

• 7 •

## The Need for Walls: Privacy, Community, and Freedom in *The Dispossessed*

*Mark Tunick*

### INTRODUCTION

Ursula K. Le Guin has been criticized for not being sufficiently utopian or radical in her book *The Dispossessed*.<sup>1</sup> Tom Moylan, who casts Le Guin as an anarcho-communist libertarian with an affinity for Taoist mysticism, sees her purpose as getting us to break down walls. On his view, Anarres, with its absence of walls and possessiveness, comes close to Le Guin's ideal. But, he argues, despite Le Guin's valiant efforts to depict an anarchist-communist world without privacy protecting walls, she reveals, in her implicit criticism of Anarres—of its barrenness in contrast to the beauty of Urras, and of its rejection of the nuclear family—both her conservatism and the limits of her utopian radical thought. Moylan adds that activists in the novel are displaced to the margins, which for him is a signal of Le Guin's inability to imagine a truly revolutionary, emancipatory politics.<sup>2</sup> Nadia Khouri is critical of Le Guin's alleged failure to envision a utopia that could emerge once we recognize the "internal and external contradictions" of both Anarres and Urras. To Khouri, Le Guin falls back on a "psychologizing individualism": she converts a political crisis into a crisis of consciousness, and is "stuck in her own aesthetic project," failing to face the objective world and the real changes needed to transform it.<sup>3</sup> In effect, Khouri says of Le Guin what Marx and the Left Hegelians said of Hegel and the German idealists: they are content with merely a new consciousness of the world, but we need to get our hands dirty and change it.<sup>4</sup>

I interpret Le Guin's project as Hegelian rather than either Marxian or utopian.<sup>5</sup> As a utopia, or a vision of a society to which we ought to aspire, Anarres leaves much to be desired. Its faults have been apparent to others, some of whom have tried to explain its ambiguities as a utopia by suggesting that Le Guin was too timid to imagine how its limitations could be overcome in practice. I shall not have much to say about what Le Guin's intentions actually were. I approach

130 *Mark Tunick*

her work as a political theorist intrigued by the ways in which it invites us to think about important political concepts. I take *The Dispossessed*, though subtitled “An Ambiguous Utopia,” as an unambiguous treatment of the tensions between one anarchist ideal, of freedom without law and authority, and another ideal central to some anarchists, such as Kropotkin, of community (as distinguished from “collectivity” [1: 4]).<sup>6</sup> *The Dispossessed* is not a failure in imaginative political theory, but a rich and critical examination of the anarchist ideal of tearing down walls for the sake of freedom. *The Dispossessed* explores the relationships between walls, privacy, freedom, and community. Anarres has but one boundary wall, and little privacy, in contrast to Urras, with its “massive walls of stone and glass,” prisons, private possessions, and possessiveness. Shevek wants to unbuild walls. But, as Takver notes, without walls “it may get pretty drafty” (10: 333). Certain walls may be needed to preserve privacy and individuality; but too many walls may undermine the sense of community valued on Anarres. The freedom Shevek seeks requires community, but community itself may require the preservation of individual autonomy and the building of some walls without creating a state of possessive individualism as exists on Urras.

## FREEDOM

In discussing the connection between privacy, community, and freedom, I draw on a conception of freedom that must be distinguished from the classical liberal understanding of freedom as the ability to do as one pleases absent unjustified constraints.<sup>7</sup> The conception of freedom I shall invoke was developed by G. W. F. Hegel, for whom true freedom is not merely the unrestricted ability to do as one pleases, or “negative freedom,” though that is an essential aspect of freedom. Rather, for Hegel true freedom involves experiencing a deep sense of fulfillment or satisfaction—the German word Hegel uses is *Befriedigung*—and of being “at home” in one’s world.<sup>8</sup> On Hegel’s view, the limitations on our desires imposed by laws and the obligations and duties we have as members of the state and its subordinate institutions, including family and the institutions of civil society, are not to be understood as restrictions on our freedom if we are “at home” in our state and its institutions, and so long as we freely choose them. For Hegel, “the limitation of impulse, desire, passion . . . [and] of caprice and willfulness, is [wrongly] taken as a limitation of freedom. On the contrary, such limitation is the very condition leading to liberation, and society and the state are the very conditions in which freedom is realized.”<sup>9</sup> Freedom is not freedom from, merely, but is also freedom in.<sup>10</sup> This idea is not foreign to the founder of Anarres, Odo, who came to see that promises, which restrict negative freedom, in fact promote freedom as they promote the idea of fidelity, which is essential “in the complexity of freedom” (8: 245); nor is it foreign to Shevek, who connects freedom with the idea

of being responsible to one another (2: 45) and with the principle of mutual aid between individuals (9: 300).

*The Dispossessed* centrally addresses the question of the conditions under which we can be truly fulfilled and at home, and this is an important sense of what it is to be free. Shevek, a physicist from the planet Anarres, visits Urras, from which the inhabitants of Anarres originated but which their ancestors left to found a new anarchic society.<sup>11</sup> Shevek has in the past reflected on whether he is fulfilled and at home in his commitments on Anarres. For example, he thinks about his partnership with Takver, which he maintained even after four years of separation, and we learn that “it had not occurred to either of them to escape the suffering by denying the commitment”—“it was joy they were both after—the completeness of being. . . . Pleasure you may get, or pleasures, but you will not be fulfilled. You will not know what it is to come home” (10: 334). Mere pleasures do not provide the sense of fulfillment and of being at home that constitutes freedom.

