and artistic development figure prominently in *The Dispossessed*. But the novel's emphasis on exile situates it comfortably within the *Künstlerroman* sub-genre as described by Beebe, even as this same emphasis allows Le Guin to continue to challenge generic boundaries. One could easily extend and reinforce my reading of *The Dispossessed* as a *sf Künstlerroman*—both in and against the Romantic tradition—by elucidating the connections between the artist figure and

13 Shevek attempts to define the concept of "egoizing" for Oiie by explaining that to "egoize" is to "show off" (150).



the exile.<sup>14</sup> In a geographical as well as a historical sense, Shevek is born into exile; the society to which he purportedly belongs came into being through an act of collective emigration. But an artist's experience of exile is unique in the sense that it is informed by the artist's proximity either to an ivory tower or to a sacred fount: the artist must always choose one mode, or one locus, of artistic production over the other. In this context, Michael Seidel's general definition of an exile as "someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another" (ix) accurately describes Shevek's fundamentally exilic position. He must constantly renegotiate his identity and his relationship with the outside world—or worlds, as the case may be—in his attempts both to create and to effect a kind of "return" from Anarres to Urras, and from Urras back to Anarres.

At Ieu Eun University (an obvious ivory tower symbol), Shevek feels that he is an exile from both worlds. More importantly, he intuits that "the certainty of isolation" is "his true condition" (89), an insight that leads him to doubt the tenability of his artistic vision:

He was alone, here, because he came from a self-exiled society. He had always been alone on his own world because he had exiled himself from his society. The Settlers had taken one step away. He had taken two. He stood by himself, because he had taken the metaphysical risk.

And he had been fool enough to think that he might serve to bring together two worlds to which he did not belong. (89–90)

Like the titular protagonist of Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* (1903), Shevek imagines his mission to have been a failure. Moretti translates Tonio's parting letter as follows: "I am in between two worlds, at home in neither, and as a consequence everything is a bit difficult for me" (237). However, while the rest of Mann's narrative cumulatively "suggests that the acclaimed artist and impeccable bourgeois is in fact at home in *both* worlds" (Moretti 237), Le Guin's novel leaves Shevek literally suspended between two worlds but also firmly set against the bourgeois materialism of Urras's A-Io state and the increasingly restrictive, institutionalized anarchism of Anarres.

Shevek's attempted union of these two worlds serves as a reminder of Le Guin's commitment to a radical theory of art—one which rewrites, rather than simply regurgitates, an historical genre and its attendant ("bourgeois") ideology and theory of art. As a self-exile as well as a dual-exile, Shevek is an artist whose conflicted identity necessarily informs his

14 This connection is explored at length by Bevan, Dascălu, and Seidel.



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efforts to connect seemingly irreconcilable and disconnected cultures. Within the Romantic framework outlined by Beebe, what David Bevan calls the exiled artist's "double or contrapuntal vision" provides Shevek with the perspective he needs to create, but this kind of dual perspective is central to his *ability* to effect change on a larger scale, not just a utopian but ultimately ideologically constrained, *desire* to do so. At the Sacred Fount, he receives the materials for his art, and his need for community is satisfied, if only temporarily; in the ivory tower, he is able to create, and this position of self-exile provides him with a unique vantage point. On Urras, for example, Shevek is given the creative distance he requires to write, and this new perspective allows him to "see a thing whole" (190), thus furthering his education as an artist. Again, though, he is neither an artist in the conventional Romantic sense nor a physicist in our modern one, but a hybrid of both. His partial (or implied future) success in bringing together two worlds, as well as "two cultures," facilitates the creation of a hybrid third culture or site of production, effected not only through Le Guin's imaginative efforts in a genre whose very name, "science fiction," suggests its roots both in the literary arts and in a scientifically-grounded epistemology but through simultaneous recourse to the *Künstlerroman* sub-genre and to the historically contingent definitions of art around which *Künstlerromane* are constructed.

Despite Shevek's doubts about the value of his project, his solitary work on Urras results in an epiphany (280–81) that provides him with the key he requires to write his magnum opus and ally his physics with his revolutionary ideals both in theory and in practice. His theory unlocks the secrets of simultaneity or "transilience,"<sup>15</sup> facilitating the invention of the "ansible," "an instantaneous communication device" (276) that effectively illustrates the ways his art serves practical as well as merely aesthetic purposes, merging artistic process and scientific product. Stated simply, Shevek's discovery makes possible "a utopia of communication" (Dietz 112). Shevek himself acknowledges that "[m]en cannot leap the great gaps, but ideas can" (344), and to this end he gives his own idea as a "gift" to all (345). Notably, for Shevek, this gesture frees his art from the logic of A-IO's capitalist market. His art is predicated on the act of sharing, and during his time on Urras, he comes to understand that "[i]t is of the nature of idea to be communicated: written, spoken, done" (72).

