Cosmic Landscapes

Daoism and Environmentalism in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Utopian Fictions

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Abstract

This study looks at how Ursula K. Le Guin’s utopian fiction, represented by The Dispossessed (1974) and Always Coming Home (1985) uses Daoism to challenge the traditions of the genre of utopian literature and to present an environmental ethos for the future. This study considers these novels alongside classic Daoist texts, as well as recent scholarly writings on Daoism in relation to ecology, to explore how the tradition informs Le Guin’s ecological vision. I show how these representations engage the reader to question and resist established ideas of the relationship between human beings and nature. Within this context, I argue that Le Guin makes use of the strategy of cognitive estrangement to allow readers to identify and consequently analyze established norms from alternative perspectives.
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1 Introduction

Be completely empty.
Be perfectly serene.
The ten thousand things arise together;
in their arising is their return.
Now they flower,
and flowering
sink homeward,
returning to the root.

The return to the root
is peace.
Peace: to accept what must be,
to know what endures.
In that knowledge is wisdom.
Without it, ruin, disorder.

- Laozi/Daodejing¹ (translated by Ursula K. Le Guin and J. P. Seaton)

This study looks at how Ursula K. Le Guin’s utopian fiction, represented by The Dispossessed (1974) and Always Coming Home (1985) uses Daoism to challenge the traditions of the genre of utopian fiction and to present an environmental ethos for the future. I believe that science fiction (SF), and utopian SF in particular, is a suitable genre when it comes to encouraging readers to look critically at current normalized real-world practices concerning environmentalism. Le Guin’s whole body of work is characterized by a critical view on standard assumptions about a wide range of subjects. Through her fiction, she has both criticized and opened up for new ways of thinking about everything from gender politics to imperialism. Her work has often approached utopian fiction, but I would argue that the two novels that fit this billing the most are the novels treated in this thesis. Consequently, these

¹ I use the pinyin system for transliterating Chinese terms, which has now become the international standard. Le Guin and some other critics and scholars use the older Wade/Giles system, which transliterates “Daoism” as “Taoism” and “Daodejing” as “Tao Te Ching”.
utopian fictions provide the most detailed and comprehensive view of Le Guin’s often radical and subversive ideas for a better future, even if these most certainly can be spotted in other works as well. This study considers these novels alongside a selection of relatively recent writings on Daoism to explore how Daoism informs Le Guin’s utopian societies and thereby represents a radical break with the Western tradition of utopian literature. I will examine how these representations work to engage the reader to question and resist established ideas of the relationship between human beings and nature through Le Guin didactic exhibition of central Daoist teachings. Within this context, I argue that Le Guin’s strategy of cognitive estrangement allows readers to identify and consequently analyze established norms from alternative perspectives. In this introductory chapter, I will first argue that the neglecting of Daoism’s central role in Le Guin’s fiction has led to missed opportunities in approaching her work from the perspective of Darko Suvin’s theory of cognitive estrangement. I will then discuss some of the difficulties in approaching Daoism as a critical framework, as well as how this ancient tradition may serve to challenge and reframe problematic issues related to environmentalism.

Daoism has long been recognized as a central theme in Ursula Le Guin’s fiction. Douglas Barbour was the first to point out the how her Hainish novels were characterized by “a consistently paradoxical light/dark image pattern . . . to render the thematic concepts of wholeness and balance,” and how this pattern is reflected in the very structure of The Dispossessed (Barbour 248). Le Guin was first exposed to Daoism by her father, the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, who kept a version of the Laozi in the family home. Although she is cautious of calling herself a “Daoist”, she has acknowledged the influence of Daoism on her work and her general worldview from a young age. In 1998, she published her own rendition of the Laozi in collaboration with the sinologist J.P. Seaton. She describes this version as a culmination of studies that began already in her twenties (Le Guin, Tao 107). Despite the general consensus about the importance of Daoism in her works of fiction, it has been pointed out that it remains a poorly understood tradition among literary critics (Prettyman 56, Miller 2). In a response to the 1975 collection of critical essays that formed the special edition of Science Fiction Studies celebrating Le Guin’s work, she laments the frequent misunderstanding of the Daoist content of her fiction:
[A]ll too often…I find the critic apparently persuaded that Yin and Yang are opposites…This is all wrong. There is some contamination from Manicheanism/Christianity, or Marxian dialectics, or something…The central image/idea of Taoism is an important thing to be clear about, certainly not because it's a central theme in my work. It's a central theme, period (“A Response” 45)

Whether it is due to a lack of knowledge about Daoism or not, critics who approach her work from the perspective of Marxism or other critical fields tend either to overlook this content or regard it merely as a structural device. In his essay “Daoism, Ecology and World Reduction in Le Guin’s Utopian Fictions”, Gib Prettyman has pointed out that some of the most influential critics of Le Guin’s work, such as the Marxists Darko Suvin and Fredric Jameson, have downplayed or dismissed Daoism as a “politically misleading” aspect of an otherwise groundbreaking body of work in terms of its ability to imagine radical change (Prettyman 56). Instead, Suvin has interpreted Daoist concepts in Le Guin as equivalent to insights of Marxist critique. The Daoist worldview so characteristic of many of Le Guin’s characters and societies are seen by Suvin to be offering a “quest for and sketching of a new, collectivist system of no longer alienated human relationships” (“Parables” 1). This new system arises out of the necessity for overcoming the “intolerable ethical, cosmic, political and physical alienation” of capitalism (Suvin, “Parables” 1). Writing on The Dispossessed, Suvin saw Le Guin’s thought as having “evolved” from the “early interest” in Daoism into the anarchism of the likes of Peter Kropotkin, and claimed that “attempts to subsume her under Taoism” would be “not only doomed to failure but also retrospectively revealed as inadequate even for her earlier works” (qtd. in Prettyman 59). Rather than seeing Daoism as an important aspect of Le Guin’s work in its own right, then, Suvin finds it more fruitfully approached through Marxist or anarchist critique. Prettyman rightly points out, however, that contrary to Suvin’s early predictions, Daoism has become an increasingly important source of inspiration for Le Guin’s fiction in the years after the publication of The Dispossessed, which Always Coming Home, as we will see, is but one example of.

Fredric Jameson’s interpretation of Le Guin’s work has also mainly revolved around its political implications. However, in his essay “World Reduction in Le Guin,” he implicitly points out the scope of the Daoist influence in her work. According to Jameson, her “predilection for quietistic heroes,” her “valorization of an anti-political, anti-activist stance,” and the more outright “Tao-like passivity” of the protagonist in The Lathe of Heaven, are all aspects of Le Guin’s novels that can reasonably be argued to be influenced by Daoist thought
Jameson argues that the “liberal, rather than radical” mindset inherent in these examples form part of an anti-institutional stance in her novels, comparable to that of “the Jeffersonian and Thoreauvian tradition” against important political features of that imperializing liberalism which is the dominant ideology of the United States today” (275). Moreover, the anti-institutional Daoist mindset plays a key part in enabling Jameson’s main point in the essay: that Le Guin’s worlds are characterized by “a principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality . . . in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out” (271). The most important aspect of present-day reality Jameson finds that has been removed through Le Guin’s process of world reduction is capitalism. But in creating a world without capitalism, Le Guin needs to create protagonists who do not think or act like people living within the paradigm of capitalism. The most important role of Daoism in her work is arguably to represent this alternate mode of thinking. Still, despite the major political implications Jameson finds, Daoism is not seen as a principle source, and its ability to offer a different frame of reference seems to be an underexplored aspect of Le Guin’s work. By examining the classic texts of Daoism in relation to Le Guin’s novels, I want to show how her use of Daoism underscores even the most political aspects of her utopian fictions, rather than the other way around.

Gib Prettyman has highlighted some of the similarities between Eastern philosophies and the fundamental insights of ecology in an attempt to elevate Daoism’s role in Le Guin’s fiction into a serious “strategic framework in its own right” when it comes to challenging conventional ideas about our relationship to the natural world (57). Prettyman argues that the Daoist framework has its own unique qualities, especially in its cognitive reframing of issues of ecology, which means it cannot simply be substituted with Marxist critical theory, even if they might have certain things in common. This thesis takes up a similar position to Prettyman’s with regard to Daoism. For all its merits, however, Prettyman’s article does not examine Daoism itself in any detail. By doing just that, I hope to present a more comprehensive idea of how Le Guin utilizes this framework to challenge established ideas about our relationship to the natural world. First, however, I will present Darko Suvin’s theory of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement and show how this can illuminate the role of Daoism in Le Guin’s novels.
Suvin’s idea of cognitive estrangement has been hugely influential in the criticism of science fiction. Deriving originally from Russian Formalism (ostraniene), and later underpinned by an anthropological and historical approach by Bertolt Brecht (the Verfremdungseffekt), the technique of estrangement has the purpose of making the familiar unfamiliar, which allows the reader or spectator of a work of art to consider it more attentively. Ordinarily, we are caught in an “automatic” mode of perception, which means we no longer consider our reality critically. Defamiliarization or estrangement offers a way out of this day-to-day mode and allows us to consider reality in new and intriguing ways; often by means of combining the familiar with the unfamiliar. Suvin coined the term cognitive estrangement to describe the specific literary effort in the genre of SF to disorient and renew readers’ perceptions of normalized social reality. The genre’s ability to present unfamiliar objects and situations that are nevertheless rationally of this reality allows readers to question current political practices in a unique way. Suvin sees the estrangement as opening up for previously unimagined possibilities – a “strange newness” which he labels nova - while cognition functions as the reality principle that keeps our imaginations grounded and honest (“Poetics” 373). Estrangement implies a “creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than a static mirroring of the author’s environment” (Metamorphoses 10). In this sense, the estranged object, or even culture, is not merely a static reflection of a real-world equivalent approached through narrative techniques and imagery, but is actively changed into something different. The part of cognition distinguishes SF from, for instance, fairy tales, in which everything is possible. Like Jameson, Suvin sees the science fiction genre as particularly useful to present and uncover people’s desires for a different future. He therefore emphasizes that the cognitive aspect of SF implies a two-way relationship (Metamorphoses 10). The estranged object reflects back on the familiar object, which makes the reader involved in the process, prompting critical reflections in the reader about the nature of the difference and whether such difference is possible and desirable. Suvin thus sees SF as an “educational literature” from which we must demand a certain level of social imagination to attain fruitful reflective processes (“Poetics” 381).