When Dr. Atro welcomes Shevek to Urras he says “welcome home!” (3: 67) even though Shevek had never before set foot on Urras. When Shevek first breathes its air it is said to be “the air of the world from which his race had come, it was the air of home” (1: 20; cf. 3: 77). Yet after spending time on Urras he has a thought that threatens to break down the gates, flooding him with an “urgent yearning” for Anarres: “To speak Pravic, to speak to friends, to see Takver, Pilun, Sadik, to touch the dust of Anarres . . . .” (9: 273). So where is Shevek truly at home? Shevek is driven to leave the barren Anarres where his physics work is hampered and he is parted from his family. He seeks something more universal than the provincial Anarres life. The Anarresti strive for negative freedom without authority as well as a genuine community that, on Hegel’s view, is precisely the sort of transcending commitment that we all need to give meaning to our lives and be free. But one is left wondering whether the Anarresti’s nearly complete rejection of walls and privacy and, more broadly, of the possessive individualism so valued on Urras, is compatible with achieving a meaningful community in which they can be at home. Yet Shevek doubts that the Urrasti of A-Io are free either, though many of them have material wealth that purchases them physical and intellectual pleasures.

## ANARRES

Anarres may commonly be thought of as Le Guin’s utopia, but it would be an odd choice in some ways. Life on Anarres is Spartan. The people, wearing their coarse clothing of holum-fiber fabric (1: 13), live in a harsh, arid mining colony with no animals, no lush foliage, and occasional famine-producing droughts (ch. 4). The founder Odo apparently could not take Machiavelli’s advice and found a city on

fertile soil.<sup>12</sup> Urras, in contrast, has a beauty in its combination of nature and artifice, a beauty arising from “the tenderness and vitality of the colors, the mixture of rectilinear human design and powerful, proliferate natural contours, the variety and harmony of the elements,” all of which give “an impression of complex wholeness such as [Shevek] had never seen” (3: 65). It is the forbidding environment on Anarres, Shevek at one point speculates, and not the social structure that “frustrates individual creativity”: “This planet wasn’t meant to support civilization” and so human solidarity is its only resource (6: 167). Perhaps the desolateness promotes community, focusing attention on people’s relations and interactions with each other. There is a spot on Depot Street on Anarres where Urrasti trees are grown, and Shevek wonders whether the extravagant foliage is mere excess, “excrement.” They require constant watering, rich soil, much caring (4: 100); by their absence the Anarresti are left to nurture their characters and interpersonal relationships without the distraction of material or natural excess. Yet standing under these dark tree limbs, with their green hands, “awe came into him” (4: 100). Strong evidence that for Shevek there is something sorely missing on Anarres, something found on Urras that the Anarresti feebly replicate. Anarres emphasizes community, in contrast to the more individualist society of A-Lo on Urras, yet there is a sense of belonging on Urras, of feeling a part of the whole earth, that its inhabitants share with other animals, a feeling absent on Anarres: “Think of it: everywhere you looked animals, other creatures, sharing the earth and air with you. You’d feel so much more a *part*,” says Takver when pondering the abundance and variety of life on “the Old World” (6: 186). In addition to its natural abundance and beauty, Urras is steeped in traditions, symbolized by the buildings Shevek sees which tell him “I have been here for a long time, and I am still here” (3: 89). Edmund Burke argued that traditions are an important tie that binds members of a community, that connects the future with the past, and that gives meaning to our lives, and that they are hard to build from scratch: “Alas! They little know how many a weary step is to be taken before they can form themselves into a mass which has a true politic personality. . . . A nation . . . is an idea of continuity which extends in time as well as in numbers and in space. And this is a choice not of one day or one set of people, not a tumultuary and giddy choice; it is a deliberate election of ages and of generations; it is a constitution made by what is ten thousand times better than choice.”<sup>13</sup> One wonders what gives meaning to the Anarresti, who lack a connection either to place or traditions. What is special about belonging to their community that would justify individual sacrifices—sacrifices that can be considerable? Shevek had “given up his book, and his love, and his child. How much can a man be asked to give up?” (8: 258) And for what?

Perhaps what binds them and gives them meaning is not a relation to their natural environment or shared customs and traditions, but a commitment to certain ideals. Anarres is supposedly classless and egalitarian: “there was no rank, no terms of rank, no conventional respectful forms of address” (4: 101). Through

their commitment to an ideal of equality understood as the rejection of privilege and hierarchy based on status, even merited status, or in the words of Kropotkin, who would have professors clean hallways, as the ruling out of “privileged labor,” the Anarresti avoid the ranking and judging that is so prominent on Urras and that makes solidarity less likely.<sup>14</sup>

Yet Le Guin casts doubt on whether the Anarresti genuinely value equality in this sense. It turns out there are privileges based on status, as Shevek learns when he goes to the Central Institute of the Sciences and gets dessert nightly, rather than once or twice a decad (ten days) as at most refectories (4: 111). And doubt is cast also on whether a completely egalitarian society should be their ideal. Shevek is warned about “false egalitarianism,” that is, denying that some are better than others. He is told to work with the best physicists (2: 57–58), and he recognizes that in physics “he had had no equals” on Anarres. Only in A-Io, “in the realm of inequity,” did he have competent colleagues (3: 71). In A-Io, Shevek is bowed to for the first time in his life, and he observes how “the Urrasti were forever using titles and honorifics” (3: 66). People are categorized as superior and inferior (1: 15). Yet the results are not entirely unhappy: the people are more refined and the students are better. Shevek notes, “they never fell asleep in class because they were tired from having worked on rotational duty the day before”—but he adds, “their freedom from obligation was in exact proportion to their lack of freedom of initiative” (5: 127).

Shevek, here, points to one apparent advantage Anarres has over Urras: the realization of another ideal to which the Anarresti are committed, negative freedom, promoted by a guiding principle: no laws or boundaries. On Anarres there is only “one law” (1: 7)—the law of evolution or change (7: 220; 12: 359)—and one “right”: “the right of the Odonian individual to initiate action harmless to others” (12: 357).

