

## MOSS ON THE NORTH SIDE

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Perhaps I should re-title this "Frost on the North Side". Suzle Tompkins called from Seattle the other day to inform us that it was snowing, and claimed that she had been lured to the Pacific Northwest under false pretenses.

"Don't be silly, Suzle. It never snows in Seattle. It's just your imagination."

"That's what everybody told us! Well, there's eight inches of imagination outside and it's still coming down!"

Meanwhile, it's been, shall we say, unseasonably cold up here (but clear -- which is quite fortunate as last November I watched the entire city of Vancouver grind to a halt over  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch of snow).

On to mailing comments:

LETTERS FROM A FLOATING WORLD (doug): Some more comments on linguistics. Although Whorf/Sapir offer evidence that language can influence your thoughts, and make certain paths easier or more difficult, it is still clear that with enough work you can express anything in any language -- by inventing or borrowing words if necessary (e.g. you are doubtless familiar with those English words *mana* and *taboo*; in BABEL-17, the Butcher, trying to express a concept he has no word for -- "I" -- invents a gestural substitute, namely thumping himself on the chest; Rydra soon teaches him the English for that concept; in Silverberg's TIME OF CHANGES the language uses convoluted euphemisms for that same concept which deters, but does not completely stop people from using it).

So, when you talk about Annares not having words for possession, and implying that "however Shevek and Takver think of themselves as a pair, they cannot, within the limitations of their language, think in terms of possession" -- well, I don't buy it. They have an epithet ("propertarian") which shows familiarity with the concept of possession, and at least one individual (Sabul) concerned with such propertarian pursuits as getting his name on papers.

Now, as to the use of "my and mine": As an experiment, I opened THE DISPOSSESSED at random, looking only for dialog in an Annares section. I always found a possessive almost immediately. Which means you have to accept either the largely ritual use of such words in English, or visualize what such phrases could possibly mean to the people speaking them (that is, what is the concept they are trying to communicate, and if you could spend a page translating, which LeGuin can't do in the middle of a novel, how would you do it). Some random examples (page numbers are from the hardcover edition, my italics) --

"The reality of our life is in love, in solidarity." (p. 54)

"What motivated Odo but an exceptional sensitivity to suffer 'ing -- her own and others'?" Bedap retorted. (p. 54)

"He was in terrible pain, mostly from his hands. I don't think he knew the rest of his body was all charred ..." (p.55)

"...I went and talked to them at Divlab and also read their project... All, for life, your sister, Takver." (p.227)

"Shevek: Physics off. on yr return. Sabul." (p.227)

Note that we have here 4 or 5 different speakers. Of course, you can blame it on faulty conceptualization by LeGuin, but I think (except possibly in the note from Takver), the possessives are just adjectives, to distinguish these nouns from other nouns, as the "red book, not the blue" does not have to call Mao to mind.



Your comments on art give me an excuse to work out a half-baked thought I threw into an earlier mailing, to wit, that better art communicates to a wider range of people. When artists, as you say, serve only their inner sense of truth, then they should (should in the sense of "it seems reasonable that they would be") be in touch with the most universal parts of themselves, parts they will share with, or which will resonate with, the rest of humanity. To the extent that the artistic artifact, whether painting, or song, or play (here we have linguistic/translation problems) can move people from very different cultures, to that extent can't you say that it is "true" or "good"?

Joseph Campbell had a theory in THE MASKS OF GOD: Apparently many organisms have instinctual responses to certain stimuli. Chickens react to the shadow of a chicken hawk with fear and flight even if they've never encountered one before; some species of moth is attracted to darker-colored moths, who are the acme of sexiness. It turns out, though, that we can make a cardboard silhouette which is far more frightening to a chicken than a real chicken hawk; we can make an artificial moth of a blackness surpassing anything natural pigment can produce, and our moths will flock to this Hollywood creation while their real-life mates languish.

Campbell's theory was that people, too, have instinctual responses to certain stimuli, which we can think of as Jungian archetypes. These could be biologically based instincts evolved for whatever purposes. Suppose that great artists can not only tap into these archetypes, but also produce artifacts that are "truer", cause a stronger response, than anything naturally occurring? Artifacts that are "realer" than whatever our ~~xxx~~ instincts evolved to deal with?

Perhaps in this context, if you are optimistic about human nature, you could say that good art must necessarily be moral, life-affirming, because otherwise it wouldn't be in harmony with our deepest instincts, and therefore less true to the artist's inner feelings. Of course, if you think people are essentially rotten ... And there is certainly a dark side to the human psyche, which could resonate to art that was powerful but "evil"; bad art if you will, in the political sense, but possibly still very true to the artist, still powerfully moving, still able to communicate across cultures ... Pick a definition -- where might it fail? I'm afraid that I can't go along with the naive statement of Mark Rudd, when he was asked about censorship after his return from Cuba -- "I don't see how any truly sensitive poet could be counter-revolutionary."

I'd like to think that any definition of "good" art, whether starting from inside the artist or from the response of the audience, would eventually come to point to the same body of work. After that, it's up to one's political theory to deal with "correct" versus "incorrect" art. But to me, speaking as audience, the ability to move others is crucial, and it's why, much as I love puns, I couldn't call them art -- and why a truly elegant piece of mathematics, as an abstract embodiment of pattern and harmony, can be art (but here again we have a translation problem).

I like Jeanne's point that the harmfulness of art depends a lot on who is perceiving it. Presumably, healthy individuals who found themselves affected by "evil" would use this information to better integrate their dark side into their personality, and therefore be better off, more protected if you will (e.g. a committed pacifist roused to a killing frenzy with regard to a fictional character in a book preaching war). On a less abstract level, once one ~~man~~ embodies the archetypes in specific forms, we can have very "dangerous" political propaganda, but the more specific and concrete it is, the more it can be dealt with on an intellectual level (and the danger I'd think would come from it giving people an excuse to persecute or whatever, rather than actually changing anyone's mind). Propaganda automatically limits its audience, I'd say.