Contrary to Suvin’s skepticism of Daoism noted earlier, I argue that Le Guin’s use of it has a central role in ensuring that her utopian worlds are characterized by a different way of thinking. More specifically, Le Guin creates worlds and societies that are informed by a different and altogether prominent worldview or cosmology which influences the beliefs and values in their culture. These cosmologies are comprehensive and detailed, and more often
than not alters how language is used. It is on this level that their relevance to environmentalism is perhaps most clearly visible. Both of the utopian societies treated in this thesis display what is arguably a more environmentally sustainable “working metaphor” than our current Western, mechanistic one. Le Guin seems to argue that it must change into one that is capable of fostering a more respectful attitude of humans toward nature. Daoist ideas are instrumental in the forming of these cosmologies. The differences between Le Guin’s fictional cosmologies and that of our own are sufficiently dominant as to create a kind of epistemological “gap” between the reader and the inner workings of her utopian societies. Le Guin seems to be acutely aware of this gap, and in certain works, as we will see later on, she explicitly challenges the reader to help bridge it. This is not the only strategic tool she makes use of, however. Numerous critics have noted the influence of anthropology on Le Guin’s work. Many of her protagonists are themselves anthropologists, which provides them with the analytical perspective characteristic of this field of knowledge. However, as is the case in *The Dispossessed*, the protagonist’s physicist profession entails an entirely different way of approaching the world. Prettyman labels this specific variety of estrangement “disciplinary reframing” (69). Its effect is that the protagonist himself is somewhat estranged within the boundaries of the written text. These multiple layers of framing both strengthen the overall effect of Suvin’s cognitive estrangement, and are suited to highlight various environmental aspects of Daoist thought. In the upcoming section, these aspects will be examined in more detail, as well as the way I am going to approach the classic texts of the Daoist tradition.

At the turn of the millennium, Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions sponsored a large-scale, multi-volume research project on the environmental implications of all of the major world religions, as well as of certain indigenous faiths. In the preface to the volume on Daoism, *Daoism and Ecology*, Lawrence E. Sullivan points out the all-encompassing nature of religious worldviews, which makes them “not just contend with other ideas as equals; they frame the mind-set within which all sorts of ideas commingle in a cosmology. For this reason, their role in ecology must be better understood” (x). The ecocritic Lawrence Buell notes that the purpose of this project was “not to make these faiths out to be ecocentric in spite of themselves, but to foreground the strains within each that give aid and comfort to a mental reorientation toward green thinking,” in which he points out that the project “succeeds impressively” (Buell 106, emphasis mine). This “mental orientation” of “all-encompassing” mindsets testifies to Daoism’s potential ability to offer a fundamentally different way of understanding the world.
In dealing with such culturally and historically important material as religious texts, however, there is need for caution. The editors of *Daoism and Ecology* are wary of the popular equation between Daoism and ecology, which is often simplistic, and warn about the Western tendency to reduce Daoism "to popular visions of a Yoda-like Chinese sage wandering amidst a mist-laden cosmic landscape of craggy mountains, swaying bamboo, and lofty waterfalls" (Girardot et al., xxxviii). They also warn that the narrowing down of Daoism to the classic texts without further comment has sometimes been bordering on cultural appropriation, in the sense that one finds whatever one wants to find, and that this by no means reflects the width of this old and complex tradition. "In the most basic sense," they nevertheless conclude, “Daoism – whether associated with the early texts or the later organized religion – does have something important to say regarding many ecological questions” (Girardot et al., xlv-xlvi).

For the purpose of this thesis, I will, like Le Guin in her novels, focus on the founding texts of Daoism; the classic texts of the Laozi and the Zhuangzi. Different scholars have named this narrowing of scope “early Daoism”, “proto-Daoism”, or “philosophical Daoism”. The latter might be the most descriptive in this context, given its implications of a certain distance to the later organized religion, which Le Guin admits to knowing “next to nothing about” (Le Guin, “Chronicles”). The former she describes as “a philosophy, or actually a way of thinking, which is profoundly subversive and permanently anti-establishment” (Le Guin, “Chronicles”). Her introduction to her own rendition of the *Daodejing* may serve to further clarify the stance I am taking to the texts and their content:

> The *Tao Te Ching* was probably written about twenty-five hundred years ago, perhaps by a man called Lao Tzu, who may have lived at about the same time as Confucius. Nothing about it is certain except that it’s Chinese, and very old, and speaks to people everywhere as if it had been written yesterday . . . the whole thing is poetry. I wanted to catch that poetry, its terse, strange beauty. Most translations have caught meanings in their net, but prosily, letting the beauty slip through. And in poetry, beauty is no ornament; it is the meaning. It is the truth (*Tao* ix)

While this attitude may seem evasive or unscholarly from a sinologist’s perspective, it gives a good impression of Le Guin’s personal stance toward the texts. In describing “the whole thing” as poetry, she indicates a stance that is fundamentally aesthetical. In the same introduction, she also comments upon her role as cultural interpreter of the tradition: “I
wanted a Book of the Way accessible to a present-day, unwise, unpowerful, and perhaps
unmale reader, not seeking esoteric secrets, but listening for a voice that speaks to the soul”
(Tao x). Le Guin sees philosophical Daoism as relevant for today’s world, and not just as an
important cultural artifact.

One article in Daoism and Ecology discusses Ursula K. Le Guin’s role as one of the
foremost popularizers of Daoist thought in the Western world. The author of this article,
Jonathan R. Herman, sees Le Guin’s modern approach as firmly in tune with the main
teachings of philosophical Daoism, while noting that “most existing scholarship on these
Daoistic cultural crossovers is indeed being produced by specialists in English literature, fine
arts, and popular culture” and that the role of sinologists in this context is to “articulate
exactly how the Daoist ideas or practices are being transformed” (393-4). He also opens up
for the possibility that the most creative answers to questions of environmental issues are to
be found “within modern Western transformations” due to their ability to bring latent
characteristics of the original works to the surface in a specific context (394). Herman sees Le
Guin’s introductory notes and her overall choice of wording in her version of Daodejing as
indicating a forward-looking stance to the text, emphasizing its egalitarian content and its
ability to offer counsel and advice to the modern reader, without exaggerating familiar Le
Guinian themes such as feminism and environmentalism (398-401). Herman concludes that
Le Guin’s engagement with the classic texts is “a fascinating encounter between the Western
and the Daoist imaginations,” resulting in “a creative, responsible, and compelling vision that
is worthy of both our scholarly attention and our moral ear” (403-404). As a popularizer, Le
Guin is seen as an “exemplary role model” who “strives to take without taking away” and
thereby avoids the pitfalls of cultural appropriation and “religious orientalism” in the difficult
endeavor of introducing Daoist thought to a Western audience (Herman 404).

Daoism and Ecology is dedicated to uncover strains within Daoism that can be helpful
in order to rethink our relationship to the natural world in the context of ecological crisis.
Despite a wide variety of conclusions, it is possible to make out certain points on which the
contributors generally agree can make a difference to the way in which we think about
ecology. I will enter into a more detailed discussion of these issues in relation to the novels
later, but for the time being, it will suffice to list the main points here:
1. The outlook in the Laozi and Zhuangzi differs in a meaningful way from Western ideas about the problematic binary humanity/nature. In the Daoist understanding, nature is not something outside of us, but rather a mental attitude, as well as the true condition of one’s body.

2. The body is seen as a microcosm, containing all dimensions of reality, including what is in Western terms regarded as nature. The body is thus porous, and not characterized by clear limits to the outside world, an attitude that can be illustrated by the act of breathing.

3. A radical perspective on our temporal situation. In the classic texts of Daoism, the modern Western notion of linear time is not to be found. Time is largely regarded as cyclical, which unsettles such ideas as the Western myth of progress.

4. The emphasis on local ecology. The Laozi and Zhuangzi repeatedly draw attention to the intrinsic qualities in things and living beings in the immediate environment. The profound respect for all manifestations of life is the basis of the moral advice given in both texts.

5. Cosmic ecology. The Daoist universe is characterized perhaps most famously by the dynamic pattern of yin and yang, which stand for the contraction and expansion, respectively, of a kind of cosmic heartbeat. The universe is thus seen as an organism, spontaneously regenerating and renewing itself.

What the aspects listed above add up to is a worldview that strongly emphasizes our embeddedness in the natural world. As Lawrence Buell has pointed out, Daoist environmental notions have played a role in establishing the standpoint within environmental ethics known as ecocentrism (Buell 101). Buell explains that ecocentrism largely builds on the work of the twentieth-century ecologist Aldo Leopold, from whom it owes the concept of the “land ethic”. The “land ethic,” presented in Leopold’s 1949 work A Sand County Almanac, is important in the sense that it ascribes rights to non-human life forms. In Leopold’s words, it enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals,” which entails changing “the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (204). In this “biotic community,” man is but “one of thousands of accretions” (Leopold 204-16). Leopold also provided a testing ground for proposed environmental alteration: Rather than basing the decision solely on economics, we must put it to the test of whether “it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic
community” (Leopold 224-5). Similarly, James Miller has pointed out that the *Laozi* espouses a view of nature as “a dynamic system of vital processes whose basic character is that of self-determination” and recognize that “humans cannot act for their own good without considering the overall health of the ecosystems in which they are embedded” (4-10). Ecocentrism involves obvious self-contradictions, however. As Buell says, it is after all human beings who must decide whether our actions tend to preserve the integrity and stability of the biotic community (104). He therefore proposes an aesthetic reading of Leopold, seeing it as “designed to unsettle standard utilitarian assumptions” (105). This resembles Le Guin’s use of Daoism. She does not claim it to be a self-consistent ethical position, but uses it strategically to allow the reader to see things from a different perspective. In the same way as Buell sees Leopold’s ecocentrism, Le Guin’s Daoism works as a provocative tool.

Le Guin’s knowledge of the tradition, and the noted awareness of the epistemological difference between such an understanding and the normal Western worldview, allows her to make use of these insights in ways relevant to ecology. Le Guin has addressed the problem of modern Western civilization in Daoist terms as one of alienation:

> Our curse is alienation, the separation of Yang and Yin. Instead of a search for balance, there is struggle for dominance. Divisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied. The dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used, might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity (*Dancing* 16)

In an essay written in 1982, while working on *Always Coming Home*, she presents a strategy for reviving the utopian genre, using the same Daoist terminology as above. “Utopia has been euclidean, it has been European, and it has been masculine,” Le Guin writes, and suggests that “our final loss of faith in that radiant sandcastle may enable our eyes to adjust to a dimmer light and in it perceive another kind of utopia” (*Dancing*, 88). Le Guin needs a positive description of a new kind of utopia, and proposes *yin*, as related to the *yang* characteristics of the Western utopian tradition:

> Utopia has been yang. In one way or another, from Plato on, utopia has been the big yang motorcycle trip. Bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot…Our civilization is now so
Here, Le Guin makes strategic use of Daoism by employing it as a counterweight to the traditional Western utopian ideals. She proposes that “we must return, go round, go inward, go yinward” (Le Guin, Dancing 90). A “yin utopia” would look totally different than the preceding ones: “It would be dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold” (Le Guin, Dancing, 90). In endowing her characters and societies with attributes that stand in opposition to and therefore challenge the entire tradition of utopian fiction, Le Guin has something important to tell us about how we live today, and what kind of change of mentality she believes is necessary in order to deal with the environmental challenges facing us.