Having no laws, the Anarresti have little sense of guilt and do not punish. For a society that strives to regard each as of equal worth, notions of desert and blame may be problematic, and without blame and guilt there is no retribution. Odo, in her *Prison Letters*, implores Odonians: “free your mind of the idea of deserving, the idea of earning, and you will begin to be able to think” (12: 358). When Shevek takes double helpings of food during the famine, he declares “need is right. He was an Odonian, he left guilt to profiteers” (8: 261). Not only is there apparently no internal guilt, there is no visible practice of legal punishment and there are no prisons (2: 34–40). The very notion of a prison can be repulsive to the Anarresti, as Shevek learned when as a child he and his friends, out of curiosity and in play, built a makeshift cell in which they confined Kadagv. Shevek, playing a guard, felt a sense of “secret power” that made him suddenly uncomfortable to the point that he had to lean over a bowl and vomit (2: 39–40).

Even an egalitarian society without a notion of desert could justify punishment as a deterrent. But on Anarres there is little need even for that. For example, there are no sexual violations since “molestation was extremely rare in a society

where complete fulfillment was the norm from puberty on" (8: 245). However, there are asylums (6: 170) and sometimes "they make you go away by yourself for a while"(5: 150).

That should give us pause. "Everybody on Anarres is a revolutionary," and no one is supposed to have authority. The only authority is public opinion (3: 76). No one is supposed to be forced or ordered on this anarchic world. Yet sometimes "they make you go away by yourself." It turns out there is considerable social pressure, and this makes us wonder how much of even the classical liberal sense of freedom the Anarresti really enjoy. With no threat of punishment for breaking laws, why do the dirty work? Because, explains Shevek to Oiiie, it is done together, in little communities, with others; and there is the challenge: "Where there's no money the real motives are clearer, maybe. People like to do things." Curiously, Shevek adds "people . . . can—egoize, we call it," using a derogatory Anarresti word for showing off (5: 150). Another motivator is "the social conscience, the opinion of one's neighbors. There is no other reward, on Anarres, no other law. One's own pleasure, and the respect of one's fellows" (5: 150). Someone who just won't cooperate is made fun of, others get "rough with him, beat him up." His name might be removed from the meals listing so he has to cook and eat by himself, which is "humiliating," so he either conforms, or becomes a "nuchnibi" (5: 150–51).

No one on Anarres is threatened with legal punishment if they pursue what they want rather than fulfill their social obligations, so long as they do not harm others.<sup>15</sup> Yet there are other forms of coercion besides legal punishment. John Stuart Mill developed his harm principle to demarcate limits on the state's use of coercion, but he also worried about other ways in which liberty is restricted, including public opinion, the power of custom, and expressions of distaste.<sup>16</sup> Such forces prevail on Anarres, imposing great pressure to fulfill one's duties. In a key passage Shevek is talking to Takver and notes how they lie about their freedom: they say they make their own choices, yet in fact they go where PDC posts them and stay till they are reposted, even though it means being apart. Shevek had been told he "could do what he pleased"(8: 269), in contrast to how on Urras he was explicitly called upon to do physics against his will (9: 272). But, Shevek remarks to Takver, on Anarres "we always think [I'm a free man], and say it, but we don't do it. We keep our initiative tucked away safe in our mind," we say "I make my own choices," but then we do what we're told. Indeed, notes Shevek, few Anarresti refuse to accept a posting, because people are ashamed: "the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate—we *obey*"(10: 329–30).

Bedap also sees the social conscience as a freedom-stifling "power machine, controlled by bureaucrats" (6: 167), and gives the example of how the physicist Sabul prevents Shevek from publishing his new ideas in physics. "Public opinion! That's the power structure . . . that stifles the individual mind" (6: 165). Replace government and "legal" use of power with "customary," says Bedap, and you have

Sabul and the Syndicate (6: 166). Le Guin presents other examples of how on Anarres social conscience can be as coercive as laws. Shevek's child Sadik is shunned by her dorm mates because Shevek advocates going to Urras (12: 370). Public opinion effectively censors Sala's music (6: 175) and virtually exiles the poet and dramatist Tirin. Tirin "was a free man, and the rest of us, his brothers, drove him insane in punishment for his first free act." Shevek adds, "we force a man outside the sphere of our approval, and then condemn him for it. We've made laws, laws of conventional behavior, built walls all around ourselves, and we can't see them, because they're part of our thinking" (10: 330–31).

So there are walls on Anarres, but they are mostly hidden. There is authority and control, but by virtue of being non-institutionalized these are harder to point to. Bedap says the real problem on Anarres is the hypocrisy and self-deception: "It's the lies that make you want to kill yourself" (6: 166). One might conclude that the solution is to get rid of the hidden walls and subtle forms of coercion, to better live up to the anarchic ideal. Shevek at one point reflects: "That the Odonian society on Anarres had fallen short of the ideal [of letting the individual exercise his optimum function so as to contribute best to the whole society] did not, in his eyes, lessen his responsibility to it" (10: 333). We have seen that Le Guin's alleged failure to follow through on the project of breaking down walls and constructing an anarchic community has led some commentators to charge her with political timidity and conservatism. Moylan, for example, criticizes Shevek for being a phallocratic male hero too attached to conservative and bourgeois institutions such as family to effectively realize Le Guin's utopia.<sup>17</sup> I follow the text in another direction. We see that there is an essential tension between freedom without authority, and a freely chosen but meaningful community. We come to admit that some privacy and walls are needed, but they should be visible. The Urrasti Ve'a picks up on the Foucauldian notion that laws and punishment would somehow be more honest and less intrusive than the power of public opinion since at least they can be seen.<sup>18</sup> She notes how the Odonians got rid of law, but instead they have their consciences, so they are still slaves. It is better to have the orders come from outside, from a Queen Teaea (the Queen against whom the Odonians rebelled), for at least then "you could rebel against her" (7: 219). This might seem a troubling recipe, until we recognize that walls and privacy may be necessary for true freedom in a community: so long as the construction of walls does not lead to the extreme of possessive individualism as in A-Io.

