

THE RECOVERY OF THE PAST IN URSULA K. LEGUIN'S *THE TELLING*

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This article aims to analyse Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Telling* and to highlight certain characteristics that make it an example of a critical dystopia. Moreover, it deals with the question of modification and erasure of both memory and the past as a means of control in repressive societies. Furthermore, it takes a closer look at the possibilities of challenging the centre of power by a retrieval of the forbidden past, language, texts and bodily practices. It also emphasises the importance of a dialogue and a collective struggle employed in this process, rather than an individual venture.

Keywords: critical dystopia, dialogue, language, memory, past, LeGuin

What is horrifying in totalitarian regimes is not only the violation of human dignity but the fear that there might remain nobody who could ever again bear witness to the past.

Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*

Utopia is supposed to be a perfection of a state, a place where all the desires and longings can be finally fulfilled. Dystopia is frequently described as a failed utopia, a place which became a realisation of our deepest fears and concerns. Instead of granting liberty and promoting free thinking, it is a space of surveillance and oppression. The ways to exercise power and impose order are manifold. Control over memory and the past is one of them. This article analyses Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Telling* and shows how the centre of power can be challenged by recovering the forbidden past and how in this way a space for a dialogue and a possible reconciliation is created.

The Telling is the story of Suttu, a Terran Envoy, who is sent to the planet Aka to observe and record its reality. Aka, once a world of rich culture, is now ruled by the Corporation whose main concern is scientific and technological progress. The past and its records have been destroyed and citizens are strictly monitored. However, in the course of her research Suttu discovers that the inhabitants of a remote provincial town of Okzat-Ozkat still speak the forbidden language and follow banned traditions. She is fascinated by their teachings and decides to try to help restore the past. At the end of the novel she manages to establish a multicultural dialogue which can be the first recognised step in the recovery of the lost past of Aka.

In the classical dystopia the state is the primary source of restrictive power. One of the main focuses of such texts is to display the mechanisms employed to exercise absolute control over the individual and to show how the regime maintains the status quo by the constant regulating and monitoring of citizens' lives. However, the final decades of the twentieth century saw a change in the mode of portraying power relations

in dystopian texts which resulted in the development of the critical dystopia (Moylan 1986: 10-12; Moylan 2000: 183-199; Baccolini and Moylan: 2003: 5- 8). Such changes may be seen as a reaction to the political situation after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the gradual disintegration of the Soviet Union and the consequent transformations in the political panorama. One of the most significant alterations in dystopia at the end of the twentieth century is the fact that the state is no longer the sole responsible for the control and exploitation of its citizens. It is replaced by various corporations and organisations. As Tom Moylan states, "the power of the authoritarian state gives way to the more pervasive tyranny of the corporation. Everyday life in the new dystopias is still observed, ruled, and controlled; but now it is also reified, exploited, and commodified. ... the corporation rules, and does so more effectively than any state, as its exploitive tentacles reach into the cultures and bodies of the people who serve it and who are cast aside by it" (2003: 135-136).

Planet Aka, portrayed in Le Guin's novel, once used to be a culturally rich world, where all types of written data played a crucial role in the everyday existence of its inhabitants. The texts were not only meant to be read in private but also to be narrated and listened to in public. This practice of *telling* formed the core of Aka's tradition and everyday life. When Sutti, a Terran observer, arrives at Aka, she discovers that the situation on the planet she is to describe has undergone a drastic change. It is run by the capitalist Corporation, whose main concern, apart from the total control of the population, is technological development at all costs. The Corporation also promotes consumerism and hard work. Their famous slogans are: "*Wealth is work and work is wealth!*" (Le Guin 2001: 70), "PURE SCIENCE DESTROYS CORRUPTION. UPWARD ONWARD FORWARD" (89).