The urgency of his desire to put his own ideas into practice becomes increasingly obvious as the novel progresses, and Le Guin makes it clear

15 For more on transilience, see Le Guin (*The Dispossessed* 86, 143).

that, by taking action—especially revolutionary action—Shevek carries out his role both as an artist and as an Odonian: “He could not rebel against his society,” she writes, “because his society, properly conceived, was a revolution, a permanent one, an ongoing process” (176). Shevek’s artistic achievement does not suggest that his “life has been fulfilled” (281) but, rather, that his life as a true Odonian revolutionary is only beginning. Accordingly, he decides not to reintegrate into Anarresti society in its current form so much as to gradually bring it into closer alignment with its as-yet-unrealized form, as crucially indicated by the qualifier “his society, properly conceived.” For Takver, Bedap, and the other members of the Syndicate of Initiative, “process [is] all” (334); the utopian effort to “unbuild walls” (8, 75, 332), to reverse the processes of centralization, bureaucratization, and ossification of Odonian principles (168), never ends, just as the artist’s vision can never be fully realized in art—not because unbuilding the various walls the novel identifies is impossible, or because Shevek fails in his vocation as an artist-physicist, but because new walls are inevitably, and often unconsciously, erected in their place.

Given that the novel ends before the outcome of the political unrest on Urras or of Shevek’s own journey is known, one might question whether or not Le Guin’s text can be considered a *Künstlerroman* according to traditional definitions of that sub-genre. The artist has not yet “arrived.” Still, one might argue that the novel’s insistence on the importance of process makes its ending entirely appropriate, and that, by presenting exile and flux as empowering rather than debilitating realities, the novel depicts Shevek’s development in such a way that it all but announces his artistic mastery as a *fait accompli*, even if the utopian vision tied to his invention can, by definition, never be completely realized. The novel concludes with the same sense of in-betweenness, indeterminacy, and ambiguity that Le Guin emphasizes throughout; the permanence of Shevek’s status as an artist-scientist in exile is again asserted as he moves toward, but never reaches, Anarres, thus corroborating Cristina Emanuela Dascălu’s claim that “[t]he subjectivity of the exile is one of motion, of becoming but never reaching the certainty of having become” (13).

Nevertheless, the novel’s emphasis on unrealizability raises important questions about how one reads Le Guin’s theory of art with or against the grain of the text’s utopian and Marxist politics. Fredric Jameson, for one, provides a useful gloss of how, in Marxist terms, the SF novel operates in spite of the unrealizability of its utopian visions: “[SF’s] deepest vocation is to bring home, in local and determinate ways, and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself, and

this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners” (“Progress” 153). In *The Dispossessed*, just as Odo was physically imprisoned on Urras, her followers know that they will be subject to the forces of centralization, bureaucracy, and other forms of socio-political and cultural imprisonment. Consequently, part of Shevek’s artistic vision is to make others aware of the inevitability of what Jameson elsewhere refers to as “mental and ideological imprisonment” (*Archaeologies* xiii), so that they will join him in the ongoing process of dismantling the walls of their sundry “prisons.” Through acts of resistance, and particularly through his revolutionary writings, Shevek comes to embody his own theory, which is an extension of Odonian theory; he is aware of the “closure” of which Jameson speaks but actively works to reverse it.

Alternatively, one might argue that, even if Le Guin remains a “prisoner” of her “systemic, cultural, and ideological” conditioning, her novel imagines a utopian space where Shevek does not—a possibility figured most memorably, perhaps, by the literal outer space where Le Guin leaves Shevek, a subject seemingly free of ideology’s gravitational pull. What this space requires, however, is a theory of art in which art does not operate within the closed loop of ideology but, rather, one that breaks free of its constraints, upholding (now unfashionable) aesthetic concepts such as the autonomy and inherent value of artistic processes. In several respects, this is precisely what *The Dispossessed* appears to give us. The theory of art undergirding Shevek’s utopian project emerges out of, but is ultimately poised to completely disrupt, what Carl Freedman refers to as Anarres’s “anarcho-communist” society.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the novel, Shevek embodies a revolutionary truth and occupies an intermediary space seemingly independent of capital P “Politics”—something Le Guin explicitly aligns with “Pedantry” and opposes to art, which, at its best, she imagines is capable of embodying a kind of Platonic “Truth” (“The View In” 7). In this way, the novel successfully *projects* an autonomous art in keeping with Le Guin’s own theory of art, if only in the limited sense of autonomy described by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*: “The autonomy of art is,” in this view, “a lie that art tells itself, which paradoxically contains a truth. Art, according to Adorno, can never be truly autonomous and yet it must take on that status in order to criticize society” (Petsche). Le Guin tells this lie repeatedly, and with similarly paradoxical effect. In the process of making Shevek the