#### A-IO, ON URRAS

In many ways A-Io seems the opposite of Anarres: a consumerist society where people are seen not as members of a community, but as self-interested individuals who use each other in the pursuit of their own pleasures. Shevek experiences

the “nightmare street” of Saemtenevia Prospect, in Nio Esseia, a main city in A-Io, with its retail shops selling all sorts of clothes, in hundreds of cuts, for every conceivable purpose, as well as perfumes, clocks, lamps, statues, “acres of luxuries, acres of excrement”; “All the people in all the shops were either buyers or sellers. They had no relation to the things but that of possession” (5: 132). In contrast to the hardworking Anarresti, Urrasti spend their time “lying around naked in the sun with jewels in their navels” (2: 41). The Urrasti use people as objects. They use Shevek with the hope that he will reveal his discoveries in physics: “Nine, ten months we’ve been feeding the bastard, for nothing!” says Pae to Oiie (7: 232), revealing his ulterior motives for inviting Shevek. There is always a self-interested motive, a using of others for one’s own ends.

One result of A-Io’s capitalist social structure and its people’s consumerist mentality is striking inequality with its horrible costs. In A-Io, while the wealthy have leisure, many live in wretched poverty. Efor, a servant, tells Shevek about the rats, insane asylums, poorhouses, unemployed, dead babies in ditches, and the difference between the hospitals for the rich, and those for the poor, which are “dirty. Like a trashman’s ass-hole” (9: 283). Anarres has poverty too, but as Shevek notes, the difference is that on Anarres “nobody goes hungry while another eats” (9: 285). A-Io has gender inequality as well, in contrast to Anarres (1: 16). In A-Io women are objects.<sup>19</sup> Women are thought to be unable to engage in abstract thought (3: 73). They are not permitted at the University and to avoid distraction students are not permitted to marry (5: 129).

The class structure and consumerism contribute to a society without community, without freedom in Hegel’s sense, and with many lacking even negative freedom. Our omniscient narrator describes it as a society of “not mutual aid but mutual aggression” (7: 208). People are indifferent. When the rebellion was put down, a man beside him is hurt and although Shevek asks for help to carry him, the people hurry on (9: 304). Yet people on Anarres hardly differ in this respect. During the famine on Anarres, a truck driver runs over people desperate for food. There are “propertarians” and “egoizers” on Anarres, such as Desar (6: 154-55)—something we have already seen when Shevek explains that egoizing is a motivation to work, for some Anarresti (5: 150).

Yet with all its faults, Urras holds many attractions for Shevek, whose attitude toward it is deeply ambivalent and wavers. Shevek comes to see that the Urrasti “were not the gross, cold egoists he had expected them to be: they were as complex and various as their culture, as their landscape; and they were intelligent; and they were kind . . . . And he did feel at home . . . this was home indeed, his race’s world; and all its beauty was his birthright” (3: 77). Yet after going to a series of receptions, he thinks that “everyone was very polite and talked a great deal, but not about anything interesting; and they smiled so much they looked anxious. But their clothes were gorgeous” and there was the food, drink, lavish furnishings and ornaments (3: 83). Shevek was taught of the inequity, iniquity and waste, but as he travels by car or train through the villages, he sees the people are well



dressed, well fed, industrious; they were busy and energetic; “the lure and compulsion of *profit* was evidently a much more effective replacement of the natural initiative than he had been led to believe” (3: 82). However, later in the novel, once he sees its poverty, Shevek is again critical: “There is no way to act rightly, with a clear heart, on Urras. There is nothing you can do that profit does not enter into, and fear of loss, and the wish for power . . . You cannot act like a brother to other people, you must manipulate them, or command them, or obey them, or trick them . . . There is no freedom,” he says (11: 346–47), meaning freedom in Hegel’s sense. But then Keng, Ambassador of Terra, replies with a more favorable view of Urras: yes it is full of evils, but it is also “full of good, of beauty, vitality, achievement. It is what a world should be! It is *alive*,” and Shevek nods in agreement (11: 347). This is not an unambiguous nod of approval, as Shevek’s subsequent remarks make clear. But it should not be dismissed.

Neither the Anarresti nor the Urrasti are fully free. The societies on each world limit the freedom of the individual in the classical liberal sense of freedom, though in different ways: on Urras, through institutional coercion, on Anarres, through non-institutional forms of social pressure. One problem is that the people on both worlds are too complex to be constrained by the ideals they articulate and fail to live up to. Measured against their one-sided ideals they are hypocrites. The political solution may be a dialectical mediation between conflicting ideals.

#### PRIVACY AND COMMUNITY

Anarres makes a claim to classical liberal (or negative) freedom by its absence of laws—though we have seen that coercion finds other ways of seeping in. It makes a claim to freedom in Hegel’s sense of “being at home” by attempting to establish a meaningful community, and one way it does this is through its lack of separating boundaries. There is little privacy—apart from the modest privacy accorded to sexual partners (8: 245)—and few apparent walls: “nothing was hidden” (4: 98). “There were no disguises and no advertisements. It was all there, all the work, all the life of the city, open to the eye and to the hand” (4: 99). Private rooms are rare (4: 102–3); the only boundary wall on the world was at the port (1: 2). Letters are public and unsealed (8: 251).<sup>20</sup> This marks a stark contrast with Urras, where people lock their doors (1: 11). Whereas on Anarres private life is virtually nonexistent, on Urras private lives are so guarded from the public sphere that there are literally separate private and public persona. Oiie, of Urras, “was a changed man at home. The secretive look left his face, and he did not drawl when he spoke . . . at home, he suddenly appeared as a simple, brotherly kind of man, a free man” (5: 147).

