

Verbal Dance: An Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin

Paul J. Comeau

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In this interview conducted with *Fifth Estate* via email, Le Guin discusses influences on her life and work, some of the ideas behind her famous novel *The Dispossessed*, what needs to be done to cause a shift in the perception of anarchism in the popular imagination, and the inspirations for her most recent novel *Lavinia* (Harcourt 2008).

Paul J. Comeau: In *The Dispossessed*, the philosopher Odo states “True voyage is return.” How did this statement relate to your life at the time you wrote it, and how does it relate to your life today?

Ursula K. Le Guin: I don’t know. Obviously my writing comes out of my life, and I try to be honest to my perceptions of life, but I don’t write to “express myself” My fiction is experiential but not confessional. To tell you the truth I seldom have any idea of how what I say in my books “relates” to me personally. A statement like “True voyage is return” isn’t a reasoned conclusion arrived at after thought. It’s unverbally experienced finding words, on the assumption that it’s a shared experience—that other people, reading the words, may recognize the experience.

Paul J. Comeau: There is a point in *The Dispossessed* where the protagonist Shevek realizes or accepts that his “proper function in the social organism” is to “unbuild walls.” To what extent has your career as a writer been a similar effort to “unbuild walls?”

Ursula K. Le Guin: Well, I have done some of that. Some of it purely within literature (trying to get critics and pros to stop ghettoizing genre literature, particularly s.f. and fantasy) and some of it with larger social intent, such as having most of my protagonists people of color, without saying much about it—so that white readers have to put on a brown skin if they want to identify with my characters. And I have written some fairly direct satirical or polemical stories about misogyny, homophobia, doctrinaire oppression and persecution, etc. That’s all wall-unbuilding.

My metaphor for it in my work is “keeping the doors and windows open.” The house I build in a story has walls, or it wouldn’t be a house; but the doors aren’t locked and the windows aren’t blinded. I build very drafty houses. No air conditioning, the wind blows through.

Paul J. Comeau: In a previous interview, you described *The Dispossessed* as “an Anarchist utopian novel. Its ideas come from the pacifist anarchist tradition—Kropotkin, etc.” Could you expand a bit on the background/ideas/inspirations for the novel?

Ursula K. Le Guin: That would take me hours and hours to answer. It was two years of reading. I read every anarchist book that was available in Portland in the early 1970s. That was plenty—there are several university libraries, and there was an anarchist bookstore, which had texts that are now easily available, but weren’t at that time.

At this distance, I’d say that probably the major influences on me were Kropotkin, and the Goodmans, especially *Communitas*.

Paul J. Comeau: Was the Shantih Town culture in *The Eye of the Heron* inspired by similar background material/ideas?

Ursula K. Le Guin: Yup. But more especially by Gandhi.

Paul J. Comeau: When did you first encounter anarchism? What drew you to it?

Ursula K. Le Guin: I had the germ of the story in my head but couldn’t figure out who my protagonist, this physicist, was—I only knew he was somehow at odds with his society. I got to reading utopias, I read all the

utopias, and that led me to Gandhi. Meanwhile biologists' discussion of altruism vs. selfish behavior had led me to Kropotkin's animal studies, and that drew me on to read more Kropotkin. So then I got fascinated by the whole pacifist-anarchist literature and just plunged in. And at some point it occurred to me: a) there has never been an anarchist utopian novel; b) THIS is what my physicist guy is all about!

So there came *The Dispossessed*.

Paul J. Comeau: How has anarchism, as it relates to your own life, grown or changed over time?

Ursula K. Le Guin: I don't know. I can't live an anarchist life, and never could pretend to; when I was reading anarchism and in love with it, I was a middle-aged, middle-class housewife with three kids—and no desire to be anything else, so long as I could write my books.

So how does anarchism relate to my life? Only as freedom of the mind, of the imagination. The same freedom that reading Lao Tzu gave me many years earlier.

Paul J. Comeau: *The Dispossessed* is frequently included in anarchist suggested reading lists. If you were to write your own suggested reading list, what are some things that you would include in it?

Ursula K. Le Guin: I'm sorry—I'm really too far away from the literature I knew well decades ago. If I try to name names I'll just leave out half the most important ones. And there's undoubtedly some new ones I don't even know.