16 Similarly, Fredric Jameson remarks that “it seems important to question [Le Guin’s] qualification of Anarres as an ‘anarchist’ Utopia” (“World-Reduction” 230).

mouthpiece for a truth capable of transcending and reforming the societies that have conditioned its expression in his art, her narrative embodies this message by translating it into an aesthetic form, the SF *Künstlerroman*—a form simultaneously embedded in, and yet definitionally and ontologically distinct from, both the non-fictional realities and the literary-historical materials that informed its production.

Jameson, meanwhile, understands Le Guin's "valorization of an anti-political, anti-activist [*sic*] stance" in novels such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* to be part of a "world-reduction" technique that admirably but unsuccessfully "attempt[s] to rethink Western history without capitalism" ("World-Reduction" 228). By the end of *The Dispossessed*, Anarresti society is still organized according to a political system that resembles Marxism in several key aspects, as many critics have observed. In contrast with Urras's A-Io state and with the real-world capitalist society in which Le Guin penned the novel, Anarres's attempted erasure of class difference under the aegis of "anarchism" highlights the radical, but also the unrealized (and perhaps unrealizable), aspects of its founding Odonian philosophy.

But if Anarresti society, "properly conceived" (176), can be read in Marxist terms, so, too, can the theory of art it propounds be read as "properly" Marxist. More than that, this theory can be read in such a way as to address, or at least begin to address, the impasse suggested both by Jameson's materialist critique of Le Guin's idealist utopianism and by corresponding debates about art's utilitarian versus intrinsic value. Freedman remarks, "Employing the specific terms of Marxian economics, one might say that Shevek not only advocates but *incarnates* the triumph of use-value over exchange-value" (120). However, this is only part of the picture, and one Freedman refers neither to Le Guin's theory of art nor to the novel's larger portrait-of-the-artist frame, but to his real focus: "a more specifically political dialectic" (114). Freedman's emphasis on "the triumph of use-value" therefore has the unintentional effect of occulting art's intrinsic worth. Contra major strains of critical and particularly Marxist theory, in which the revolutionary potential of artistic works is modulated first and foremost by their ideological and material relations, Ali Alizadeh asserts that, according to Marx's "frankly extraordinary" but frequently misunderstood theory of art, "art is the task or process of the preparation and transformation of spirituality into something that we can use in *the realm of theory*" (608). And this is the point at which *The Dispossessed* finally arrives: the moment of Shevek's alchemical transformation of an immaterial, utopian impulse into an embodied and soon-to-be-enacted

theory. As Alizadeh elaborates, this theory of art, developed across Marx's formidable oeuvre,

is challenging because it breaks both with our contemporary capitalist, instrumentalist views of art—that is, our view of art as, first and foremost, either a commercial or ideological value—and also with our Romantic, metaphysical notions of art which present the work as a quasi-mystical spiritual negation of the materiality of human life. [...] The *genius* of Marx—if I may use the term without allusions to the cults of aestheticism or Romanticism—can be seen in his ability to show that these two qualities are not contradictory but that they are in fact absolutely complimentary and even symbiotic: art's infinite or indefinite uses exist precisely because they spring from material human labour which, as *concrete* labour—prior to its reification to homogenous *abstract* labour for the purposes of exchange and commodification—seeks to produce nothing other than pure usefulness, i.e. the satisfaction of humanity's most basic needs. Art, therefore, is absolutely essential, useful and valuable, and it is also absolutely resistant to commodity fetishism and an exchange economy. (596–97)

To articulate a theory of art along these lines is, I submit, to work toward a dissipation of enervating tensions, actual or perceived: between art's instrumental versus intrinsic value, for example, or between *The Dispossessed's* anarcho-communist materialism, which invites readings of Shevek's achievements in terms of their use value (for example, the ansible as a scientific product that satisfies the basic need of communication), and its inherited Romantic *Künstlerroman* form, which seems to cast Shevek's artistic development and revolutionary ideals in such a way as to render them resistant to crude instrumentalization or commodification (for example, Shevek's understanding of his revolutionary vocation as an ongoing search for Truth).