Shevek thinks freedom requires openness not secrecy (4: 109). He is critical of both the physical and metaphorical walls he finds on Urras. On first arriving

on Urras he notes the “massive walls of stone and glass . . . Stone, steel, glass, electric light. No faces” (1: 21). When he discusses politics with Pae he hits another wall, the wall of “charm, courtesy, indifference” (3: 80). The workers of the retail street Seamtenevia Prospect that overwhelms him are hidden “behind walls”(5: 132). He later notes that he let a “wall be built around him” that kept him from seeing the poor people on Urras (7: 193)—he had been co-opted, with walls of smiles of the rich, and he didn’t know how to break them down (7: 193). Yet it turns out that the Anarresti need their own protective walls between the public and the private, to shelter them from the force of public opinion. While on Anarres we would expect open sexual relations, this is one of the few areas to which privacy is accorded.<sup>21</sup> And at the Central Institute there was also privacy, which helped with Shevek’s work (4: 111). On my reading, Shevek’s original view toward walls comes to be seen as one-sided and inadequate. Freedom lies not in an even more radical commitment to his ideal of openness, but in a recognition of the limits of this ideal, and of the need for some walls.

Connected to the idea of privacy are the notions of possession, possessiveness, and exclusive ownership.<sup>22</sup> Property can promote the same boundaries and isolating individualism that walls create. Urras is so property-oriented that its birds sing “Ree-dee, tee-dee. This is my propertee-tee, this is my territorree-ree-ree, it belongs to mee, mee” (7: 205–6). On Anarres, in contrast, just as privacy is disavowed, there is no private property, no possessiveness, no territoriality. One shares. Odo had written, “To make a thief, make an owner; to create crime, create laws” (5: 139). There is no robbery on Anarres as nobody owns anything to rob: “If you want things you take them from the depository” (5: 149). As Shevek arrives on Urras, he notes that he did not bring much, and certainly not enough food for his visit, and he will rely on their handouts. Shevek explains, “I am an Anarresti, I make the Urrasti behave like Anarresti: to give, not to sell” (1: 13). When asked by Vea if there is anything he is not, Shevek replies, “a salesman” (7: 216). There is no profit-motive: people do things for other reasons (5: 150). The difference in Anarresti and Urrasti views toward property leads to an amusing clash of cultures during Shevek’s visit to Oiie’s home. Shevek does not say thank you to Oiie’s child Ini when he was given a dish of pickles, explaining that he thought Ini was sharing them with him, and on Anarres one does not say thanks for sharing. Ini admits he does not even like pickles, and Shevek notes that makes it very easy to share (5: 147).

Shevek at one point speculates that the people on Urras are not truly free precisely because they have so many walls built between people and are so possessive: “On Anarres nothing is beautiful, nothing but the faces . . . Here [on Urras] you see the jewels, there [on Anarres] you see the eyes. And in the eyes you see the splendor, the splendor of the human spirit. Because our men and women are free—possessing nothing, they are free. And you the possessors are possessed. You are all in jail. Each alone, solitary, with a heap of what he owns. You live in prison, die in prison. It is all I can see in your eyes—the wall, the wall!” (7:

228–29) Shevek sees possessiveness and the “labyrinths of love/hate” as just so many walls restricting freedom.

It may seem puzzling for an anarchic society to disavow privacy and possessiveness. The Anarresti value negative freedom, and we may think that this sort of freedom requires protective barriers. The very idea of a right to do as one pleases so long as one does not harm others can be seen as requiring the construction of walls around individuals that must not be penetrated. It is less puzzling when we recognize that the Anarresti also strive to obtain freedom in Hegel’s sense, or freedom in, though they would reject Hegel’s advocacy of the rule of law and institution of property, and instead aim for the anarchist-communist ideal of a genuine community achieved only through the absence of laws and other coercive institutions relied on by states. Building a strong community providing a meaningful commitment is a condition for achieving a sense of belonging, a feeling of being at home, that constitutes freedom in this sense, and we might think walls and possessiveness deter community.

Yet the ideals of dispossession and of sharing with others are not always lived up to on Anarres. The Anarresti, who disavow the pursuit of power and profit, are sometimes hypocrites. In charge of the physics syndicate, Sabul must be bargained with: “bargained like profiteers. It had not been a battle, but a sale. You give me this and I’ll give you that. Refuse me and I’ll refuse you. Sold? Sold! Shevek’s career, like the existence of his society, depended on the continuance of a fundamental, *unadmitted* profit contract. Not a relationship of mutual aid and solidarity, but an exploitative relationship” (4: 117, my emphasis). During the famine, Shevek realizes that it is easy to share when there is enough, just as it was easy for Ini to share what he did not want for himself, but when food is scarce, force enters, and violence; and so the townsfolk hid behind their walls and did not share their food with the passengers on the trains (8: 256). Living in a Spartan environment that eschews materialism and excess, many Anarresti, like Bedap, are functionalists. Bedap, observing a handmade orange blanket in Shevek’s room, declares that Shevek lives “like a rotten Urrasti profiteer”: “an excremental color. . . . As a functions analyst I must point out that there is no need for orange. Orange serves no vital function” (6: 162). Yet there is some jewelry on Anarres, worn by people in the small towns (10: 325). Even Shevek is possessive of his ideas at first (8: 240), and we learn that possessiveness seems to be innate and must be overcome by socialization.<sup>23</sup> On Urras, Shevek became used to the possessive pronoun “and spoke it without self-consciousness,” as in “my rooms” (5: 134).