In the upcoming chapters, I will seek to show how Le Guin’s utopian societies in The Dispossessed and Always Coming Home are informed by Daoism, as well as how she challenges normalized Western ways of thinking about environmental issues through a Daoist-inspired form of cognitive estrangement. In each main chapter, I will first analyze how the utopian society in each novel is informed by a Daoist worldview. Secondly, I will attempt to show how Le Guin exemplifies central Daoist teachings on a personal level through certain narrative techniques. This way, she challenges normalized assumptions about the relationship between human beings and the natural world in a way that involves the reader.
The Dispossessed

The Dispossessed, subtitled “An Ambiguous Utopia,” is perhaps most famous for being Le Guin’s attempt at creating an anarchist utopia. The novel was published in 1974 and was awarded the Nebula, Hugo and Jupiter awards. As Peter Stillman has pointed out, The Dispossessed was published in “the beginnings of the contemporary environmental movement”, about “four years after the first Earth Day in the United States” and three years after the first world environmental summit, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 (55). In the same year, The Club of Rome’s report “Limits to Growth” raised considerable public attention to environmental issues. As the name implies, the report focused largely on the dangers of resource depletion as a result of unsustainable levels of pollution, population growth and exponential growth. In an interview with China Miéville, Le Guin’s admits to being deeply influenced by these findings: “I wasn’t a bit ahead of the curve . . . What we were doing was leading us to the complete degradation of natural resources and the oceans and the atmosphere . . . I was just using the warnings that the scientist were putting out” (Miéville). As well as presenting a though experiment about anarchism, Le Guin addresses real environmentalist concerns.

The first part of this chapter will focus on the philosophical ideas underpinning this anarchist utopia, highlighting the Daoist ideas which inform its overall ideology. The second part will examine the novel’s protagonist Shevek’s journey and how it serves to illustrate certain central Daoist teachings. All along, I will investigate in what ways the inherent Daoist material can be seen as relevant to present-day environmental issues and how it can be said to serve to stimulate readers’ perceptions in the context of environmental crisis, following Darko Suvin’s theory of cognitive estrangement.

The utopian society in The Dispossessed is situated on a moon orbiting the inhabitants’ original home planet, Urras, from where they have been exiled. The natural environment is so harsh that environmental vigilance is paramount in order to maintain life. Fredric Jameson sees the scarce landscape of Anarres as where Le Guin’s technique of world reduction “is pushed to its ultimate consequences, providing the spectacle of a planet . . . in which human life is virtually without biological partners” (224). In the same essay, Jameson recognizes the novel’s relevance to environmental issues in claiming that “it constitutes a powerful and timely rebuke to present-day attempts to parlay American abundance and
consumers' goods into some ultimate vision of the ‘great society’” (228). He further suggests that, in *The Dispossessed*, “the device of world-reduction becomes transformed into a sociopolitical hypothesis about the inseparability of utopia and scarcity” (228). This conclusion, although Jameson does not decisively say so, is presumably based on Anarres’ opposite number Urras’ inability to implement any of the utopian ideas of the former, both historically, and in spite of Shevek’s best efforts at providing aid to the revolutionary effort of the suppressed majority of the nation of A-Io. For Jameson, since Urras has definite likenesses with our earth, their failure to establish a system of material justice ascribes a pessimistic conclusion to the novel. There are, however, other ways of reading these turns of events, to which the classic texts of philosophical Daoism might contribute important clues. Jameson is undoubtedly correct that the reduced landscape of Anarres provides a carefully refined image of an earth where scarcity is startlingly palpable and real. The way it constantly looms over the human population, arguably makes scarcity, alongside anarchism, a central theme of the novel. Survival in such a limited environment is, still in line with Jameson, ensured primarily through its political system of anarchy. This system however, is underpinned by an ideology based on the work of the founder-philosopher Laia Odo; an ideology that stretches beyond the anarchist theorizing of Peter Kropotkin, Paul Goodman and others that Le Guin depended on in working on the novel (“Response by Ansible” 307). The first goal of this chapter is to examine this ideology and what it is that makes it effective in order to maintain life on a planet characterized most of all by extreme ecological scarcity. It will also seek to challenge Jameson’s assertion that this utopian society is necessarily inseparable from scarcity, rather than being applicable, if only in parts, to real world environmental issues.

Laia Odo is the ideological founder of the utopian society on Anarres. She is long deceased in the time span of the novel, but we learn that she lived a life of political dissidence on Urras, sparking a revolution that took place shortly after her death and led to the first settlements on Anarres. Odo’s teachings laid out the blueprint for the Anarresti anarchist system; a communitarian society in which property is held in common, and order and economic stability is ensured by means of mutual agreement among citizens. In the introduction to “The Day Before the Revolution”, a short story depicting Odo’s final hours on her home planet of Urras, Le Guin writes that anarchism, “as prefigured by Taoist thought . . . is the most idealistic, and to me the most interesting of all political theories” (*WTQ* 260). On this particular point it is important to keep in mind Le Guin’s egalitarian reading and rendition
of the *Laozi*, which emphasizes the egalitarianism in the work, rather than its social role as a manual or set of advice for rulers. The content of Odonian thought as presented to us in the novel, however, go beyond anarchism as such, even if it forms part of the overall picture.

Odo’s teachings are implemented by means of a complex system, which includes such features as an entirely new, “rationally invented” language called Pravic (Le Guin, *TD* 339). As well as ensuring, grammatically, that the use of possessive pronouns does not naturalize owning, Pravic appears to have its own “modes” for speaking about such things as the larger society and religion. Religion is described by Shevek as “one of the Categories. The fourth mode. Few people learn to practice all the Modes. But the Modes are built of the natural capacities of the mind” (Le Guin, *TD* 15). The “analogic mode” is used when speaking about societal issues. All central societal functions are described analogically in terms of the human body. The name of the capital, Abbenay, “meant, in the new language of the new society, Mind,” and the inevitable centralization of certain functions is justified on the background that “you can’t have a nervous system without at least a ganglion, and preferably a brain” (Le Guin, *TD* 95-6). Despite the long distances between settlements on the planet, we are told, “they held to the ideal of complex organicism” (Le Guin, *TD* 95). The title of one Odo’s books - “The Social Organism” – as well as the oft-cited proverb “excess is excrement” imply, as Christine Nadir as pointed out, “that the human body and the body politic must work analogously, that any excess will kill them” (38). All forms of luxuries, including such immaterial features as privacy, are seen as “not functional. It was excess, waste” (Le Guin, *TD* 110). The main challenge to the Anarresti society is scarcity, and parts of what we learn about Odo’s thinking provide aid to this essentially ecological problem. Even though Odo lived all her life on the verdant and rich planet of Urras, her organicist mode of thinking, which sees nature as an efficient economy in which every being has a proper function, is distinctly ecological. Taking into account the imminence of potential natural devastation, the fundamental ecological focus is well suited to the needs of the Anarresti population as it tends to invoke a constant environmental awareness in the population.

As mentioned briefly in the introductory chapter, the Daoist worldview in large part centers on the body as a kind of microcosm. This view has its roots in Chinese folk medicine, and centers on “the ability of the body to maintain an overall physiological equilibrium” through the same flow of energy (qi) that maintains the balance between *yin* and *yang* in the Daoist macrocosm (Miller, “Daoism and Nature” 8). While the roots of this perspective might
seem unscientific today, classic Daoist philosophy does not require these ideas to back up its worldview. Like Odonianism, it grounds its thinking in the human body. The Daoist conception of nature, according to James Miller, “is unitary in that it is comprised ultimately of one energy matter, Qi” (8). The link between the micro- and macrocosm in Daoist thinking is made through the act of breathing, which illustrates the porous nature of the body. Through breathing, qi is released from the microcosm of the body into the macrocosm, and vice versa. Le Guin’s rendition of Laozi emphasizes the dangers of excess in relation to the environment:

For the world is a sacred object.
Nothing is to be done to it.
To do anything to it is to damage it.
To seize it is to lose it.

So the wise soul keeps away
from the extremes, excess, extravagance (Tao 40)

In her notes to this particular verse, Le Guin writes that “to lose the sense of sacredness of the world is a mortal loss. To injure our world by excesses of greed and ingenuity is to endanger our own sacredness” (Tao 40). This verse prescribes the central Daoist imperative of wu wei as an ethical solution to retaining the sacredness of the world. Lu Xiaogan writes that wu wei, in philosophical Daoism, refers to a higher standard of human actions and their results,” a “different value orientation from prevailing conventions” that “demands the most appropriate manner of action” (315). Although often translated as “non-action” or “inaction,” Xiaogan and other scholars who have attempted to link Daoist ideas to environmental ethics render the term as a type of action that harmonizes with that of the Dao, which is “action-in-itself” of the most fundamentally “natural” kind (Ip, “Taoism” 340). Wu wei “prefers a natural, gradual, and moderate style of conduct” and “opposes movements exercised intensively, coercively, dramatically, and on a large scale” (Xiaogan 317). Rather than understood as not taking action at all, then, wu wei should be seen as a well-planned, informed and deliberate form of action that does not violate the laws of nature as described by the scientific field of ecology. This particular set of ethics has its parallel in Odonianism’s focus on functionalism. Odo’s
philosophy gives indications to which forms of action should be considered functional and which should not, based on whether or not they tend to contribute positively to the overall health of the social organism. The basic ideas of anarchism serve to underscore the Daoist advice when it comes to such things as owning, excess and extravagance.

