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Broken Loose: Knowledge and Ideology in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

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Abstract

The world we live in, as well as the literature we consume, is dominated by ideology. The philosophical question of whether or not 'knowledge' is simply a facet of our ideological constraints is important to how we engage with art, whether in the form of literature or otherwise. This paper examines the relationship of knowledge to ideology, both in a literary and a philosophical sense, by reading John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in conversation with Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and dissecting the ideological settings of each text, how knowledge is symbolized, and how the two concepts govern one another. In studying the remarkably similar narratives that Milton and Le Guin develop—with both repositioning a contemporary ideological conflict in a fantasy-style setting—it becomes clear that both share a preoccupation with the inner workings of ideology and how knowledge relates to it. Specifically, both use their fantastical setting as a background of ideological conflict, conflict disrupted or altered by the 'acquisition' of knowledge in some form. Using Foucault's theoretical framework of the 'episteme' as put forward in *The Order of Things*, it becomes clear that knowledge is not wholly defined by ideological conditioning but that, instead, the two ideas function in tandem with one another to create a sense of reality. Thus, literature—fantastical literature in particular—can be read as an exploration of both of these interlinked concepts and an expounding upon the influence of ideology in our own perceptions of reality. In considering knowledge and ideology not as equatable, but codependent, we can better understand how such concepts can interact with literature and the realities it constructs.

Broken Loose: Knowledge and Ideology in Paradise Lost and The Dispossessed

The concept of knowledge is a complex and a dangerous thing, particularly in the context of the fictional worlds of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. In fact, though written from and about vastly different worlds, the seventeenth century epic and the seventies sci-fi novel share a preoccupation with knowledge, and how it operates in the midst of ideological conflict. Reading the texts in conjunction with one another can unearth some of the intricacies and difficulties in the relationship of knowledge to ideology, and help to determine whether the two words are simply variations of the same idea. This line of thought—that knowledge is fundamentally a product of ideology, and that what we consider 'knowledge' or 'truth' is merely a reflection of a dominant set of beliefs—is lauded by many Marxist scholars, but is inherently problematic. A more nuanced interpretation of this relationship can be found by reading *Paradise Lost* and *The Dispossessed* not only in conversation with one another, but also with the theory of the 'episteme,' or preconceived space in which knowledge is ordered or imagined, put across by Foucault in *The Order of Things*. My argument is that in neither poem nor novel is knowledge equatable with ideology, but that in both texts the ideological backdrop serves as a kind of 'episteme' in which knowledge and thought must exist.

In making that argument, then, I must first delve into the similarities between Le Guin's novel and Milton's poem, and how those similarities impact the ideological conflicts outlined in each text. Perhaps the most obvious parallel lies in the titles—after all, to 'lose' paradise in the case of Adam and Eve is to be 'dispossessed' of Eden, stripped of their place in God's presence. Satan too, the fallen angel to whom the title of *Paradise Lost* could allude, is dispossessed of his paradisiacal birthright in Heaven and cast down to Hell, where his role as "possessor" is met with far less

contentment than he would have us believe. In the same passage that contains his famous assertion that it is “Better to reign in hell than serve in Heaven,” he mourns openly for “happy fields / Where joy forever dwells.” Every word is tinged with the same bitterness that permeates most of his poetic speech. Bitterness at his dispossession forms the backbone of Satan’s antagonism with God—it is the reason that he sets out to destroy man in the first place (Milton, 1996, p. 645–656). This antagonism is the principal ideological conflict in Milton’s poem, a conflict between God’s dominant or ruling ideology—God who is for Milton unchallengeable, the “Almighty Father”—and Satan, who God himself designates the “Adversary” (Milton, 1996, p. 56–82). For most of the poem there is a kind of constructed stability in this conflict; God and his ideology consistently preside over events in all three worlds of Heaven, Hell, and Earth, while Satan’s attempts at subversion remain, on the whole, fruitless. There is, however one incident that disrupts—for reasons I will explain more fully in a later section—this status quo: the ‘original sin’ of Eve, her consumption of the fruit of knowledge. In this sense then, *Paradise Lost* can be read as a tale about how the acquisition of knowledge can unsettle the dynamic in a struggle between two opposing ideologies.

A similar reading is possible for *The Dispossessed*. Perhaps fittingly given its cryptic subheading, the title of Le Guin’s novel is deliberately ambiguous. It is never made explicit who ‘the dispossessed’ are; the anarchists of the planet Anarres are, in fact, literally without possession (a quality that Shevek appreciates profoundly by the end of the book, “His hands [...] empty, as they had always been,”) but that is not the only reading available. The protagonist, Shevek, is an individual who is also dispossessed over the course of the novel, of his uneasy place on Anarres and its twin planet, Urras. This loss is not, as in *Paradise Lost*, a result of a physical deprivation of a ‘place’, but disillusionment on Shevek’s part with what Foucault calls the “consolation” of both utopias. His assertion close to the end of the novel that “Hell is Urras” (Le Guin, 1974, p. 347) is striking for its resentment, so like Satan’s after his expulsion from Heaven, and from its resemblance to his earlier comments about the disintegration of Anarresti society (Le Guin, 1974, p. 331). His increasing discomfort with both planets sets up the two utopias as sides of an ideological binary, over which irreconcilability supposedly reigns. As in *Paradise Lost*, it is knowledge, specifically Shevek’s pursuit of knowledge, that throws off the ideological balance of this conflict. He embarks on an unprecedented interplanetary journey—ostensibly to develop his so-called ‘theory of simultaneity’—a new way of interpreting time, but concurrently to upset the preconceived social order:

“Things are... a little broken loose, on Anarres. [...] It was our purpose all along—our Syndicate, this journey of mine—to shake up things, to stir up, to break some habits, to make people ask questions. To behave like anarchists!” (Le Guin, 1974, p. 384)

Shevek’s quest to understand and develop his theory sets him out on his odyssey, and has a dramatic effect on the ideological foundations of not only Urrasti society, but of his own home planet. He describes it in terms of a physical break, a rupture in previously fast-held beliefs, thus conveying the sheer magnitude of the effects that ‘knowledge’ has had on an ideological structure. Shevek is able to alter the way ideology works in his universe through the pursuit of knowledge.

Not only, then, do Shevek’s actions therefore parallel Eve’s in *Paradise Lost*, but his theory can also be read as a parallel to the forbidden fruit of Eden itself. Both fruit and theory serve as a means to depict the decidedly abstract concept of ‘knowledge’ in a more concrete way. In fact, in a vaguely Žizekian sense, each comes to symbolize both a frustrating *lack* of knowledge—the presence of the fruit in Eden a constant reminder to Eve of her ignorant state, the bare bones of Shevek’s theory functioning in the same way—and the eventual ‘realization’ of said knowledge. Both, too, are shrouded a kind of moral, ideological haze. The fruit has been denied Eve by God, the ruling ideological power: “But of the tree whose operation brings knowledge of good and ill [...] shun to taste,” he tells Adam (Milton, 1996, p. 323–327). The act of eating the fruit is tied to a code of morality imposed by a higher power; “good and ill” are concepts defined in terms of God’s accepted ideology. Thus, the fruit, and by proxy knowledge, are depicted as already embroiled in a system of philosophical beliefs and moral assumptions that inhibit Eve’s ability to eat freely. While *The*

Dispossessed's portrayal of knowledge is characteristically more ambivalent—it is, for example, not “something that [Shevek] could possess” (Le Guin, 1974, p. 280) in the same way that Eve possesses and claims the fruit—it is cloaked in the same moral conundrum. Shevek spends a vast majority of the chapters in the book focused on Urras dealing with the moral implications of his theory, and cannot make peace between his Anarresti sense of morality, in which the gifting of ideas is paramount, and the profit-based climate that he is in, a climate populated by men like Saio Pae the “filthy profiteering liar,” as denounced by Shevek (Le Guin, 1974, p. 276). His academic abilities are infringed upon by his increasing moral dilemma, and like Eve, he finds himself unable to extract himself from the web of ideology that he exists in.

This moral discomfort is perhaps best exemplified by the ties that both the fruit and the theory of simultaneity have to sex and shame. This connotation is unsurprising where the fruit of knowledge is concerned—‘to know’ after all is still used in its biblical sense, and in *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve’s consumption of the fruit is immediately followed by their first foray into lust—“of their mutual guilt the seal” (Milton, 1996, p. 1034-1044). This carnal desire is followed by acute shame, rooted in the aforementioned moral code imposed by God. Shevek’s journey to knowledge, on the other hand, is preceded (rather than followed by, as in the case of Adam and Eve) by a deeply unsettling sexual encounter with an Urrasti woman, Vea—one that is entangled in and warped by the clashing moral systems of Urras and Anarres’ ideological backgrounds (Le Guin, 1974, p. 230)—and it is in the throes of shame over this encounter that he is able to finally refine his theory. “Shame—the sense of vileness and of self-estrangement—was a revelation” (Le Guin, 1974, p. 272). This juxtaposition between shame and revelation emphasizes the role that shame or moral guilt, a facet of ideological constraints, plays in the development of knowledge, and also highlights the idea that knowledge inherently exists in amongst a system of varying ideologies.

The idea that knowledge must by definition coexist with ideology is interesting in relation to both *Paradise Lost* and *The Dispossessed*, since in both texts a character is faced with the philosophical or theoretical proposition that knowledge can transcend ideology—a proposition that in both cases turns out to be misleading. If we read the conversation between Eve and Satan-as-Serpent in Book IX as a kind of battle over control and understanding of language (a battle for knowledge, in other words) as Leonard does, then the culmination of that conversation—Eve’s eating of the fruit—can be read as an attempt to triumph over the serpent, over Satan’s ideological constraints. At the same time, the Devil himself promises her:

“[...] that in that day
Ye eat thereof your eyes, that seem so clear
Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then
Opened and cleared, and ye shall be as Gods
Knowing both good and evil as they know.” (Milton, 1996, p.705-709)