Shevek ultimately is ambivalent towards privacy. He wants the walls down. He is uncomfortable with the large private room he has on Urras and sees the privacy it affords as “excess, waste” (4: 110). Yet he sees that privacy is as desirable for physics as it was for sex, and even on Anarres they like their sex private (4: 111). Shevek is critical of the possessiveness and materialism on Urras, including the possessiveness evident in monogamous relations. Yet Shevek himself falls in love. The ideal on Anarres of being dispossessed, of lacking privacy and property,

140 *Mark Tunick*

has costs: without privacy and without property one risks losing one's individuality. Such a loss has been avoided on Anarres. The Anarresti are unique individuals. They are "members of a community, not elements of a collectivity," as they are not moved by mass feelings (1: 4). But on Anarres individuality has been preserved by hypocrisy, by the emergence of subtle and unacknowledged forms of privacy and possessiveness, just as the need in a community for order has been met on this anarchic world, to an unfortunate and excessive degree, by the emergence of subtle, non-institutional forms of social coercion.

### FREEDOM: COMMUNITY WITH WALLS

One might think that privacy undermines community, and that the problem with Anarres is that it still has some walls and does not live up to its ideals enough. I am suggesting, instead, that the ideals on Anarres are in conflict. To have a freely chosen community, as opposed to a collectivity that is an undifferentiated mob, individual autonomy must be preserved, and this requires privacy and some walls. Privacy is important for individual autonomy in a variety of ways. Privacy can provide an important emotional release from the effort we make to be civil and polite. A divide between the public and the private may help maintain our sanity and our integrity. Privacy can protect groups within a society, thereby enabling individuals freely to associate. There are of course dangers to privacy. Too much of it can inhibit personal development. Privacy can be a crutch for people who are not sufficiently autonomous, and crutches do not always help us develop what we lack.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps most importantly, privacy lets us maintain close ties to family and friends. While sometimes such commitments conflict with commitments to the state, on the whole they promote community.<sup>25</sup> Here one thinks of Hegel, for whom the modern family is an essential institution because it trains individuals to think beyond their own particular interests, to transcend the state of mind of possessive individualism and find their true meaning and worth as part of their state: "Through [the modern family], the state has as members individuals who in uniting to form a state, bring with them the sound basis of a political edifice, the capacity of feeling one with a whole."<sup>26</sup> For Hegel, transcending the state of mind of possessive individualism does not mean losing one's sense of self; one preserves it as part of a deeper and more adequate understanding of one's place in the world.

The Anarresti face obstacles to creating a strong sense of community. A strong attachment to place seems ruled out by the non-descript, even harsh environment. They do not like traditions, given their preference for change and negative liberty. What, then, can provide the basis for community? I have already considered two possibilities—commitment to the ideals of equality and liberty—

and found these wanting. The Anarresti appeal to a third abstract ideal, of brotherhood. This does not depend on traditions, or a shared sense of place. Yet Le Guin reveals it to be a somewhat empty ideal in one of the novel's most important scenes. At the end of chapter 4, Shevek is ill with fever and his mother Rulag visits. She had abandoned him for her career, and denies that they have a strong familial bond: they are merely biologically related. The bond they share, she says, is the Anarresti tie of brotherhood: "we are brother and sister, here and now. Which is what really matters, isn't it?" (4: 124). But this bond of brotherhood seems weak, as is evident from the ensuing exchange: Shevek replies, "I don't know" (4: 124). For a moment, Rulag's face breaks down, but she recovers; and then another patient also calls Shevek "brother," but this provides no solace: "Even from the brother there is no comfort in the bad hour, in the dark at the foot of the wall" (4: 125). At this point we perhaps see the political significance of Shevek's theory of simultaneity and sequentialism: you can not deny the past. There is a limit to the communal ideal of brotherhood when it is totalized, and replaces other commitments rooted in our historical past, in the relations that shaped us as individuals. Le Guin suggests that family, the consummate institution of private life, provides such a commitment and that Rulag and other Anarresti are mistaken to deny its significance.<sup>27</sup>

Le Guin has been accused of conservatism for espousing family values, as when she has her narrator preach about the homosexual Bedap having an empty life which he must change "if he would be saved."<sup>28</sup> If we read Le Guin's project as advocating an anarchist-communist libertarian society that breaks from all traditions, her apparent embracing of family, a traditional and private form of association, would be troubling. But if we understand her project as, rather, an exploration of the complex tensions one faces in building a community in which we are at home and free, then the encounter between Shevek and Rulag signals dissatisfaction with one-sided ideals and acknowledgment of the importance of traditional commitments such as family that preserve private life and individuality, so long as they do not undermine community. If the Anarresti are to establish meaningful commitments that will lead them freely to choose, rather than being shamed into, individual sacrifice, then they need some concrete basis for them.<sup>29</sup> Family is the foremost Terran and Urrasti institution demarcating private from public life. Concrete commitments to family can compete with an attachment to the abstract ideal of brotherhood. The Anarresti appear to think we must choose between these, and they outwardly reject family. But, on my reading, we come to see the limitations of one-sided ideals such as brotherhood, equality, and openness, and the need for some traditions, some privacy, some walls, both if we are to freely choose our commitments, and if they are to be meaningful. Of course not all families do well at providing meaningful commitments, and no one chooses their natal family so we might wonder how it provides a freely chosen commitment. However the families founded through marriage are, except in some traditional

societies, freely chosen, as is, typically, the decision to have children. And while not all actual families provide privacy and nurture individuality, the fact that actuality can diverge from the ideal and that other means of protecting privacy and individuality, including the protection of privacy within families, are needed, is insufficient reason to reject the institution. Even the anarchist-communist Kropotkin, sometimes seen as a source for Le Guin, wants people to be able, should they choose, to take their meals with their family or friends, and rejects the “tyranny” of being forced to use communal kitchens.<sup>30</sup>