Or, to read the novel alongside Le Guin's own theory of art and utopian methodology, one might say that Shevek must find a way to share the spiritual "truths" unlocked by his imaginative inquiries, leveraging artistic processes to achieve pragmatic but hopeful ends. Regardless, it bears repeating that revolution, as a means of envisioning and working toward utopian ideals, must be an ongoing process. Even as an incarnation of a utopian theory of art, Shevek, too, must "be communicated" (72) to make his mission intelligible and initiate the ongoing process of tearing down the walls that separate Urras from Anarres. During the moment of his

epiphany, Shevek had imagined that there were “no more walls. There was no more exile” (281). But this transcendent vision is merely an ephemeral glimpse of a possible future, not of his present reality, and he soon realizes that the walls that separate him from his peers—or Urras from Anarres—still remain. Nevertheless, as Alizadeh reminds us, in Marx’s theory of art, “If both capitalism and organised religion produce alienation, then art has the power to de-alienate, or make the world assimilable and familiar” (608). The same can be said of the form of artistic praxis championed in Le Guin’s novel: despite being contained in a genre widely known for what Darko Suvin calls “cognitive estrangement,”<sup>17</sup> the theory of art espoused in *The Dispossessed* ultimately seeks to reconcile multiple worlds (Urras and Anarres, capitalism and anarcho-communism, art and science), reversing the forces of alienation that have acted on Shevek during his exile and artistic development.

## Conclusion

Although Le Guin leaves her protagonist suspended provocatively between Urras and Anarres, between various ivory towers and sacred founts, Shevek is able to embrace his exilic condition as a necessary, even generative, element of his identity as an artist-physicist whose revolutionary invention seems poised to set worlds in motion. The theory of art outlined in the novel allows Shevek to imaginatively, if not actually, slip the bonds of ideology; his artistic process (labour) is itself valuable, and seemingly autonomous, yet also materially valuable in a way that resists the kind of commodification he overtly rejects. These gestures are, as I have argued, possible precisely because of Le Guin’s innovation, the SF *Künstlerroman*, which knowingly carves out a reality of its own. As Jameson points out, “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” (“World-Reduction” 223). In *The Dispossessed*, the “variation” Le Guin provides is a universe in which “two cultures” are fused, with artistic process and scientific product unified under a capacious theory of art. That is, this unique process of world reduction takes place in the aesthetic sphere: the novel’s collapse of art and science, of SF and the Romantic *Künstlerroman*, enables its critiques of flawed political systems as well as its utopian responses to the problems it introduces.

This union—and the theory of art that facilitates it—has implications for future readers of *The Dispossessed*, and for *Künstlerroman* studies more

17 See Suvin’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979).

generally. On the one hand, it should now be clear that *The Dispossessed* can be read as a modern portrait-of-the-artist-in-exile narrative, and that understanding the text in this new light invites a more fulsome reconsideration of the text's formal and thematic implications than I have provided here. On the other, however, the novel paradoxically fulfils the role of the Romantic *Künstlerroman* Beebe describes even as it challenges the post-Enlightenment definitions of art upon which Moretti's youth-centric *Bildungsroman* and Snow's influential separation of the two cultures seem to rely. In other words, to read *The Dispossessed* in reference to the *Künstlerroman* form is to call into question the historical and aesthetic conditions that have mediated that sub-genre's coherence and development from the eighteenth century to the present. While the novel's hero achieves the kind of success of which Joyce's fledgling Stephen Dedalus can only dream, this is no finished portrait, either. Le Guin's text is deliberately open-ended, and Shevek's project foregrounds the importance of artistic and revolutionary process—not the realizability of artistic or social perfection.

If the *Bildungsroman* survived and was wildly successful because, as Moretti claims, it was a “bastard” genre with a “*predisposition to compromise*” (10), it is possible that *The Dispossessed* has continued to fascinate critics for precisely the opposite reason: because its author posits a theory of art provocatively out of step with the dominant ideology of her time, wilfully conflating artistic and scientific categories that were seen by many, at mid-century, as wholly antithetical—and she does so not to accommodate, but rather to confound, capitalist modes of production. In the process, the novel serves as a record of generic (r)evolution. To borrow a metaphor from Moretti, one might say that the *Künstlerroman* has not fallen far from the “dead branches” of the *Bildungsroman* family tree (245)—just far enough to take root in new fields.