This novel –like other critical dystopias– does not only discuss the ways in which the state or corporation function; it also explains why and how the oppressive regime came into being and how it can be challenged (Fitting 2003: 156). The motives for such a drastic change in the mode of life on Aka are revealed gradually as Sutti ventures on a trip to the distant rural regions. This journey develops into a retrieval of Aka's history and into a reconciliation of Sutti with her own past. She discovers that the history of both Aka and her home planet Terra, share many common traits and that both of them "are living the future of a people who denied their past" (11). The State Corporation on Aka and the Unists back on Terra set out to eradicate any written records which were incompatible with their own teaching. On Aka, all culture has been destroyed. The *umyazu*, counterparts of libraries, universities and temples, have been demolished and traditional ways of living, outlawed. Even the language has been altered to better serve the purposes of the Corporation. All this was done in the name of progress. "The government of this world, to gain technological power and intellectual freedom, had outlawed the past. ... To this government who had declared they would be free of tradition, custom, and history, all old habits, way, modes, manners, ideas, pieties were sources of pestilence, rotten corpses to be burned or buried. The writing that had preserved them was to be erased" (57). On Terra, because of the orthodox religious doctrine, the libraries, all book collections and archives had been blown up and burnt down. Two different planets, two distinct times, two seemingly different reasons, but the outcome was startlingly similar.

The Telling and other critical dystopias share the tendency to "move away from the classical dystopian privileging of the power of the state in favor of a focus on the extensive and intensive power of the economic-cultural system, and on the potential for resistance to it" (Moylan 2003: 137). The struggle of the villagers of Okzat-Ozkat to resist the domination of the Corporation is revealed to Sutti gradually and she finds it to

be peaceful, free from strife and violence. The retrieval and further spreading of past traditions and remaining faithful to the ways of their ancestors constitute the only alternative which gives them hope for a better future. Contrary to the protagonists of the classical dystopia who "do not get any control over history and the past, in the critical dystopia the recovery of the history is an important element for the survival of hope" (Baccolini 2003: 115).

The past can present danger for the ruling regime as it permits citizens to compare, analyse and realise that another mode of life was, and consequently, is possible. "All the beginnings contain an element of recollection" (Connerton 1989: 6) and thus the groups in charge of the new order try to ensure that any evaluation will end up being positive for them. Therefore, the past must be either modified or totally erased so that no such comparisons can take place. It has to be noted that "The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting" (Connerton: 12). The progress is valued above anything else by the Corporation on Aka. The measures to achieve this ideal are applied with crude consequence and determination. Gradually, everything that could constitute a threat is eradicated. Control over memory and past is one of the methods employed to achieve this state of affairs.

In her quest for a suppressed past Suttu has to abandon Dovza City, the capital of Aka and its centre of power, and search for the explanations and alternative narratives in the rural town of Okzat-Ozkat. She notices that the customs, behaviour and even the language of the people there differ significantly from the ways of the inhabitants of the capital. One of the first differences that struck her is the language used in the village. It is not the controlled and scientific language of the Corporation but a language full of prohibited words, poetic expressions and references to the past. The walls of some of the houses are covered with the old writing, which has been forbidden and thus is now forgotten and meaningless for the majority of Akans. To her surprise though, Suttu discovers that for some villagers these words are not devoid of significance. Moreover, they cherish and protect them. Before the cultural revolution, enforced by the Corporation, several languages and many dialects had existed on Aka. All of them used the same ideograms that were intelligible to all. This posed a great threat to the Corporation, as it enabled even the oldest texts to be re-read and understood with no effort at all. Thus, an alternative script, based on a different alphabet, was introduced. But here, in the mountainous village, far away from the urban civilisation, Suttu finds out that the children in their free time secretly learn the old script. The retrieval of this banned language and writing could be understood as their first step in the recovery of the past. The language of Akans differs significantly from any authoritarian discourse; it is "Not the Logos, the Word, but words. Not one but many, many" (133). The reality of Aka is "A world made of words." (118) and in order to recover its forgotten past and its genuine existence these forgotten words and the way of communication that allowed many interpretations, needed to be brought back to life.

The revival of this former language would make it possible for everyone to access and thrive on the knowledge preserved in the books from the old days. Although the majority of them had been destroyed in the purges of the cultural revolution, many were rescued and stored all over the mountainous regions and in the last great library on the Mountain Silong. There, people "stayed to read and study, to be with the books, to be in the caves full of being" (181). For the people of Aka all texts were worth preserving. As they did not treat their language as *the language*, the only one acceptable and correct, their quest to recover the past was not the pursuit of one holy book. Instead of one sacred text, Akans opted for various versions of many different texts. Suttu felt

bewildered. "No bible. No koran. Dozens of upanishadas, a million of sutras. Every maz gave her something else to read. ... countless texts, written, oral, both written and oral, many or most of them existing in more than one mode and more than one version. The subject matter of the tellings seemed to be endless, even now, when so much had been destroyed" (102). This plurality was exceptionally dangerous for the Corporation as it permitted a variety of interpretations undermining the authority of the centre. It promoted creative thinking, freedom of thought and a multiplicity of choices. Such a situation is less than desirable for any repressive regime.