The problem with the ideal of brotherhood on Anarres is not that it is idealistic. As with the case of family, an ideal need not be thoroughly lived up to in every circumstance to still be feasible and worthy of our commitment. When Chifoilisk calls Anarres a “little commune of starving idealists,” Shevek responds that in fact Anarres is practical, not idealistic: cooperation and mutual aid are the only means of staying alive (5: 135). Shevek still defends the ideal, telling Veä “we are all relatives” (7: 198). Yet he surely realizes that Anarresti can still be strangers, as on some of the rotational community labor groups (4: 106–7), and sometimes one needs protection from strangers. The problem is with the ideal itself, when totalized, and not with its feasibility. Sometimes there is a need for being by oneself, apart not only from strangers but loved ones. We are told that although Takver’s “existence was necessary to Shevek her actual presence could be a distraction” (6: 188). Community doesn’t demand the loss of individuality: “Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice—the power of change, the essential function of life” (10: 333). An ideal of brotherhood that rejects competing commitments and privacy-preserving traditions such as family can threaten the individuality and autonomy necessary if we are to be free in, and freely choose, community. Preservation of the family alone is not sufficient to promote freedom. Hegel recognized that other institutions such as private property and the forming of contractual relations and corporate groups within civil society were also essential. But, contrary to critics who see pro-family sentiments as a capitulation and obstacle to achieving an anarchic communist utopia, on my interpretation they are an appropriate recognition of the need for institutions that mediate between the ideals of individuality and community.

*The Dispossessed* rejects one-sided and simplistic ideals that can lead only to hypocrisy. Le Guin’s text points, in its very structure, to the limits of the Odonian’s one-sided and conflicting ideals of an open society with negative freedom and no authority, and of brotherhood and community—or of the Urrasti’s equally one-sided ideal of “possessive individualism,” and to the need for reconciliation. The novel begins on both planets, and each successive chapter shifts from one to the other world, finally concluding back on both planets. Shevek’s goal is to include and connect (9: 285), to reconcile difference (10: 322). He sees the need for both Anarres and Urras: “You will not achieve or even understand Urras unless

you accept the reality, the enduring reality, of Anarres”(11: 349). The ship Shevek takes to return to Anarres in the final chapter, the *Davenant*, “had neither the opulence of Urras nor the austerity of Anarres, but struck a balance, with the effortless grace of long practice” (13: 381). A balance of conflicting ideals may ultimately constitute a political blueprint for freedom. Shevek wants to break down walls between the two planets to promote free exchange (5: 138). If he succeeds this may lead to the building of more walls on Anarres, or the making opaque the hidden and unacknowledged walls already present, walls needed to promote the individual autonomy essential for community.

The problem with Anarres’s anarchic ideal that resists authority and emphasizes autonomy of conscience and challenging of conventions is that it cuts against another ideal in anarchist thought, an ideal also central to the Anarresti: the ideal of community. Shevek is torn: he rejects submission to authority, wanting to be his own person, yet he wants also to be a part of a community, a meaningful whole. Strict adherence to one or the other of their conflicting ideals leads to hypocrisy. The Urrasti Chifoilisk tells Shevek: “No need to pretend that all you Odonian brothers are full of brotherly love . . . Human nature is human nature”(3: 69). Too much emphasis on autonomy, as in Bedap’s forceful defense, leaves Shevek cold, lost, and without shelter (6: 172–73). Yet, I have argued, autonomy and privacy are important if one is to be free in a community. The Anarresti need some protective walls between public and private to shelter them from the coercive force of public opinion. It may be that this will lead to more possessiveness, and encourage conservative institutions like the nuclear family. But thanks to Shevek’s journey and return, they can point to the excesses on Urras as a cautionary guide.

## NOTES

I thank Laurence Davis for his careful reading of a previous draft and numerous important and thoughtful suggestions, Peter Stillman for inspiring me to take up this project, and Michael Harrawood and Christian Weisser.

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), cited in the text by chapter and page to the 388-page Eos HarperCollins edition of 2001.

2. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 91–97, 102, 113. Samuel Delany has also criticized Le Guin’s conservatism, particularly her use of Bedap as a token homosexual, and is offended at Le Guin’s implication that Bedap must shed his homosexuality and endorse traditional family values to be saved. See Samuel R. Delany, “To Read the Dispossessed,” in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (New York: Berkeley Windhover, 1977).

3. Nadia Khouri, “The Dialectics of Power: Utopia in the Science Fiction of Le Guin, Jeury, and Piercy,” *Science-Fiction Studies* 7, no. 1 (March, 1980): 49–61.

4. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978), 143–45.

5. Of course Marx was highly critical of utopians for ignoring the real material forces shaping society and for fancying that they could draw a blueprint of how the world ought to be that could be realized in practice simply by willing it. The anarchist Peter Kropotkin also distinguishes anarchy from utopia, utopia being a wished for ideal, anarchy being based on an analysis of existing tendencies—see Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchism," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910), [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/kropotkin/britaniaanarchy.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/kropotkin/britaniaanarchy.html) (accessed 7 May 2004).

6. There are a wide variety of anarchist theories. Moylan (in *Demand the Impossible*, 96) points to Le Guin's sympathies with Peter Kropotkin, who emphasized mutual aid, the natural affinity for all species including man to help one another, and the ideal of decentralized voluntary associations that would realize an ideal of community without fettering individual initiative, though sometimes Kropotkin speaks of the "absorption of the I" by the clan or the tribe as the basis of ethics (Peter Kropotkin, *Ethics: Origins and Development* [New York: B. Blum, 1968], chaps. 1, 2, 9). Compare Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 81, on anarchism as a "local, community-based development of a consensual or general will" with emphasis on a decentralized idea of community. Other anarchists, such as Max Stirner, more emphasize the development of individuality rather than the flourishing of all members of the community; see April Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

7. For the classical liberal view see John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, and Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*; for a contemporary version see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. This definition of freedom is used by Le Guin's omniscient narrator: doing "what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it for as long as he wanted to do it" (4: 112). But other definitions are given as well. For example, Shevek defines freedom as doing what's in your nature and carrying out your responsibilities, though Tirin seems unhappy with this definition (2: 45).

