The Morality of Creation: Dostoevsky and William James in Le Guin's "Omelas"

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Ursula K. Le Guin firmly asserts that, at the time she was writing "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," she had forgotten Dostoevsky and remembered only William James. "The fact is, I haven't been able to re-read Dostoevsky, much as I loved him, since I was twenty-five, and I'd simply forgotten he used the idea. But when I met it in James's 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,' it was with a shock of recognition."[1] We are, however, entitled to be sceptical, and, as D. H. Lawrence suggests, to trust the tale instead of the teller. Lawrence's advice, in fact, has a special relevance to Le Guin's fable, a tale that involves and implicates the reader in the telling, and one in which the reader and narrator, just as surely as the characters in the story, are on trial as moral agents.

In presenting a country where universal joy—perfect, intelligent, and mature— depends on the confinement and deprivation of one innocent child, Le Guin is indicting her reader and her own narrator, who work together to construct the hideous moral universe of Omelas. Although this universe has parallels in the writings of both William James (whom Le Guin remembers) and Dostoevsky (whom she thinks she has forgotten), Le Guin goes beyond their formulations and beyond the moral-political lesson, usually assigned to her story, that "no society should rest on the misery of the unfortunate."[2] Her actual subject is the proper morality of art itself. A genuinely moral artist, Le Guin implies, would articulate a coherent universe in which connections and loyalties are possible, the sort of place envisaged by Le Guin in *The Dispossessed* as "a landscape inhabitable by human beings."[3] Omelas does not qualify, for reasons Dostoevsky, at least, would have understood.

William James's "certain lost soul," of course, was clearly useful to Le Guin as a starting point. There are several similarities. In "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," James writes (and Le Guin quotes):

> Or if the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost

> soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a specifical and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?[4]

The basic situation, for Le Guin and for James, is the promise of mass bliss in exchange for a unique torment.

In both cases, furthermore, people are held accountable for their response to the scapegoat only because they are able to formulate this response in full knowledge of the context. James says that our enjoyment of this happiness would be hideous because the bargain would be "deliberately accepted." Similarly, every child in Omelas is given the opportunity to see the scapegoat, at least once, and to understand why it has to suffer.

In both universes, finally, the decision to dissent seems to be based on something other than rational calculation. For James, the reason lies in "a specifical and independent sort of emotion"; the narrator of Omelas can offer no rational explanation at all of the sudden, silent, solitary march of the ones who walk away.

The passage in James appealed to Le Guin immediately; she says she felt a "shock of recognition" when she first read it. Certainly she found his anti-utilitarian position congenial. Le Guin and James agree that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should not be used as a moral criterion. (We recall the exchange between Rocannon and Mogien in Le Guin's *Rocannon's World:* "One man's fate is not important." "If it is not, what is?"[5]) The philosophical background of the passage in James, however, seems at first to clash with the spirit of Le Guin's story.

James offers his hypothetical situation as an example of a moral instinct or intuition—as distinct from a maxim, a habit, or a calculation—"an innate preference of the more ideal attitude for its own pure sake. The nobler thing *tastes* better, and that is all that we can say" (p.187). In Omelas, on the other hand, the nobler thing does not taste better; if it did, Omelas would be a ghost town. To reject the hideous bargain is, for James, the obvious and immediate thing to do; according to our narrator, however, to do so is "incredible" (p. 284). Le Guin's story, then, seems to refute the Jamesian assumption of an innate human decency; in Omelas, the mean and the vulgar are accepted as a necessary part of existence. The narrator would not understand William James, and vice versa.

By creating an unsympathetic, un-Jamesian narrator, who in turn creates an unsympathetic, un-Jamesian world, Le Guin makes the story much more than the political parable it at first appears to be. We are allowed, of course, to read the story according to the political interpretation; Le Guin herself encourages us to do so. Referring to James's essay in her introduction to her story, she writes: "The dilemma of the American conscience can hardly be better stated" (p. 276). The political interpretation is suggestive, but its value

is limited, particularly when we attempt to make connections between the story and the contemporary world. Do Americans enjoy perfect happiness? Even if they did, how could their happiness depend absolutely on the suffering of a scapegoat? And how could their rescue of a scapegoat bring all joy to an end? These questions are rhetorical, of course; the essay by James is not reducible to the sort of dogma that could provide concrete political answers.

The story is similarly complex and irreducible, whatever the writer may say about it after the fact. As we look more closely at the craft of the story, at the details, the language, the point of view, and even the grammar, we shall see not only that Le Guin has, on some level, remembered Dostoevsky, but also that she has defined, by negative example, the nature of artistic responsibility.