The plurality of texts mirrored the religion-philosophy of Akans called *the Telling*. Although the aim of the rebels was the recovery of the past, in no way would it mean going back to something rigid and stiff. For Akans the people, their language and the world around them were all interdependent, inseparable and they nourished one another. They intended to explain it to Sutti: "We are not outside the world. ... We are the world. We're its language. So we live and it lives. You see? If we don't say the words, what is there in our world?" (133). Their culture was the culture of becoming, of palimpsests, of process and change. There was no one *word*, or one *book* and the concept of God did not exist either. Even the very word for God was absent in their language. There was "No creator, only creation. No eternal father to reward and punish, justify injustice, ordain cruelty, offer salvation. Eternity not an endpoint but a continuity. ... No hierarchy of Nature and Supernatural. No binary Dark/Light, Evil/Good, or Body/Soul. ... No heavens, no hells" (95). Such a philosophy of constant change was quite opposite to what the Corporation sought. Although it cherished progress, advances and growth were accepted only in the realm of technology, never spirituality and creative thought. They constructed a culture of stagnation, a static technological utopia and, like in any utopia, only a few were appropriate for this project. Contrary to the doctrine of the Corporation, Akan philosophy did not seek to persuade anyone, it did not assume to offer *the truth*. Rather, it offered "Glances, glimpses of sacredness. One was not asked to believe, only to listen" (97). Their system of beliefs was devoid of rules. Instead, it offered alternatives. It was an eternal, never-ending feast of possibilities and dialogue. Clearly, such an attitude was not welcome by the Corporation.

Not only written and spoken language but also the bodily expressions used in Okzat-Ozkat were different. In the cities, the Corporation forced its citizens to do gymnastics accompanied by loud music and shouting orders from the loudspeakers. It was aggressive, massive, abrupt and unnatural. It nourished only the body. In Okzat-Ozkat people secretly practised tai-chi-like exercises. They followed the natural rhythm of breathing and were performed slowly, to the sounds of peaceful wordless murmur. As Sutti notes, "They felt as if they had a meaning in them" (70). The influence of the Corporation over the bodily practices of the citizens of Aka is significant as, according to Paul Connerton, "In habitual memory the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body" (Connerton 1989: 72). Every day, each of us performs many movements unconsciously. We shake hands, bow, kneel and all these activities are signs of power structures present in our culture.

Significantly, it is through the constant dialogue and collective effort that the ultimate goal of preserving the Telling and Akan culture is accomplished. There are many parties involved in the process. First, open-mindedness and mutual trust enables Sutti and the citizens of Okzat-Ozkat to initiate the communication. It is with their help that Sutti intends to understand their system of beliefs. This process of reciprocal recognition and acceptance is based on endless conversations and exchange of ideas. Then, Sutti and Corporation Monitor manage to thrust aside their prejudices and find a

way to communicate. They let the other speak out and manage to listen to each other's confessions. Finally, Suttu and her supervisor succeed in establishing a dialogue between the Ekumen, the Corporation and the followers of the Telling.

What is remembered and what is forgotten always remains a question of power, as "the politics of memory is often nothing more than the politics of forgetting, especially in regimes that have to hide very important things" (Misztal 2010: 30). In Le Guin's novel, the restoration of the past and memory offers the way of fighting against the omnipresent Corporation and its oppressive laws. It is achieved through the recovery of both spoken and written language, of oral and written texts, of the philosophy and finally, of past bodily practices. In her novel, Le Guin proposes dialogue condemning in this way any kind of fundamentalism, be it secular or religious. Hope is to be found in mutual trust. The struggle of subjects against the regime is the struggle to preserve, recover and narrate memories. Their task is to challenge power, to find witnesses willing to narrate alternative stories, to make others aware of the ongoing manipulation and enable them to doubt and to question the power system. What needs to be emphasised is that "unlike in classical dystopia, where the *art of memory* remains trapped in an individual, regressive nostalgia, in *The Telling* and in other critical dystopias the *culture of memory* allows for the formation of a collective resistance" (Baccolini 2003: 127).

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