8. G. W. F. Hegel emphasizes the importance of a state of satisfaction (*Befriedigung*) in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977 [1806]), paras. 80, 163, 175. On the idea of freedom as "being at home" (*bei sich*), see G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1821]), para. 7; *Phenomenology*, paras. 347, 533; and G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, tr. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 39.

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert Hartman (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 55.

10. See Mark Tunick, *Hegel's Political Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), ch. 3.

11. *Ur* means origin, as in the German "Ur-text."

12. Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy*, Book I, ch. 1.

13. Edmund Burke, "Speech on the Reform of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament, May 7, 1782," *Select Works of Edmund Burke, and Miscellaneous Writings*, <http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBBooks/Burke/brkSWv4c2.html> (accessed 14 Jan. 2004).

14. Peter Kropotkin, "Must we occupy ourselves with an examination of the ideal of a future system?" (1873), in *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, ed. Martin Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 48, 56–57.



15. The institutional mechanisms Anarres draws on in the event that someone causes harm to others are not made clear. It may be that “the right of the Odonian individual to initiate action harmless to others” (12: 357) is not enforced; yet presumably there are means of bringing nuchnibi or others to asylums.

16. Mill, *On Liberty*, chap. 1. Joseph Hamburger argues, controversially, that Mill favors such expressions of distaste for acts that are regarded as immoral though they do not cause harm. He regards Mill as illiberal, in *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 177.

17. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 102, 110.

18. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, argues that Enlightenment penal reforms that marked an end to punishment as a public spectacle and attack on the physical body were even more nefarious in controlling and disciplining one’s entire soul; discussed in Mark Tunick, *Punishment: Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

19. “Ioti women did not go outside with naked breasts, reserving their nudity for its owners” (7: 213).

20. The lack of privacy in the mails on Anarres resembles the lack of privacy in colonial New England, where letters were also open to all. See David Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), discussed in Tunick, *Practices and Principles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), chap 5.

21. Curiously Urras is the world in which there are public displays of affection, which Shevek looks down upon: “To caress and copulate in front of unpaired people was as vulgar as to eat in front of hungry people” (7: 226). But see 7: 213, cited in note 19 above.

22. Privacy is used interchangeably with private ownership on 6: 16263.

23. In 2: 27: as an infant, Shevek was possessive, saying “mine”; cf. 2: 58: little children say “my mother” but with socialization soon learn to say “the mother.”

24. See Gary Marx, “Privacy and Technology,” *Whole Earth Review* 73 (Winter 1991): 90–95.

25. I develop the idea that privacy is needed for community in Mark Tunick, “Does Privacy Undermine Community?” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (December 2001): 517–34.

26. Hegel, *Reason in History*, 56; cf. *Philosophy of Right*, paras. 158–81.

27. Cf. 6: 152: only when married does Shevek’s work progress. One should recognize that families take many forms not all of which may provide the sort of commitment that Le Guin or Hegel have in mind, although neither Le Guin nor Hegel would essentialize the family by insisting that the concept refers to a single form.

28. 12: 298. Samuel Delany makes this criticism, see note 2, above.

29. This would be Burke’s point. Burke is skeptical of commitment to abstract ideals: see Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [with Paine’s *The Rights of Man*] (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1973), 9, 72–74.

30. Peter Kropotkin, “Expropriation” (1882), in *Selected Writings*, 186. But see his *Ethics: Origin and Development*, chap. 4, where he criticizes Aristotle for confusing sociality with friendship and mutual love, perhaps implying a limited role for family in his anarchist-communist ideal; and of course Kropotkin argues in “Expropriation,” “The Commune of Paris” (1880), and other works that private property should be expropriated,

146 *Mark Tunick*

further limiting his acceptance of privacy nurturing institutions within his anarchist-communist society.

## WORKS CITED

- Burke, Edmund. "Speech on the Reform of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament, May 7, 1782." *Select Works of Edmund Burke, and Miscellaneous Writings*. <http://www.econlib.org/library/LFB000s/Burke/brkSWv4c2.html> (accessed 14 Jan. 2004).
- Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1973.
- Carter, April. *The Political Theory of Anarchism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
- Delany, Samuel. "To Read the Dispossessed." Pp. 218–83 in his *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*. New York: Berkeley Windhover, 1977.
- Flaherty, David. *Privacy in Colonial New England*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Pantheon, 1977.
- Hamburger, Joseph. *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977 (1806).
- . *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree. New York: Dover, 1956.
- . *Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbett. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991 (1821).
- . *Reason in History*, trans. Robert Hartman. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Metaphysics of Morals*.
- Khouri, Nadia. "The Dialectics of Power: Utopia in the Science Fiction of Le Guin, Jeury, and Piercy." *Science-Fiction Studies* 7, no. 1 (March, 1980): 49–61.
- Kropotkin, Peter. "Anarchism." *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910). [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/kropotkin/britanniaanarchy.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/kropotkin/britanniaanarchy.html) (accessed 7 May 2004).
- . *Ethics: Origins and Development*. New York: B. Blum, 1968.
- . "Expropriation." Pp. 160–209 in *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, ed. Martin Miller. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970.
- . "Must we Occupy ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?" Pp. 47–116 in *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, ed. Martin Miller. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. New York: Eos, HarperCollins, 2001 (1974).
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Discourses on Livy*.
- Marx, Gary. "Privacy and Technology." *Whole Earth Review* 73 (Winter, 1991): 90–95.
- Marx, Karl. "Theses on Feuerbach." Pp. 143–45 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Robert Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978.
- Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*.
- Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. New York: Methuen, 1986.

*The Need for Walls* 147

- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Tunick, Mark. "Does Privacy Undermine Community?" *Journal of Value Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (December 2001): 517–34.
- . *Hegel's Political Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- . *Practices and Principles*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- . *Punishment: Theory and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Wolff, Robert Paul. *In Defense of Anarchism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