But what of its future in the field of SF? Moretti's study, while brilliantly insightful and expansive, does not account—nor should it be expected to account—for the ways that SF might actually engage or engender new conceptions of youth or, better yet, new worlds on which to project the utopian impulses and youthful aspirations he imagines to have been exploded in our own by the Great War (229). Moretti's vision of youth—and with it, the youth-centric *Bildungsroman*—is future-oriented (5), but so is much SF literature. In Le Guin's hands, both the utopian hopes of youth and the postmodernists' rejection of teleology (which paradoxically guarantees the endless deferral of such hopes) are reinscribed not only in the supposedly moribund *Bildungsroman* form Moretti describes but in a genre whose self-reflexive reconstellation of the political and economic contingencies



of our own world means that youth no longer needs to be the symbolic locus of the novel of the artist. Le Guin, following the Romantic *Künstlerroman* tradition, chooses for her protagonist a precocious youth who is already established in his field by the age of twenty, but Shevek's major accomplishments occur during his adult years. To turn Moretti's generalization about "twentieth-century heroes" against him, one might say that Shevek's maturation is marked not by "regression," but by continued intellectual and emotional "growth" (231) beyond the horizons suggested by the material conditions of either world, or by the conflicting theories of art they engender. More provocatively yet, *The Dispossessed's* open ending allows for another possibility that is at once out of step with Moretti's traditional definition of the *Bildungsroman* but fully in keeping with more recent scholarship: namely, the possibility of what Sara Lyons terms "disillusionment and failure," of the capacity of the *Bildungsroman* to "refer to either an affirmative or profoundly negative coming-of-age narrative (or to an ambiguous composite of these alternatives)." Committed to ambiguity from beginning to end, Le Guin's novel contains an affirmative narrative of artistic growth while also holding the door open to the possibility of its dystopian negation.

The larger point I wish to make is simply that Moretti, referring to the modernist *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* as "late" (230), was too eager to inter a still-living tradition.<sup>18</sup> After all, it is one thing to point out that a literary genre emerged in response to a specific set of historical and material conditions or that it gradually acquired a recognizable set of family conventions in the process; it is quite another to suggest that this "tradition" only ever existed in the singular, as if artists' responses to these conditions were one and the same, or to foreclose the possibility—rather, the inevitably—of generic evolution. In any case, my intention in rehearsing these arguments is not to denigrate Moretti's considerable contributions to scholarship on the *Künstlerroman* and its parent genre but to provoke further discussion of the form and, more specifically, the innovations of one of its SF children. As the foregoing analysis indicates, my own sense is that novels such as *The Dispossessed*—to say nothing of modern *Künstlerromane* such as Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), Chaim Potok's *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), Karl Ove

18 Moretti ominously titles the final section of his fourth chapter "End of a Genre" (223), and he claims that the *Bildungsroman* "took place almost entirely within" the "Hundred Years' Peace" of 1815–1914 (239). In the preface to the new edition of *The Way of the World* he defends this position, admitting only that the first edition had "never fully explain[ed] why [the *Bildungsroman*] form was so deeply entwined with one social class, one region of the world, one sex" (x).

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Knausgård's *My Struggle* series (2009–2011), or Elena Ferrante's "Neapolitan Novels" (2012–2015)—are not in fact atavistic epigones but rather new, fit specimens in an evolving line of literary descent.

The family characteristics I have highlighted—the Romantic tropes, the theme of exile, the invention of a utopian theory of art—necessarily obscure others that might be productively brought to the fore in future discussions of the plural forms now signified by the phrase "the *Künstlerroman* tradition." And perhaps that is precisely the point: *The Dispossessed* hopefully engenders new, even previously unimaginable, possibilities for art and the forms that it takes. Le Guin's novel is, indeed, "An Ambiguous Utopia," as its original subtitle suggests, and its open ending leaves Shevek in exile, caught symbolically between two worlds. But if the text is considered as a *Künstlerroman*, and if Shevek's movement between these two worlds is reframed in terms of his struggle to achieve his artistic vision, the novel's refusal to resolve the various tensions it introduces can be understood as an affirmation of the ongoing necessity and transformative power of art and artistic process, rather than as a failure to imagine a utopian future that is anything but "ambiguous."

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