Anarres is clearly a society in deterioration, however, about to fall desperately short of its initial aspirations. Social control and authoritarian sentiments rise, and personal freedom becomes restricted. Shevek’s friend Bedap, the most outspoken radical of the Anarresti society, complains that “Kids learn to parrot Odo’s words as if they were laws – the ultimate blasphemy!” (Le Guin, *TD* 168). The most dramatic example is that of the playwright Tirin, who ends up in an asylum to receive “therapy” as a result of having written a satirical play which “could seem anti-Odonian, if you were stupid” (Le Guin, *TD* 169). In another instance, the composer Salas is refused work for writing “dysfunctional music” (Le Guin, *TD* 175). “Music isn’t useful,” Bedap explains: “Canal digging is important, you know, music’s mere decoration . . . The complexity, the vitality, the freedom of invention that was at the center of the Odonian ideal, we’ve thrown it all away. We’ve gone right back to barbarism” (Le Guin, *TD* 176). The Zhuangzi includes a story which in many ways parallels the developments on Anarres. “Horse’s Hoofs,” describes a kind of Daoist utopia; an ancient time of perfect virtue:

In this age of Perfect Virtue, men live the same as birds and beasts, group themselves side by side with the ten thousand things. . . Dull and unwitting, they have no desire; this is called uncarved simplicity. In uncarved simplicity, the people attain their true nature. Then along comes the sage, huffing and puffing after benevolence, reaching on tiptoe for righteousness, and the world for the first time has doubts; mooning and mouthing over his music, snipping and stitching away at his rites, and the world for the first time is divided . . . If the Way and its Virtue had not been cast aside, how would there be any call for benevolence and righteousness? That the Way and the Virtue were destroyed in order to create benevolence and righteousness – this was the fault of the sage (Watson, *Zhuangzi* 66-7)

The Daoist scholar Joanne D. Birdwhistell reads this chapter as depicting a utopian time disturbed by the emergence of “Confucian notions of rightness and benevolence” which “serve to divide and destroy the ancient harmony” (26). Anarres similarly suffers an increased rigidity of social norms which is hierarchically imposed and ultimately limits freedom of speech and action. Obedience to concepts of morality and proper conduct implemented from
above, by people in power, goes against the Daoist virtues. Le Guin’s rendition of verse 18 of the *Laozi* concurs:

The disordered family  
is full of dutiful children and parents.  
The disordered society  
is full of loyal patriots (*Tao* 25)

This verse strikes a chord with Shevek’s observation that “the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate—we obey” (Le Guin, *Dispossessed* 330). As well as neatly illustrating Anarres’ problems, the *Zhuangzi* story serves to demonstrate certain Daoist perspectives on the relationship between human beings and the natural world. According to Birdwhistell, the story assumes “the compatibility of all life-forms” and rejects the view that “humans can live well only if they can control or destroy other life-forms or the natural world that they inhabit” (27). Before the sage appears, not only humans, but the vegetation, as well as all other species, are free to live out their inherent nature: “Birds and beasts form their flocks and herds; grass and trees grow to fullest height” (Watson, *Zhuangzi* 66). The description of the world before the appearance of the sage illustrates the importance of freedom in philosophical Daoism. According to Le Guin, the Laozi upholds the idea “that people are able to look after themselves, be just, and prosper on their own. No anarchist can be a pessimist” (*Tao* 75). The same idea holds for nature.

In her reading of *The Dispossessed*, Christine Nadir has recognized the environmental ethics inherent in Odonianism, but sees it as politically problematic due to the restrictions imposed on personal freedom. Contextualizing the novel historically, her reading sees Le Guin as putting the American environmentalist movement’s discourses of scarcity that emerged in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s under scrutiny. According to Nadir, the normative approach of this movement has its equivalent on Anarres, where the “discourse of scarcity that makes life possible . . . conditions its subjects to accept absolute dispossession and sacrifice as the condition of their freedom, as the condition of utopia” (Nadir 40). Nadir argues that Odonianism is coercive in its absolute environmentalist focus, and that Le Guin, in
her depiction of the utopian ideology, is partly critical of the normative approach of the American environmentalist movement. I would argue, however, that it is the negative development of Odonianism that makes it truly coercive. The society as a whole takes a step away from Daoist values when personal freedom no longer functions as a counterweight to the sacrifices the population are obliged to make, which is evident in the way outsiders like Tirin and Salas are eventually treated. Based on the Daoist ethics that can be derived from “Horse’s Hoofs,” Le Guin seems to issue a warning to the environmentalist movement that any normative political approach must be continually reexamed to avoid alienating the people. Odonianism is Le Guin’s cognitively estranged version of an initially utopian form of environmentalism; one in which the sacrifice of material goods as a result of an acute awareness of nature’s limits is depicted as an ultimately positive development. Le Guin’s Daoist worldview both underscores the environmental ethics of Odonianism and enunciates the constant need for change. By depicting the dangers of adhering to a solution – static conservativism rather than the continual process characteristic of Daoist thought – she also highlights the difficulties of maintaining this system, and the constant need for agency in the population it requires. On the political level, Le Guin seems to recognize the need for balance between Confucian morality and Daoist personal freedom. Shevek realizes that the social conscience needs to strike a balance with the individual conscience because they both have something important to offer. Even if Odonian anarchism is built on Daoist ideas, Daoist philosophy ultimately speaks to the individual and offers its advice on the premise of cultivating the self. By tracing Shevek’s personal development in the course of the novel, I hope to illuminate this, and add something important to the discussion of the value of environmental ethics in Daoism.

James Bittner has proposed that Le Guin’s works of fiction preceding *The Dispossessed* are consistently characterized by a structure which closely resembles that of the romance genre. “Romance,” Bittner writes, “resolves psychological and metaphysical opposition and contradictions, including related ethical problems, with a visionary experience, or even a magical event” (8). In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek’s journey to Urras and back has a similar structure. This section seeks to map this journey of discovery, while showing that the journey structure in the novel serves an additional purpose to romance-genre resolution; it gives the reader a closer look at an individual’s understanding of central Daoist teachings. These teachings are centered on the Daoist tradition’s altogether different cosmological perspective, and, consequently, on ecology. In beginning to examine how Shevek’s temporal
theory corresponds with these Daoist teachings, a closer look at how Daoist cosmology is explained in the classic texts of the Laozi and Zhuangzi is in order. Verse 42 of the Laozi constitutes what Le Guin has called a “pocket cosmology”:

The Way bears one.
The one bears two.
The two bear three.
The three bear the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry the yin on their shoulders and hold in their arms the yang whose interplay of energy makes harmony (Le Guin, *Tao* 57)

The sparse nature of this account makes it necessary to examine the cosmology of Daoism from another perspective as well. According to the editors of *Daoism and Ecology*,

The Daoist universe is one and nameless, but infinitely diverse and particular. Its unity is implied by the fact that all dimensions of existence, from the budding of a flower to the orbit of the stars, may be denominated in terms of qi, the fundamental energy-matter of the universe whose dynamic pattern is a cosmic heartbeat of expansion (yang) and contraction (yin). Its diversity is a function of the complex interaction of the myriad cosmic processes, both light and fluid and heavy and dense. The universe is a single, vital organism, not created according to some fixed principle, but spontaneously regenerating itself from the primal empty-potency lodged within all organic forms of life (xlviii)

The first time Shevek’s temporal theory is mentioned in the novel, it is in connection with the natural landscape of Anarres:
The Anarresti hoped to restore the fertility of that restless earth by replanting the forest. This was, Shevek thought, in accordance with the principle of Causative Reversibility, ignored by the Sequency school of physics currently respectable on Anarres, but still an intimate, tacit element of Odonian thought. He would like to write a paper showing the relationship of Odo's ideas to the ideas of temporal physics, and particularly the influence of Causative Reversibility on her handling of the problem of ends and means (Le Guin, *TD* 46).

Here, Odo’s concept of reversibility entails renewal and the returning of something now lost, and is thereby cyclical. Shevek wants to show how this is relevant to temporality, despite the current focus on sequency physics, or linearity, on Anarres. Later, on Urras, he describes his problem as one of reconciliation of the two different perspectives on temporality, which will allow him to discover a “unified theory of time”. At Vea’s party, he describes cyclic temporality in a way that closely resembles the “cosmic heartbeat” of the “vital organism” which is the model for the universe in Daoist cosmology:

And then on the big scale, the cosmos: well, you know we think that the whole universe is a cyclic process, an oscillation of expansion and contraction, without any before or after. Only within each of the great cycles, where we live, only there is there linear time, evolution, change (Le Guin, *TD* 223)

Furthermore, Shevek has a sound understanding of the Daoist complexity of the universe as something that needs to be taken into consideration in the application of his yet unfinished theory:

We don’t want purity, but complexity, the relationship of cause and effect, means and end. Our model of the cosmos must be as inexhaustible as the cosmos. A complexity that includes not only duration but creation, not only being but becoming, not only geometry but ethics. It is not the answer we are after, but only how to ask the question (Le Guin, *TD* 226)

Roger T. Ames has pointed out some temporal implications in the *Laozi* that can serve to clarify Shevek’s position. In the Daoist cosmology, Ames writes, “there is a priority of historia and mythos over logos, of narrative over analysis” (274, emphasis removed). Since
the Daoist conception of reality “is precisely that complex pattern of relationships which in sum constitute the myriad things of the world,” the tradition “seeks a way to live productively rather than the truth,” which “requires more of a narrative than an analytic understanding” (Ames 274-5). The Laozi “does not purport to provide an adequate and compelling description of what de and Dao might mean as an ontological explanation for the world around us,” but “seeks to engage us and to provide guidance in how we ought to interact with the phenomena, human and otherwise, that give us context in the world” (Ames 275). The quotation above, then, shows that, before completing his theory, Shevek has realized that in order to capture complexity rather than (analytic, conclusive) purity, the key lies in asking the right kind of question. When he gets back to work, it turns out that he had had all the scientific material he needed in front of him the whole time, but that he did not know how to use it. His discovery is therefore one of “know-how” rather than of “know-what” (Ames 275).

In finally reaching a breakthrough on his theory, Shevek realizes that he had been wrong in “groping and grabbing after certainty, as if it were something he could possess,” and that “the only chance for breaking out of the circle and going ahead” lay in the region of the “unprovable or even the disprovable” (Le Guin, TD 225). He thus realizes that philosophical Daoism is just a method, a way of seeing the world. It is a worldview that enables one to act creatively rather than a final truth. Douglas Barbour has pointed out that Le Guin’s wording of Shevek’s revelation serves to underscore the Daoist nature of his discovery (249):

The wall was down. The vision was both clear and whole. What he saw was simple, simpler than anything else. It was simplicity: and contained in it all complexity, all promise. It was revelation. It was the way clear, the way home, the light . . . He had seen the foundations of the universe, and they were solid” (TD 280-1, emphasis mine).

Shevek’s understanding of the nature of time is an understanding of Daoist cosmology; he is on the way. Only when he reaches this understanding is he able to overcome alienation. In accordance with Le Guin’s yin utopian program mentioned in the introduction, Bittner suggests that the experience of the present, attained through understanding of Daoist ideas, is utopia itself: “Because we are too alienated to see it, however, because we lack the necessary vision, because we have conceptual blind spots, it does not exist for us: we do not feel at home” (22). “If utopia is a place that does not exist,” Le Guin writes of her yin utopia, “then
surely (as Lao Tzu would say) the way to get there is by the way that is not a way” (*Dancing*, 83). Shevek’s breakthrough represents a discovery of the spatial and temporal location of Le Guin’s *yin* utopia, which is more of a state of mind than a place to get to. Conceptually, then, Shevek discovers a utopia that, unlike Anarres, is distinctly unambiguous. Furthermore, this suggests that the way to utopia is strictly individual.

