

To Dan'l: Ambiguous utopias

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 09 Apr 2001

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Nicholas Gevers — 09 Apr 2001, 22:03

In response to the comments of Dan'l Blattid O'Roach below:

Points well taken. I should add that if THE DISPOSSESSED has influenced TBSS, it may well have done so via its major utopian successor, again Robinson's MARS Trilogy--the Trilogy is very much about sister planets, Mars and Earth, and their complex utopian/dystopian/counterutopian relationship, in close and deliberate echo of Le Guin.

Ambiguity in Le Guin: well, absolutely, and Wolfe is far more ambiguous than Le Guin, and more ambivalent, as I've indicated, about utopia; in THE DISPOSSESSED, Le Guin certainly strives for a balance of systems and their limitations, but she is inherently a highly partisan and didactic writer, and achieves less objectivity than she believes. TBSS could profitably be seen as Wolfe putting authentic "ambiguity" into the utopia or heterotopia (Delany) for the first time, as only he can manage--thus his bewildering variety of systems of governance, which come much closer to the world's actual degree of variety than any ordinary utopian scenario ever could...

In short, TBSS poses the question: in the volatile, multiplex cauldron of events that is socio-political reality, what degree of utopian consensus can ever emerge? Wolfe proposes some of the necessary lineaments of such a consensus (social justice, inclusivity, as I've mentioned in earlier posts), but leaves us in fully appropriate uncertainty as to whether the consensus will ever really emerge and be applied. Sounds to me like the best thought-out utopian novel ever.

--Nick Gevers.

H'mmm. I think this underestimates the "ambiguous" of Le Guin's subtitle: THE DISPOSSESSED is about two worlds each of which _claims_ to be "utopian" vis-a-vis the other, but neither quite

manages to be a utopia. I think the key to understanding THE DISPOSSESSED is an idea expressed (of all places) in THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN v.1 -- the passage of the lake of the dead in Hildegren's boat, where Dorcas delivers herself of a little speech on how the good and the evil in the world remain in a kind of balance between internal and external.

Of course, Le Guin isn't a Catholic, but move the idea in to her belief-system and you have the key to THE DISPOSSESSED: each world _ought_ to be a Utopia, Urras because it has the resources, Anarres because it has the anarcho-Taoist philosophy: but neither quite makes it because it lacks what the other possesses. Each is dispossessed, each incomplete without the other.

Of course, any simple mapping to THE DISPOSSESSED is going to be radically flawed because SHORT SUN contrasts four worlds, not two, and (counting roughly off the top of my head) at least ten systems of governance -- Viron's, New Viron's, Gaon's, Soldo's, Blanko's, the village on Green, the inhum city, Dorp, uh, the place at the end of the Whorl where Pig gets his eye, and the Commonwealth: all their governances are shown at least in miniature; all are offered to us in contrast with the others.