The promise that Eve will, after eating the fruit, become as God, and that she will be able to for herself know true “good and evil” is an enticing one, because it promises to free her from the ideological restrictions under which she has always lived. However, Milton’s idea of ‘free choice’—a concept that *Paradise Lost* tries very hard to reconcile with divine omnipotence—fits the model of what Žižek calls “a paradoxical point of *choix forcé*,” in which under a communal ideology a “wrong” choice, made freely, can result in the denial of freedom altogether. Thus, Eve’s supposedly free choice to ‘defy’ remains caught in the existing ideological conditions of her world—in simpler terms, God’s ideology rules on, in spite of her attempts to transcend it. Her attempt is even met with a considerable degree of violence—even excepting the harshness of the “judgement” that God pronounces on each individual involved, the serpent as well as Adam and Eve (Milton, 1996, p. 174, 192, 197), there is the violence of death, made inevitable, if not imminent, by God’s word. Death’s speech upon entering Paradise is one of the most disturbing in the poem, ending with the assertion that “[...] here, though plenteous, all too little seems / To stuff this maw, this vast unhidebound corpse” (Milton, 1996, p. 600-601). The violence in death is unreserved, and though perhaps not as explicit as that enacted in *The Dispossessed*, where corpses are “too close pressed to fall” at a

thwarted Urrasti protest (Le Guin, 1974, p. 301), it is proof of the manner in which the ideological status quo is reinforced through violent means.

In a similar vein, Shevek begins his journey in *The Dispossessed* under the impression that he, too, can somehow rise above the ideological disputes of his universe and reconcile the tensions between planets through developing his knowledge (Le Guin, 1974, p. 378). Like Eve, he finds the idea appealing, and like Eve he finds it impossible to fulfill said intention. He recognizes what Foucault argues about the nature of knowledge and thought, that it cannot be taken outside of its context, that to do so renders it “unthinkable.” In spite of his earlier aspirations, Shevek admits: “My society is also an idea. I was made by it.” (Le Guin, 1974, p. 345) Shevek understands that he has been formed by the ideologies (even the language, if you accept the perspective of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) of his society, and to transcend that is beyond him. His work, then, his theory, his knowledge, must exist within the context of his ideology; his ideas must be superimposed onto the ideological ‘space’ that preexists his own understanding.

It would be simple here, then, to assume that knowledge can only be used to support and promote a dominant ideology. Especially in the context of *Paradise Lost*, the pursuit of knowledge seems to have very little effect on the predominance of one ideology over another. However, I would argue that whilst the knowledge ‘acquired’ in both *Paradise Lost* and *The Dispossessed* has to exist within the confines of an ideological *episteme*, it is possible for that *episteme* to shift collaterally with that knowledge. Leonard makes the argument that in *Paradise Lost*, Milton deliberately uses language to represent a changed state of affairs after the Fall—that in Eden, he uses words in their ‘uncorrupted’ or “Adamic” state, whose connotations change drastically after the seduction of Adam and Eve. In the same way, the whole epicenter of knowledge and understanding shifts once the fruit has been eaten; whether for ‘good or ill,’ Adam and Eve leave the garden with a deeper and more developed philosophical sense of the way that ideologies work. There is, in the final lines of the poem, a likely unintentional implication that the ideological set-up of Eden will not continue on unopposed; “Providence” is reduced to a “guide” whilst Adam and Eve go on with the world and their choices “all before them” (Milton, 1996, p. 646-649). Knowledge has become not a reinforcement of what is already dominant, but an understanding, from within a presupposed ideological context, of how that ideology functions and conflicts with other, subversive beliefs.

The Dispossessed ends with a similar suggestion that ideological binaries, so definite throughout the novel, are not entirely permanent. The lines between worlds have very much become blurred, in their physical nature as well as their ideologies, and that disintegration of binaries coincides with an understanding on Shevek’s part about how the ideologies of Urras and Anarres can be not transcended, but understood. The “slight tremor [...] of excitement, of hope” in a newly introduced ‘Hainishman’ intending to travel to Anarres replicates a more general sense of hope at the end of the novel; hope that with deeper knowledge and understanding, ideologies can perhaps coexist—for exist they must—peacefully. Knowledge must exist in a state of permanent revolution, in order to ensure freedom and evolve in a codependent state with ideology, constant change appropriately being one of the conditions of the *episteme* outlined by Foucault. Essentially, in *The Dispossessed*, knowledge acts not as a freedom from ideology, nor simply as a stagnant variation of a ruling ideology, but a moving, shifting understanding of how ideologies can work and exist together.

In neither Milton’s poem, nor in Le Guin’s novel, is knowledge the same thing as ideology. The ideologies of the book and poem are not machines, churning out ‘appropriate’ forms of knowledge on a whim; instead both knowledge and ideology are presented as innately codependent, working in parallel with one another in order to drive characters and societies forward. As two interlinked philosophical concepts, they function not in antagonism, but in synchronization. Ideology acts as an *episteme*, a space for knowledge to exist and develop and reform in a way that would be impossible outside of that preconceived context. Essentially, the two ideas, while different, reflect one another; like Urras and Anarres, or God and Satan, it is impossible to imagine one without the other.

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