Darko Suvin has suggested that the genre of science fiction is distinguished by “the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional ‘novum’ (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic” (*Metamorphoses* 63). Suvin uses the example of Shevek’s “simulsequentialist” physics as a novum that is “cognitively validated” by the fact that science “has since Marx and Einstein been an open-ended corpus of knowledge” (*Metamorphoses* 68). Le Guin uses Einstein’s theories of relativity, framed through Shevek’s physicist eye, to open up a fictional, science-based understanding of Daoism. The novum is hegemonic in the sense that it constitutes what Suvin calls “an ontic change in the character/agent’s reality” (*Metamorphoses* 71). As a result of his findings, Shevek’s orientation is changed dramatically, which has real implications for the plot of the novel. Importantly, the cognitive estrangement inherent in Le Guin’s use of Daoism involves the reader and challenges him or her to compare Shevek’s outlook with one’s ordinary perspective:

SF does not posit another superordinated and ‘more real’ reality but an alternative on the same ontological level as the author’s empirical reality . . . the necessary correlate of the novum is an alternate reality, one that possesses a different historical time corresponding to different human relationships and sociocultural norms actualized by the narration (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 71).

Le Guin’s role as cultural translator is at the heart of the use of Daoism, since the new reality must be understood as “the empirical [Western] reality modified in such-and-such ways (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 71). Daoism is certainly not a novum in the strictest sense of the term, but in the way Le Guin constantly compares the Daoist understanding with that of our own, she uses it as such. Despite containing futuristic elements like spaceships, the novel’s main novum is therefore conceptual rather than material.
Shevek’s discovery of the eternal nature of the Way enables him to act meaningfully in the present. That the wall is finally down is significant. The wall metaphor repeatedly describes mental processes; selfishness, secrecy and egoism in particular. All of these imply separateness. The Urrasti scientist Pae’s opportunism and lack of honesty is characterized by the wall, “which is this young man's charm, courtesy, indifference” (Le Guin, TD 80). Similarly, Shevek chastises the partygoers on Urras for living “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!” (Le Guin, TD 229). The wall mentality exists on Anarres too, however. Shevek’s colleague Desar, for instance, is described as having “disconcerting wall eyes” (Le Guin, TD 161). Shevek has finally been able to overcome the mental barrier that initially prevents him from understanding his place in the larger whole. It stands in stark opposition to the Daoist worldview of wholeness and balance, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things. As a result of the newly found clarity of vision, he attains the knowledge he needs in order to solve Anarres’ present problems. Anarres is, as mentioned above, frequently described in Odonian analogical terms as a human body. When the wall is down, Shevek decisively understands that Anarres, like himself, cannot exist as a separate entity, but only as part of a larger cosmological whole. Shevek’s discovery is that the Anarresti have themselves built the wall as a result of having “denied their past, their history. The settlers of Anarres had turned their backs on the Old World and its past, opted for the future only” (Le Guin, TD 89). As his temporal theory shows, however, this denial has served to break the utopian promise: “To break a promise is to deny the reality of the past; therefore it is to deny the hope of a real future” (Le Guin, TD 225). The need for continuity is apparent in verse 14 of the Laozi:

Holding fast to the old Way,
we can live in the present.

Mindful of the ancient beginnings,
we hold the tread of the Tao (Le Guin, Tao Te Ching 18)

Shevek’s discovery enables him to see the roots of Anarres on Urras, in the Old Town of A-Io hidden from him all along. He sees the poverty of the majority that facilitates the luxury of the
minority, the very same environment in which Odo wrote her works years ago. At one particularly cyclical point, Shevek is compared to Odo: “you are an idea. A dangerous one. The idea of anarchism, made flesh. Walking amongst us’. ‘Then you've got your Odo,’ the girl said” (Le Guin, TD 295). Shevek’s journey thus mirrors the cosmology of Daoism. Anarres’ roots on Urras is found and experienced by Shevek as a result of his travels.

Shevek’s solution to the deterioration of the Anarresti society is change; not so much in the meaning of upheaval or revolution as in evolution. The Hainishman, Ketho, who joins Shevek on his return to Anarres becomes the personification of change, of new impulses enabling the possibility for a revival of Odonianism, when he joins Shevek on his return to his home planet. According to Ames, the “priority of process and change over form and stasis” is another key characterization of the Daoist worldview (266). Shevek’s solution is a product of his “enlightenment”. Le Guin’s use of what Suvin has called cognitive estrangement is seen most clearly in the yet uncorrupted Odonianism in the early chapters on Anarres, and in Shevek’s change of outlook after his breakthrough on his temporal theory. The likenesses between the Daoist and the (truly) Odonian worldview serves to cast Odo in a role that resembles a cognitively estranged version of Laozi. The way the Daoist worldview that is apparent in Odonianism is seen and contested from a Western perspective, arguably makes it the hegemonic novum in the novel. This worldview allows the reader to question his or her own assumptions on how to regard reality. As Bittner writes, “[s]cience fiction, through its estrangement techniques, reminds us that our world, our empirical environment, is not eternally fixed by unalterable scientific law” (20).

Returning to the environmentalist ethics we can draw from the novel, Le Guin most of all seems to emphasize the local and individual. Shevek’s personal journey is a process of cultivation of the self; a central idea in Daoism. After the failed revolution in A-Io, he sees that he cannot be a Daoist “missionary,” imposing his own radically different paradigm onto others. His realization of this fact is made clear in his conversation with the Terran ambassador, Keng: “My people were right, and I was wrong, in this: We cannot come to you. You will not let us . . . We can only wait for you to come to us” (Le Guin, TD 349-50). This emphasis on the individual shows how the Daoist sensibility grows from the bottom-up. Daoism can never be a political system, which is why cultivation of the self is such an important part of Le Guin’s utopian vision, in which “Confucian,” normative social morality
and Daoist personal freedom must strike a fine balance. Shevek explains the society-individual balance as follows:

>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. The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind (Le Guin, *TD* 333)

Given this emphasis on the power of the individual, and since the social system of Odonianism is corrupted through much of the novel, it might be more constructive to consider the environmental ethics of the novel on the level of the individual instead of the political.

Le Guin’s *yin* utopian program is clearly modelled on the *Laozi*’s valorization of the weak, local and non-assertive. What it attempts to counterweight is the “hotness” of contemporary development based on the principle of unchecked economic growth. As several critics have noted, Le Guin’s utopianism does not clearly distinguish social justice and environmentalism as separate entities (Prettyman 65, Herman 401). Instead she tends to use Daoism as an integrative framework. As Jonathan Herman notes, the “impetus to integrate man and woman, to break down hierarchical social structures and utilitarian attitudes, is the same impetus to integrate humankind with the planet and the cosmos” (401). Nevertheless, this approach to the world, exemplified by Shevek and other “true” Odonians, can be boiled down to a set of explicitly Daoist concepts. Shevek attains an understanding of the cosmological perspective of Daoism. He recognizes the interconnectedness of the universe, as well as its processual, cyclical nature of expansion and contraction. This the Dao, or the Way, “the something / that contains everything” (Le Guin, *Tao Te Ching* 35). In several key scenes, Shevek can be said to act according to the principle of *wu wei*. In philosophical Daoism, *wu wei* “is the methodological principle to actualize *ziran*, or naturalness, the core value in *Laozi*’s system (Xiaogan 316). Daoism does not only recognize interconnection, but proposes a mode of action suitable for human intervention in the world. “When applying these conceptual theories to ecological problems,” Xiaogan elaborates, “it is obvious that most human movements causing and intensifying environmental crises in postindustrialized societies are against *wuwei*. These movements are broad in scale and rapid in expansion”
The Laozi repeatedly warns against overextending one’s actions, promoting moderation as a virtue in the process:

Brim-fill the bowl,
it’ll spill over.
Keep sharpening the blade,
You’ll soon blunt it. (Le Guin, *Tao Te Ching* 12)

The concept of *wu wei*, Le Guin notes, is one that “transforms thought radically, that changes minds” (*Tao* 6). For her, the whole of the Laozi “is both an explanation and a demonstration of it” (*Tao* 6). By endowing this insight to a character – Shevek - and placing him in a narrative context, *The Dispossessed* similarly both explains and demonstrates to the reader what such a radically different perspective might look like.

From an environmental perspective, the ambiguity of the novel is at its most puzzling when we learn that even the ruthlessly capitalist nation of A-Io have successfully dealt with environmental degradation. Shevek’s guides explain that “A-Io had led the world for centuries . . . in ecological control and the husbanding of natural resources” (Le Guin, *TD* 82). Urras has apparently been through an environmental crisis as a result of broad-scale overconsumption: “The excesses of the Ninth Millennium were ancient history, their only lasting effect being the shortage of certain metals, which fortunately could be imported from the Moon” (Le Guin, *TD* 82). This has been dealt with successfully, but the methods that have been used stand in stark contrast to those of Odonianism. In line with the larger system of thought on Urras, the solution is to exclude the majority of the population from contributing to the overall consumption. Using polluting luxury items such as cars, for example, is impossible for the majority due to heavy taxation. While Odonian thought values egalitarianism and wholeness, Urras consistently bases its system on inequality and division into smaller parts, thereby ensuring that the wealthy minority can uphold a lifestyle of excess despite its obvious unsustainability. The success of environmental protection on Urras does bear marks of a *deus ex machina* resolution, however, which works to maintain the overall ambiguity of the novel. The novel’s equivalent to our earth has suffered a far worse fate. As the Terran ambassador Keng explains: “My world, my Earth, is a ruin. A planet spoiled by the
human species. We multiplied and gobbled and fought until there was nothing left, and then we died” (Le Guin, *TD* 347). When it comes to environmental issues, Terra, not Urras, stands out as the real opposite number to Anarres. The ambiguity, however, predominantly works on the cosmological rather than the political level. Anarres’ wholeness contrasts Urras’ division into smaller parts. Shevek’s partner Takver sees the ecology on Anarres as a weakness they make their system work in spite of: “Think of it: everywhere you looked animals, other creatures, sharing the earth and air with you. You'd feel so much more a part.” (Le Guin, *TD* 186)

The Daoist principle of wholeness which permeates *The Dispossessed* stands in direct opposition to the metaphor of the wall, which is laid out as the reason for both individual and social deterioration. The wall mentality which separates the Odonian “body” from the cosmological whole, can be read metaphorically as representing the Cartesian divide between the “human” and the “natural” world. As an integrative framework, Daoism offers an alternative way out of this Enlightenment dualist tradition. Verse 32 of the *Laozi* warns against the human desire to simplify by means of language:

To order, to govern,  
is to begin naming;  
when names proliferate  
it’s time to stop.  
If you know when to stop  
you’re in no danger (Le Guin, *Tao* 43)

The need to make distinctions is recognized, but, as Le Guin notes, “you also have to know when to stop before you’ve lost the whole in the multiplicity of parts” (*Tao* 43). This example shows how the Daoist worldview characteristic of the true Odonians in the novel potentially has fundamental implications for how to relate to the natural world.