As we read "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," we are lectured, seduced, and importuned by a narrator who wants to make us hear, feel, see, and, above all, believe. We are asked to experience the music, the colors, the movement of a festival, which is characterized by the mingling of the generations and the joint participation of the human, the animal (horses), and the vegetable (flowers, meadows). The descriptions are evocative rather than clinical because, in the long third paragraph, we are politely requested to complete them: "Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all" (p. 278). Reality itself, it seems, requires permanent quotation marks. The inhabitants of Omelas may have mechanical marvels, or they may have none. "As you like it." The narrator at first believes that there are no drugs, but later explains that this first idea was wrong and "puritanical." The reader is invited to share in giving shape to Omelas. "If an orgy would help, don't hesitate." Observe the imperative mood: "Let [the nudes] join the processions. Let tambourines be struck. . . ." We might be hearing an echo of the divine fiat, an echo full of the intoxicated intensity of unlimited creation.

Unlimited? Not entirely. Sometimes the narrator implies that this society has objective reality, that it is possible to have definite knowledge about it, even if this knowledge is not fully accessible to the narrator or to us. "I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few" (p. 278). The description of the scapegoat (p. 281) contains both kinds of information, the factual and the optional. "It could be a boy or a girl" (optional). "It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten" (factual). "It is feebleminded" (factual). "Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect" (optional). (Observe the pronoun "it," which makes the child seem less than human, and hence more available for objective inspection.) Sometimes knowledge about Omelas is based on general principles. "I think that there would be no cars or helicopters; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people" (p. 278). As we read, though, we realize that even certain knowledge can be wrong; the people of Omelas "know that they, like the child, are not free." (The ones who freely walk away do not "know" that.) We are therefore entitled to treat as enigmatic a central statement of the narrator, called to our

attention by unusual syntax: "One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt" (p. 279). Maybe, maybe not. We do not, however, necessarily know everything that the narrator knows, although the narrator has tried most skillfully and persistently to implicate us in the creation of a have-it-your-way world.

Yet we ourselves are not entirely free. The narrator's invitation to us, of course, is fairly straightforward; we can take it or leave it. We can participate in the creation of Omelas, or we can walk away. The grammar of the story, however, traps us more subtly. The narrator begins with a description of the festival, in the past tense. As the description becomes more detailed and inventive, as the narrator adds detail and asks for our contributions, the mood becomes imperative and conditional. After the third paragraph, the story enters the present tense. We have become stuck in the story, to be set free only when a few of the people of Omelas stride out of the land and the story, headed for a country that the narrator cannot describe and that, consequently, may not "exist"—a hint that description confers reality, and that Omelas exists only by our leave.

The evil in the story, then, begins with its creator, a figure who is absent from James's formulation. It is this emphasis that leads me to remember the Dostoevsky whom Le Guin has forgotten. There are other reminders, too. To begin with, Le Guin has replaced James's "certain lost soul," a being of indeterminate age, with the young child of Ivan Karamazov's conversation with his brother Alyosha.[6] Le Guin also expands James's abstract "lonely torture" into a painfully concrete picture, similar to Ivan Karamazov's, of isolation, malnutrition, mental torment, and filth. Both artists, in fact, give us not only a philosophical formulation, but (raw) flesh and (clotted) blood. More importantly, both Le Guin and Dostoevsky provide a broader context for the situation James presents as a free-floating hypothesis. For Ivan, the central bargain, the payment for mass happiness with a child's tears amounts to an indictment of God, who has created a universe Ivan declines to inhabit:

> And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. . . .And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket. (p. 226)

For James, the hideous bargain is a given, to be accepted or rejected. For Ivan, though, Someone is responsible for the existence of the bargain. There is Someone to Whom one can return one's ticket. When Ivan walks away from Omelas, he knows to Whom he should say goodbye.

At the end of the conversation, he refines the bargain and asks his brother, a deeply religious man, to render judgment on the Designer of the bargain and on the parties involved:

> "...Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy...but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one living creature...and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?"...
>
> "No, I wouldn't consent," said Alyosha softly.
>
> "And can you admit the idea that men for whom you are building it would agree to accept their happiness on the foundations of the unexpiated blood of a little victim? And accepting it would remain happy forever?"
>
> "No, I can't admit it...." (p. 226)

The architect of Omelas, then, is supremely guilty, and so are the inhabitants—or so Ivan would say. Something he knows there is *much* of in Omelas is guilt, and the culprits are several: those who remain in the land of joy after their glimpse of the scapegoat, the narrator who is creating the world in the very process of describing it, and the readers who are drafted to be partners in creation.