Paul J. Comeau: While in my mind, *The Dispossessed* is the best depiction of an anarchistic society "in practice," the popular imagination still depicts anarchists as brick and bomb throwers. What do you think needs to be done to cause a shift in perception of anarchism in the popular imagination?

Ursula K. Le Guin: If people who don't throw bricks and don't throw bombs, and don't dress in a deliberately unusual way, and don't aggressively question or attack other people's ideas, still identify themselves, plain and clear, as anarchists, that can start the shift...Just as, very, very slowly, the popular perception of feminists as a few bra-burning man-haters has had to shift and shrink, since ordinary women, wives, mothers, grandmothers, are willing to identify themselves as feminists. But oh, it is so slow, it takes so long!

My heart always used to sink when a certain small group of self-identified anarchists would join one of the anti-war or anti-homophobia demos in Portland. They were in-your-face aggressive, self-righteous, and would not accept the will of the majority of demonstrators in such matters as not deliberately annoying the police and begging for retaliation. They were always the ones that got their pictures in the newspaper, though, because they played into the negative stereotype.

We are up against something a bit new: the reactionary-right-religious media. When liberal has become a word at which children are taught to shudder, how ya gonna make anarchism acceptable?

Paul J. Comeau: You have discussed elsewhere the ongoing process for you of learning to write like a woman. You even described the male narrator of *The Left Hand of Darkness* as "a deliberate authorial outreach to male readers who (or so I thought at the time) would reject an androgynous central character, particularly in a book by a woman." Could you explain what it means to "write like a woman?"

Ursula K. Le Guin: I'm afraid I can't, because every woman writes like a woman in her own way—we are actually more various and less predictable, I think, in several respects, than male writers.

I would briefly describe my own major steps in the process as:

1. Read Virginia Woolf
2. Read the New Feminist writers of the '60s, '70s and after
3. Read poetry and fiction by women
4. Think about why I thought I had to write the way men write and about what men write about
5. Think hard: if I don't do that, then what do I write about?
6. Reread Virginia Woolf
7. Give it a try
8. Hey! It works!

Paul J. Comeau: Suppose hypothetically you were writing *The Left Hand of Darkness* today, what would be different about it compared to the novel you wrote 40 years ago?

Ursula K. Le Guin: Well, obviously, I'd have the benefit of forty years of other people's thinking about and questioning gender construction—which wasn't even a word when I wrote the book. That would be a climate so different

from the almost total absence of such thought and discussion when I wrote the book that I can't even imagine the situation. Why would I write such a book now? What matters was writing it THEN.

Paul J. Comeau: In the introduction to the 1976 reprint of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, you say that "truth is a matter of the imagination." This reminds me of two statements Kurt Vonnegut made in *Cat's Cradle* where he says: "Nothing in this book is true" and later says, "all of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies." Is fiction, or all art really, telling truth in the shape of pleasing lies?

Ursula K. Le Guin: I'll buy that. Not that the lies are always pleasing or the truth always true. Borges has even more interesting things to say on this subject than Vonnegut.

Paul J. Comeau: In your most recent novel *Lavinia*, the title character is a minor character from Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid*, who has no speaking lines in the poem. Can you talk a bit about the experience of creating a voice for this character? Is it true that you learned Latin to read Virgil in his original language?

Ursula K. Le Guin: *Lavinia* began "talking" to me before I actually finished my very, very slow reading of the *Aeneid*—I mean, I began thinking about her: who was she? What did she think about having to marry this foreigner? What was her life like, a king's daughter in the Bronze Age in that part of Italy? She did what characters of novels do when they start coming to life in your mind. She was just there all the time. (Shevek, of *The Dispossessed*, was in my mind silently for about three years, waiting.) As soon as I asked Lavinia to tell me about herself, she started right in, in her own voice—hence the first-person narrative. I just listened and wrote it down. (Well, OK, I did some background stuff too.)

Latin—I had some in junior high, and again in grad school, but not enough to read Virgil, who isn't simple. I really did want to read him in Latin; you can tell that he's one of those poets that you really have to read in his own language. In my seventies, it was clearly now or never. So I got out my old grammars and memorized all those damn declensions and conjugations all over again. It was worth it.

Thanks for the tango, all best

Ursula



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