In its individual focus, *The Dispossessed* represents an early attempt at Daoist environmental utopianism in Le Guin’s overall production. Here she establishes much of the groundwork for the *yin* utopian program, which arguably finds its most coherent and wide-ranging output in the later *Always Coming Home*. Most importantly, Le Guin utilizes Daoism
as an integrative framework for understanding the world, which is clearly seen in the philosophical underpinnings of the Anarresti utopia. The concepts of wholeness, balance and appropriate action informed by *wu wei* work together to estrange the utopian thinking, thereby asking the reader to test his or her worldview against it. More than creating a Daoist utopia, Le Guin creates a utopian protagonist who in the course of the novel gradually comes to exemplify Daoist ideas in his way of relating to the outside world. As James Miller has written on the tradition’s role in the larger environmental effort, however, the Daoist “way of being in the world is not a Daoist ‘ethic’ that can be ‘applied’ to ‘situations’ of environmental concern, but rather a *creative posture*” ("Vital Tradition" 410, emphasis mine). It is a fundament that, as Shevek realizes, must necessarily work together with the Confucian pragmatism of the larger society. Le Guin’s epistemological gap in *The Dispossessed* lies precisely in the strange newness of this posture or stance to the world, which functions as the basis for all action. In the next chapter, I will explore how Le Guin expands on the individual focus to create a utopian society that is more collective and less ambiguous in *Always Coming Home*. 
3 Always Coming Home

As the previous chapter shows, Le Guin applies Daoist strategies in *The Dispossessed* in order to frame the world differently. This strategy is taken a good deal further in her 1985 novel *Always Coming Home*. The novel consists of bits and pieces – everything from poems to music to detailed chartings of familial relations - which together form an impressively comprehensive portrayal of a fictional people who, as Le Guin puts it, “might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California” (*ACH* 11). *Always Coming Home* has most often been treated by critics as an example of ecofeminist literature. Instead of necessarily linking the novel to this particular strand of ecocritical thought, I intend to show how Le Guin’s utopian society is built on certain central Daoist teachings which stand in opposition to the traditional Western view of the natural world. Most importantly, I want to show how Le Guin involves the reader in a process of mental reconfiguration of our relationship to nature.

In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin’s affiliation with Daoism is made explicit. Already on the first page, she compares the difficulty involved in “translating” from the utopian community’s language with that of the *Laozi*:

The ancient Chinese book called *Tao teh ching* has been translated into English dozens of times, and indeed the Chinese have to keep retranslating it into Chinese at every cycle of Cathay, but no translation can give us the book that Lao Tze (who may not have existed) wrote. All we have is the *Tao teh ching* that is here, now (*ACH* 11)

In addition to reiterating her personal stance to philosophical Daoism, Le Guin introduces what is arguably *Always Coming Home*’s main project, namely to represent radical difference. This puts the reader in a role resembling that of a translator; we need to make sense of the worldview of the Kesh people and in one way or another find equivalents to their practice that fit with our current, albeit moldable, frame of mind. To use the same figure of speech as earlier; the epistemological gap is widened dramatically. The first part of this chapter seeks to examine in what ways the philosophical worldview underpinning Kesh society differs from our own. In the second part I intend to show how Le Guin challenges the reader to take a position toward this exhibition of radical difference.
The utopia in *Always Coming Home* bears certain similarities to the one of *The Dispossessed*. The Kesh have no central government of any kind. Due to the rich natural environment the Kesh live in, there is no need for the system of division of labor found on Anarres. The Kesh also have a temporal understanding that brings to mind some of Shevek’s discoveries. It is taken a step further, however. Linearity does not enter into the Kesh way of thinking about time. Here, time is purely cyclical, which severely alters how history is regarded. We learn that “time and space are so muddled together that one is never sure whether they are talking about an era or an area” (Le Guin *ACH* 166). Different as the perspectives appear to be, the practical idea is similar: it allows people to see time as processual. Time is spatialized in order to create a habitable present.

The Kesh society is based upon a matrilineal kinship system structured into several clans. In the valley of the Na, the people get their food from the fertile earth, as well as from foraging, hunting and fishing. At the center of Kesh social life is the *heyima*, which is described as a second home for the people of the Valley: “In the household, you lived with your kinfolk by blood or by marriage; in the heyimas you met with your greater and permanent family” (Le Guin, *ACH* 49). The heyimas have a great variety of functions:

The heyimas was a center of worship, instruction, training, and study, a meetinghouse, a political forum, a workshop, a library, archive, and museum, a clearinghouse, an orphanage, hotel, hospice, refuge, resource center, and the principal center of economic control and management for the community (Le Guin, *ACH* 49).

The main symbol of the Kesh is the *heyiya-if*, a symbol of wholeness visually represented as “two spirals centered upon the same (empty) space” (Le Guin, *ACH* 46). The left arm of the spiral “was mortality, the right eternity” (Le Guin, *ACH* 41). This symbol, shown in illustrations in the book, closely resembles the yin-yang symbol of Daoism, both in appearance and in content. It permeates Kesh society, shaping everything from town planning to art and design: “It was the visual form of an idea which pervaded the thought and culture of the Valley” (Le Guin, *ACH* 46). The Kesh societal structure can come across as religious, especially given the many references to worship, described in the novel as “singing heya”. As Pandora the ethnographer says, however, “despite the obvious and continuous relation of Valley living and thinking with the sacred,” the Kesh “had no god; they had no gods; they had
no faith. What they appear to have had is a working metaphor (Le Guin, *ACH* 49). The symbol or sign of this metaphor is the heyiya-if. The idea “that comes nearest the center of the vision is the House . . . the word at the center, heya!” (Le Guin, *ACH* 49). The central concept of the house in Kesh cosmology signifies the world as a place of dwelling. Analogically, going outside of the house means treating the world objectively, from a distance.

Like in *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin provides a different culture to compare her utopian society up against. The militaristic Condor people, also called Dayao, are the embodiment of what Le Guin calls “excessive yang” in her essay on yin utopianism. Their culture is strictly hierarchical and patriarchal, and it is based on a monotheistic religious idea that borders on fundamentalism. As opposed to the Kesh, these people are described as living “outside the world”. They seek conquest and expansion, and their way of thinking is characterized by linearity and rationality: “The Dayao way was . . . without reversal or turning, straight, single, terrible” (Le Guin, *ACH* 211). In a passage of exemplary cognitive estrangement, Stone Telling, a young Kesh woman, describes their monotheistic worldview:

One made everything out of nothing. One is a person, immortal. He is all-powerful. Human men are imitations of him. One is not the universe; he made it, and gives it orders. Things are not part of him nor is he part of them, so you must not praise things, but only One . . . They say that as there was a time when One made everything, there will be a time when everything will stop being, when One will unmake everything. Then will begin the Time Outside of Time. He will throw away everything except the True Condors and One-Warriors who obeyed him in every way and were his slaves. They will become part of One then, and be forever. I am sure that there is some sense to be made of this, but I cannot make it (Le Guin, *ACH* 210-11)

Unlike the Kesh, the Dayao regard the world as a temporary testing ground of their faithful obedience to God. Stone Telling’s description is not just a satire of Christianity, however, but rather a way of showing how the Kesh sensibility is so far removed from this conception of the universe that it becomes almost unintelligible. The phrase “living outside the world” is used about our civilization as well. Our present-day reality is referred to as “The City of Man”, and is regarded as a different place altogether, where (or when) people had “their heads on wrong,” due to the vast environmental degradation that resulted from their way of living (Le Guin, *ACH* 165-73). In the timespan of the novel, The Kesh population still suffer directly from genetic impairment because of the release of radioactive and poisonous
substances in the form of widespread “sterility, stillbirth, and congenital disease” (Le Guin, ACH 173). The mechanistic and utilitarian view of nature is what has placed the Dayao and our own civilization outside the world. Through Stone Telling’s narrative, Le Guin presents this as a cosmological problem, which contrasts the outlook of the Kesh.

The utopian society of the Kesh has found a “working metaphor” that does not place human beings “outside the world”. Le Guin’s use of the word metaphor is surely not coincidental. The fact that Always Coming Home is complemented by a glossary of Kesh words, which often shows real discrepancies between their vocabulary and English, implies a critical view of the power of language as part of the overall cosmology informing any human society. Like Roger T. Ames earlier, David L. Hall sees Daoist worldview as fundamentally aesthetic in the sense that the world is regarded as “the non-coherent sum of all orders defined from the myriad perspectives taken up by each item in the totality of things” (247). The aesthetic understanding “promotes norm-less, nontheoretical characterizations of the modalities of human experience,” which is reflected in Daoist forms of action such as wu wei (Hall 247). According to Hall, the non-assertiveness in the Daoist approach to the world is implemented through a language characterized by “deference” rather than “reference”.

Contrary to the Western outlook, the Daoist principle of wu wei involves harmony with other life forms in the world through an action of reciprocal yielding that emphasizes allowing each life-process in the world to unfold spontaneously according to their natural capabilities: “it is action that, by taking the other on its own terms, defers to what it actually is” (Hall 257). In Hall’s opinion, the language of Daoism (which is, of course, largely influenced by Chinese), distances the speaker from the world to a lesser degree than does the Western denotative referentiality. In dominant Western epistemologies,” Hall writes, “the self exists only through tension with the world and other selves. Feeling ourselves in tension with objectified others leads us to act in an aggressive or defensive manner to effect our will” (261). The hinged spiral of the Kesh, as well as the symbol of yin-yang, is an example of the type of “allusive metaphor” that Hall sees as central to the outlook of philosophical Daoism. The allusive metaphor differs from the ordinary, expressive metaphor in that “they are groundless,” and thus do not refer to any literal, connotative property (Hall 255). It is central because its meaning does not work at the expense of other forms of life, but is instead “contextualized by an indefinite sum of meanings defined by all other orders” (Hall 262). The Daoist use of language of the Kesh, exemplified by the hinged spiral, avoids the distancing inherent in referential language. Unlike the Odonians of The Dispossessed, who are plagued by the
persisting metaphor of the wall, the Kesh have successfully found a way to overcome the Cartesian divide.

Throughout *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin tries to remedy the problem of language in the Kesh approach to the world. Another Kesh learning story, “Big Man and Little Man,” can serve to illustrate its centrality, as well as to contextualize the view of Dayao monotheism treated above. This story tells of our civilization’s alienation from the natural world, and Le Guin implicitly juxtaposes the mechanistic outlook on nature with a Daoist one, centered on the metaphor of water:

He was afraid. He didn’t belong there inside the world, he had no mother, only a father. So he killed whatever he was afraid of . . . He was afraid of mountains and made mashers to flatten them, he was afraid of valleys and made fillers to fill them up, he was afraid of grass and burned it and put stones where it was. He was really afraid of water, because of the way water is. He tried to use it all up, burying springs, damming rivers, making wells. But if you drink, you piss. Water will come back down. As the desert grows so does the sea. So Little Man poisoned the sea (Le Guin, *ACH* 172-3).