How can creators be guilty? Because, in the world of Le Guin's fiction, creation, like all acts of freedom and wizardry, entails moral responsibility. In *The Tombs of Atuan,* a young woman learns an important lesson: "Freedom is a heavy load, a great and strange burden for the spirit to undertake. It is not easy. It is not a gift given, but a choice made, and the choice may be a hard one."[7] To a large extent, Le Guin insists, the freedom of her own artistic creation lies in exploring her inner world: "[The character] exists, inside my head to be sure, but in his own right, with his own vitality. All I have to do is look at him. I don't plan him, compose him of bits and pieces, inventory him. I find him."[8] (The reference to "bits and pieces" sounds like an echo of the unnatural creation of Frankenstein's monster.)

The use of the subconscious, however, does not absolve one from accountability. In "Omelas," the world created is unfit for human habitation. The bargain on which it rests violates not only decency but logic. Why in hell or heaven should a child's suffering lead to anyone's happiness? The rationalization offered by the narrator—that the child makes the inhabitants aware of the "terrible justice of reality"—is a patent sophistry. To choose between torturing a child and destroying one's society (which includes other children) is a diabolical choice, not a human one.

Consider the crisis in *Sophie's Choice,* by William Styron: a member of the SS offers a prisoner the choice between two unacceptable (morally, psychologically) alternatives; a rejection of the choice offered, furthermore, amounts to the sum of the unacceptable alternatives. In a situation like this, evil is no longer banal. It becomes elegant. And in the creation of Omelas, an elegantly immoral, illogical universe, the mad artist replaces the Frankenstein, or the mad scientist, and becomes the new villain.

Let us hasten to distinguish between the narrator of the story and its author. Le Guin has written in persona on a number of occasions; in "Schrodinger's

Cat," "SQ," "The First Report of the Shipwrecked Foreigner to the Kandanh of Derb," *Very Far Away From Anywhere Else,* and large chunks of *The Left Hand of Darkness,* the first-person narrator is not speaking directly for the writer herself. If she identifies with anyone in our story, it is with the ones who walk away. (In her introduction to "The Day before the Revolution," she tells us that Odo, her heroine, was one of the ones who walked away.[9]) For that reason, the story comes to an end when they are introduced. Unable to tolerate the immoral universe created by the narrator, they walk straight out of the story.

Why don't they stay and fight? Why don't they play Samson and bring down their world in ruins around them? Because, after all, we need not stop the world when we have merely decided to get off. In *The Farthest Shores,* when the wizard Ged makes his escape, he frees his fellow slaves, but does not harm his enemies. He does not wish to be forced to act, he tells Arren. The apparently noble act may be a trap. His advice to a king (or any man), he says, would be: "My lord, do nothing because it is righteous or praiseworthy or noble to do so. . .do only that which you must do and which you cannot do in any other way."[10] To challenge Omelas might be righteous, but it would also require the challengers to acknowledge Omelas, thereby granting it a kind of sanction. In choosing exile instead, they pursue the limits of dissent.

The story itself can be seen as a similar act of dissent, a refusal to write stories that are rotten at the core. Le Guin says that she did not sit down to write a story about James's lost soul; to base a story on a diabolical premise would be wizardry at its most deadly. The wizard in question would be as guilty as the God condemned by Ivan Karamazov. Le Guin liberates her characters from the evil narrator by allowing them a different choice: either to function within the trap of an immoral fictional universe, or to vote (with their feet, not their fists) against it. And we, as readers, have the same choice, when we read this story and any other speculative fiction that allows us to build a brave new world.

When Margaret Fuller said "I accept the universe," Emerson tartly responded: "She'd better!" His retort is an over-simplification of an interesting problem. In "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," Le Guin makes the decision to embrace or decline the universe an intensely dramatic event. But beyond this fundamental choice, she also invokes the moral accountability of the creator of the fictional universe, a creator who also implicates us.

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NOTES

1. "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," *New Dimensions 3* (1973), rpt. in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 275-276. All subsequent citations refer to this edition, which includes introductory remarks by the writer.

2. X. J. Kennedy, Instructor's Manual to Accompany *An Introduction to Fiction,* Second Edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), p. 31.

3. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (1974; rpt. New York: Aovn, 1975), p. 268 (Ch. 10).

4. "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *International Journal of Ethics,* April, 1891, rpt. in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921), p. 188. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

5. *Rocannon's World* (New York: Ace, 1966), pp. 47, 154 (Chs. II, IX).

6. *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Constance Garnett, rev. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: Norton, 1976), pp. 217-227 (Part 5, Ch. IV, "Rebellion"). All subsequent citations refer to this edition and will appear in the text.

7. *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970-1971; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 157 ("Voyage").

8. "Dreams Must Explain Themselves," *Algol* 21 (1973), rpt. in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Fiction by Ursula K. Le Guin,* ed. Susan Wood (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979), p. 49.

9. *The Wind's Twelve Quarters,* p. 284.

10. *The Farthest Shore* (1972; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 75 ("Magelight").