Water is a recurrent metaphor for the Dao and Daoism’s preferred human mode of action, *wu wei*, in both the Laozi and the Zhuangzi. Water is deferential. Little Man, living outside the world, insists on ascribing static qualities to things in order to maintain a sense of control that is ultimately illusive. It causes a frantic spiral of destructive actions. Later in the story, however, we learn that “some people who had been there all along, hiding . . . weak, dirty, hungry, no-account people” survive the destruction (Le Guin, *ACH* 174). These people “weren’t afraid, they were too low down, too deep inside,” and therefore “asked the coyotes to help them . . . Coyote came. Where she walked she made the wilderness” (Le Guin, *ACH* 174). These people “weren’t afraid, they were too low down, too deep inside,” and therefore “asked the coyotes to help them . . . Coyote came. Where she walked she made the wilderness” (Le Guin, *ACH* 174). As verse eight of the Laozi shows, these people use water as a working metaphor:

True goodness

is like water.
Water’s good
for everything.
It doesn’t compete.

It goes right
to the low loathsome places
and so finds the way (Le Guin, Tao 11)

The language of deference, modelled on the inherent qualities of water, enables them to work with nature, not against it. Hall sees the “distancing language of reference in assaying the relationships between organisms and their environments” as being “grounded in the presumption of a Superordinate Organism who gets to set the agenda in managing the ecosystem”; in this way it is “responsible for both the exploitative motives of those who claim Lordship over Nature as their birthright and the cloying sentimentality of the Soulful Caretakers whose futile, finger-wagging gestures only advertise their impotence with respect to environmental issues” (262-3). The deference promoted by philosophical Daoism goes to the root of the problem, and informs the working metaphors that allow the Kesh to live inside of the world.

Le Guin provides the alter ego-figure of Pandora to aid us outsiders in the project of understanding the Kesh outlook on the world. In some ways, Pandora is the typical utopian visitor. She speaks with the people of the valley, asks questions, and tries to figure out how they live; all of which is part of the attempt to make an ethnographic sketch of the Kesh people. Her frame of reference, which is our empirical reality, complicates this effort. In a series of passages called “Pandora Worries About What She Is Doing,” Le Guin both comments upon and presents her doubts about the utopian project. As mentioned earlier, Always Coming Home is a much less ambiguous utopia than The Dispossessed. This causes Le Guin to grapple much more overtly with the utopian genre, which, as her yin utopian program shows, stands to represent a linear search for “static perfection . . . its premise is progress, not process, it has no habitable present” (Dancing, 87). In the first of these passages, we learn that
Pandora doesn’t want to look into the big end of the telescope and see, jewel-bright, distinct, tiny, and entire, the Valley. She shuts her eyes, she doesn’t want to see, she knows what she will see: Everything Under Control. The dolls’ house. The dolls’ country (Le Guin, *ACH* 56).

The big end of the telescope shows is the orderly utopia of the Western tradition; the static perfection achieved. Le Guin insists on focusing on the details, the “bits, chunks, fragments” that can represent the process toward the whole (*ACH* 56). She also makes it clear that any whole utopian vision must be a collaborative effort: “even if the pattern is incomplete (and the pattern is incomplete), let the mind draw its energy. Let the heart complete the pattern” (*ACH* 56). The novel represents a collaborative effort of finding a utopian vision. It involves translating radical difference into something we can understand and desire. Like Shevek’s personal journey in *The Dispossessed*, it entails an attempt at a fundamental change in our frame of reference. As Gib Prettyman writes, “the real subject” of *Always Coming Home* “is our process of trying to find a way ‘into’ the Valley mind frame” (70). In the following, I want to highlight Le Guin’s strategies to achieve this goal, and how this particular mind frame is based largely on ecologically relevant Daoist thought.

By including Pandora as a guide, Le Guin embodies the reality principle Suvin sees as necessary to keep our imaginations grounded. She is the link between our world and this, and she reminds us of approaching the “quasi-human community” of utopia in a critical fashion (*Metamorphoses* 61). This is not in itself an original idea, but the difference between Pandora and the traditional utopian visitor is that she asks us to be critical not only of the utopia found within the boundaries of the text, but of the whole tradition preceding it. Pandora acknowledges that the idea of utopia is a dangerous one, since it entails starting anew. In one of the Pandora sections, Le Guin offers a justification of the apocalyptic backdrop to the Kesh utopia, which she, as a writer, is responsible for: “Have I burned all the libraries of Babel? . . . If they burn, it will be all of us that burned them . . . even if we don’t burn it, we can’t take it with us . . . there’s still too much to carry. It is a dead weight (*ACH* 160). She also emphasizes her role as a fellow outsider to this new world:

> Am I not a daughter of the people who enslaved and extirpated the peoples of three continents? Am I not a sister of Adolf Hitler and Anne Frank? Am I not a citizen of the State that fought the first nuclear war? Have I not eaten, drunk, and breathed
poison all my life, like the maggot that lives and breeds in shit? Do you take me for innocent, my fellow maggot, colluding Reader? (161)

It becomes apparent why she chose the name Pandora: all the evils in the world are out of the box. What remains constitutes the first piece of advice we are given in order to understand the Kesh utopia: “Prometheus . . . named it Hope . . . But I won’t mind if the box is empty—if all there is in it is some room, some time. Time to look forward, surely; time to look back; and room, room enough to look around . . . No hurry. Take your time (Le Guin *ACH*, 161). As readers, we are encouraged to leave behind our old ways and be patient in the meeting with radical difference. It becomes clear that we are, in Kesh terms, outside the world, and must learn to enter.

The second of the Pandora sections, a short piece in the style of nature writing called “Pandora Sitting by the Creek,” exemplifies this piece of advice. The whole passage is a minute description of the creek beneath the Kesh village of Sinshan. She sees the bony remains of a steer and “the tail feathers of a dead bird . . . moving slightly on the water” (Le Guin, *ACH* 104). The piece ends with an implicit comparison that resembles the thinking of the Kesh: “There are no fish in the water but there are waterskaters on it and many gnats, flies, and mosquitoes in the air. Above the floating dead bird gnats or small flies dance in a swarm. The people are dancing the Summer” (Le Guin, *ACH* 104). The Kesh mark the passing of time primarily by the seasons, which are celebrated with communal dances. Pandora’s musings indicate an ecological understanding of death not as something to be feared, but as an inevitable part of the natural cycle. The similarity between the gnats and small flies that are, like the people of the village, dancing, also shows a growing understanding of the Kesh mindset. The Kesh have the same word – the equivalent of “people” - for both humans and animals, thereby going a step further in avoiding categorical distinctions as compared to *The Dispossessed*. Pandora, like Shevek, begins to unbuild categorical walls of the mind.

The major breakthrough, however, is made in another section called “Pandora, Worrying About What She Is Doing, Finds a Way into The Valley through the Scrub Oak”. The detailed, observational style is the same, but this time Pandora initially shows herself more clearly as a stranger to nature. She actively engages the reader to “look”: 
Look how messy this wilderness is. Look at this scrub oak . . . This shrub isn’t good for anything and this ridge isn’t on the way to anywhere . . . It’s a mess. It’s littered. It has no overall shape. Most of the stems come up from one area, but not all; there’s no center and no symmetry. A lot of sticks sticking up out of the ground a little ways with leaves on some of them—that describes it fairly well. The leaves themselves show some order, they seem to obey some laws, poorly (Le Guin, *ACH* 260)

Her first thought is to judge it up toward aesthetic categories that are essentially human constructs, as well as to berate its uselessness and inability to obey laws – another human category - more than “poorly”. She then gets the impulse to count them, before she realizes the absurdity of applying human concepts of order to the wilderness:

> numbers are wrong. They are in error. You don’t count scrub oaks. When you can count them, something has gone wrong . . . The chaparral is like atoms and the components of atoms: it evades. It is innumerable. It is not accidentally but essentially messy (Le Guin, *ACH* 261)

In understanding the evading character of the chaparral, and accepting its “essential” messiness, Pandora echoes David L. Hall’s descriptions of the Daoist worldview as one that privileges deference over reference. Through Pandora, Le Guin explicitly addresses the trouble with language:

> This thing is nothing to do with us. This thing is wilderness. The civilised human mind’s relation to it is imprecise, fortuitous, and full of risk. There are no shortcuts. All the analogies run one direction, our direction (*ACH* 261)

Our desire to make sense of the world around us leads us to endow meaning to it in strictly human terms, whether analogical or utilitarian: “Analogies are easy; the live oak, the humble evergreen, can certainly be made into a sermon, just as it can be made into firewood. Read or burnt” (Le Guin, *ACH* 261). The shift toward a Daoist perception happens when Pandora realizes that the scrub oak “isn’t here to be read, or burnt,” but just to *be* (Le Guin, *ACH* 261). As David L. Hall writes, “in her attempts to understand others . . . the Daoist uses language in such a way as ‘to give way to’ encountered items – that is, to let them be themselves” (249). Prettyman has noted that the scrub oak section of *Always Coming Home* closely resembles the
Zhuangzi story “The Mountain Tree” (70). In this story, a tree is “able to live out the years Heaven gave it” because of its “worthlessness” (Burton, Zhuangzi 156). Another passage in Zhuangzi echoes the language used by Le Guin to describe the scrub oak: “I have a big tree called a shu. Its trunk is too gnarled and bumpy to apply a measuring line to, its branches too bent and twisty to match up to a compass and square” (6). The teaching here exactly what Pandora realizes: the usefulness of the tree cannot be measured in human terms, only on its own. Its uselessness is a strength that allows it to unfold freely.

As the passage comes to a close, Le Guin emphasizes the temporary nature of the experience, as well as the difficulty of holding on to the understanding that the experience allows for:

It is casting a shadow across the page of this notebook in the weak sunshine of three-thirty of a February afternoon in Northern California. When I close the book and go, the shadow will not be on the page, though I have drawn a line around it; only the pencil line will be on the page. The shadow will be then on the dead-leaf-thick messy ground or on the mossy rock my ass is on now, and the shadow will move lawfully and with great majesty as the earth turns (ACH 262)

The drawing of the shadow represents the memory of the temporary understanding, which can so easily be forgotten. Here, by removing the observer from the picture, Le Guin places the experience into an understanding of the larger system of nature. The passage ends with a plea to the reader to do the same:

The mind can imagine that shadow of a few leaves falling in the wilderness; the mind is a wonderful thing. But what about all the shadows of all the other leaves on all the other branches on all the other scrub oaks on all the other ridges of all the wilderness? If you could imagine those even for a moment, what good would it do? Infinite good (ACH 262)

Le Guin implies that the Kesh utopia has managed to implement the Daoist aesthetic understanding of natural order on a social level. In employing Pandora as a “guide” for the reader in the search for an understanding of the Kesh worldview, however, she needs to start with the local, direct experience of nature. Like Hall, Roger T. Ames sees the Daoist
understanding of natural order as fundamentally aesthetic in orientation, and therefore “not linear, or disciplined toward some given end” and “not expressible in the language of completion” (Ames 277-8). Ames also emphasizes the “radical embeddedness of the Daoist experience,” which means that “one can never extricate oneself from one’s particular perspective” (278-9). Because of its local, experiential focus, Daoism cannot provide a universal, ready-made set of environmental ethics. It is partly for this reason that Le Guin is so dependent on bringing the reader along.

In the back of the book, Le Guin has included three poems by Pandora that function as an epitaph to Pandora’s journey. Here it becomes clear that she has gained full insight into the Kesh way of thinking. The poems also neatly sum up the main Daoist teachings apparent in the novel. In the first one, Pandora uses the Daoist imagery of water to describe the Kesh utopia, as opposed to the traditional “Tower built with stones of will / on the rock of law”:

We live with the animals and plants,
eating and praising them, and die with them;
their way is our way made mindful,
a river running over stones and rocks.

We live in the low places like water and shadows (Le Guin, ACH 517)

Water becomes the symbol for fitting into the natural environment rather than imposing oneself on it. Like the useless scrub oak, it endures by finding its rightful place in the overall ecological system. The second poem reiterates the importance of finding a place within the system of nature. Its title, “Newton Did Not Sleep Here,” shows how Le Guin compares this worldview to the Western Enlightenment values, while trying to bridge these two strands of thought: “What are the bridges between us? / Wind, the rainbow, / mist, still air.” (ACH 518). It is implied that the natural world is the common ground, but the ways of relating to it are different. Pandora proposes that in order to get closer to utopia “We must learn to step on the rainbow” and “learn how to walk on the wind” (Le Guin, ACH 518). The Daoist embeddedness in the world is again brought to the fore. The third poem diagnoses the Enlightenment mentality as “singleminded” and as missing the sense of wholeness characteristic of the Kesh/Daoist worldview: “Here / is no away to throw to. / A way with no
away” (Le Guin, *ACH* 518). The Daoist environmental sensibility is at its most visible in the imaginative restructuring of how we conceive our relationship to nature. Its radical embeddedness in the overall cosmic landscape means that nature cannot be seen mechanically, as something outside of us. For this reason, James Miller sees Daoism as “neither anthropocentric, cosmocentric, nor biocentric” but as simply recognizing “the reality of the interdependent transformations of these three threads” (“Vital Tradition” 410). The paradox of stewardship that Lawrence Buell points out in Leopold and others’ ecocentrism is thus not conceivable in the Daoist logic.

Pandora’s visit to the Kesh utopia functions much like Shevek’s journey in the sense that the reader is provided with a close look at an individual’s process of understanding central Daoist teachings. Some major differences, however, can be found in the comparative unambiguousness of this utopia from the last and the way in which Le Guin insists on a collaborative vision. “Drink this water of the spring,” Le Guin writes, “rest here awhile, we have a long way yet to go, and I can’t go without you” (*ACH* 361). *Always Coming Home* does not purport to provide any clear-cut answers, but the Pandora sections all seem to imply to the reader that there is a more subtle utopian vision to be found in studying its people, who live according to the teachings of philosophical Daoism in a way that foregrounds the environmentalist content of the tradition. As well as being the main sustenance of natural life, the river running through the landscape, whose springs “were the most centrally sacred places to the people of the Valley,” can be seen as a symbol of the Dao itself. (Le Guin, *ACH* 41). The proximity of the people to the river indicate a lifestyle in accordance with the Way. Echoing Pandora’s advice to the reader, Le Guin writes about the Laozi; “Of all the deep springs, this is the purest water. To me, it is also the deepest spring” (*Tao* x).
4 Conclusion

In depicting these utopian worlds, Le Guin clearly recognizes one important fact; that the so-called environmental crisis we find ourselves in is not really a crisis of the environment, but of human beings and how we relate to the world around us. Both of these novels display ways of living that differ dramatically from our current progress and growth-based capitalist world, and these visions are largely based on Daoist sensibilities.

Le Guin’s utopian fictions come with a cosmological background perspective that presupposes a sense of embeddedness in the world. Daoism’s local focus is what provides this. As Roger T. Ames explains, the world is described “in terms of centripetal centers that extend outward as radial circles” but the experience of it is always rooted in one’s particular position (279). The radical rootedness of this worldview is reinforced by *wu wei*, the mode of action typical of philosophical Daoism that advises a degree of deference in the meeting with all other lifeforms. What Daoist environmentalism in Le Guin’s novels adds up to is a milder approach than the one currently in play; one that seeks to blend in with the natural world rather than to impose human wants upon it. As Le Guin speaks of the Kesh while seeking to uncover this “archeology of the future”: “They owned their Valley very lightly, with easy hands. They walked softly here” (*ACH* 13-4).

In both novels, Le Guin supplements her utopian world-building with what James Bittner has labelled a “romance-genre” narrative style. Shevek and Pandora both pursue a deeper, personal understanding of the background perspective informing the utopias in each novel. Shevek attains a more comprehensive idea of Odo’s teachings in his journey to Urras and back, while Pandora gradually understands the initially alien outlook of the Kesh in *Always Coming Home*. Le Guin’s use of Daoist teachings in the forming of the utopian societies’ worldview means that each personal journey is a quest to understand and implement these teachings on the individual level. Like the scrub oak section, for example, shows, Le Guin stays closer to the original Daoist textual material of the Zhuangzi and the Laozi in *Always Coming Home* than she does in *The Dispossessed*.

Like the editors of *Daoism and Ecology* conclude, the radical embeddedness of the Daoist experience within its cosmological landscape can provide a useful new way of looking at environmental ethics. As Lawrence Buell has shown, ecocentrism is a problematic ethical position because of its dependence on the continuous human assessment on the overall health
of any ecology. In some ways, Daoism, as employed by Le Guin, sidesteps this paradox. From the Western perspective, Daoism represents a refusal of the philosophical approach of separation inherited from the Enlightenment. Le Guin’s utopias insist on wholeness, and their counterparts are always characterized by what she labels “singlemindedness”; a fundamental tendency to divide experience into smaller parts. Her treatment of environmental issues is affected by this perspective in that she refuses to treat environmental degradation as an isolated phenomenon. This refusal forms part of a fundamentally different outlook presented through the Daoist cosmological terms of yin and yang, which upholds balance as the ideal condition. In Le Guin’s yin utopian program, she utilizes this framework to categorize human tendencies in very broad terms, which places capitalist modes of production, environmental degradation, linearity and hierarchy in the same yang basket. While this might seem heavy-handed, it does entail for a more coherent understanding of the inherent links between social justice, capitalist critique and the treatment of the world we live in. It also it opens up for a more ecological view of the world, in which one part of the system cannot be seen as entirely separate from another. The vagueness of Daoist language in this context is therefore a real strength.

Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall’s remarks about the use of language in Daoism highlight certain aspects of Le Guin’s use of the tradition on a phenomenological level. Ames sees Daoism’s aesthetic orientation toward concepts of order in nature as one of the reasons for the lack of conclusive, analytical language in the Laozi and the Zhuangzi. Philosophical Daoism prioritizes narrative; how to relate to nature is more important than how to understand or classify nature. The cosmological difference of embeddedness versus separation underscores this point. David L. Hall elaborates on this point in his writings on the distancing qualities of the referential language of the Western tradition. The groundless, allusive metaphors of Daoist language express relatedness rather than separation. In Always Coming Home especially, it becomes clear that Le Guin is acutely aware of this aspect of Daoism, and Pandora’s role is partly to explain this particular point to the reader. In The Dispossessed, a similar attitude is noted briefly by Shevek and Takver in their remarks about the wonder of relatedness in the much larger biosphere of Urras. The Daoist attitude of deference toward the world helps to undermine anthropocentrism, as well as to ascribe intrinsic value to nature. In this sense, the phenomenological position one can draw from Le Guin’s use of Daoism resembles that of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in the importance
placed on dwelling. It differs, however, in the way it is grounded in a cosmological understanding that is unique to this tradition.

Le Guin utilizes several didactic devices to involve the reader in this reconfiguration of how to relate to the natural world. The cognitive estrangement involved in exhibiting utopian societies whose ways of relating to the world is based on other models (language, cosmology), is supplemented in Le Guin’s novels by a more direct approach than what is usual in the SF genre. By asking the reader to join her in completing the utopian pattern, Le Guin realizes that any individually conceived utopian vision has inherent flaws. It makes it stay to close to the overall tradition of “blueprint” utopian literature she has so vehemently criticized. The Pandora figure in *Always Coming Home* goes as far as to suggest to the reader that the direct experience of nature should act as the starting point of any set of environmental ethics. From there, as Pandora shows, we must use the mind’s imaginative capabilities in order to discover a more universal idea of how the same ecological workings take places also beyond our immediate surroundings. The focus on showing the significance of central Daoist teachings Le Guin has in both novels puts her close to philosophical Daoism also in tone and manner. The individual journeys function as teaching stories that explain both the Daoist content and its power to change our outlook significantly.

The wholeness that is so characteristic of Le Guin’s utopian societies may also indirectly be helpful in regarding environmentalism from a political point of view. In an essay about the role of environmentalism in the present-day American consciousness, Rebecca Solnit notes a large-scale fragmentation that has led to a “compartmetnalization” of environmentalist thought and literature. Using the example of Thoreau, Solnit sees the valorization of his position as an ascetic, isolated figure as

a microcosm of a larger partition in American thought, a fence built in the belief that places in the imagination can be contained. Those who deny that nature and culture, landscape and politics, the city and the country are inextricably interfused have undermined the connections for all of us (972-3).

By not addressing environmentalism specifically or even directly in either of these novels, Le Guin emphasizes its fundamental role and the obvious connections between this issue and all
others. Peter Stillman has similarly noted on *The Dispossessed* that Le Guin, in her treatment of temporality, “seeks to recognize that time is an aspect of . . . the full system of human life” (65). In her utopian worldviews, everything must be understood as forming part of the bigger picture. The relationship between human beings and the natural world is therefore firmly a part of the overall outlook of interconnection. Solnit’s reflections show how our tendency to isolate experience undermines our ability to treat our environment as what it is; the fundament of all human life. The common way of seeing issues of environmentalism as just another political aspect to be reckoned with is arguably one of the reasons for the severe lack of any large-scale mobilization in our times of environmental crisis. Le Guin does not shy away from the occasional seething critique of our present way of living, but more importantly, she offers alternative perspectives through which to perceive it. The vision of wholeness is one that is effective on several levels.

In its priority of wholeness, relatedness and embeddedness, the Daoist framework utilized by Le Guin contests many normalized conceptions of the relationship between human beings and nature. The question remains whether Daoism’s local focus and cautious ways, and not a more urgent approach, is what is needed today. In the current situation, there does not seem to be much time left to pursue things carefully and cautiously. I would suggest, however, that Le Guin’s utopian fictions have much to offer in reconfiguring individual perceptions of this relationship by showcasing what it might look like from within the cosmic landscape of Daoism. The utopian societies in *The Dispossessed* and *Always Coming Home* portray ways of living with a different background perspective from that of growth-based capitalism that will come across as desirable to a lot of readers.
Works cited


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