

PROMETHEUS

Bergeron vs. Omelas

By Wolfman Mac

Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" is a prescient tale of a society in the not-too-distant future, utopian in its achievement of the principle of equality. Absolute equality. In this, the year 2081, "Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of the United States Handicapper General."

The methods used to achieve this equality were simplicity itself—the attractive wore masks, the athletic "were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot," the intelligent equipped with devices similar to hearing aids that periodically distracted them with bursts of sound and kept them "from taking unfair advantage of their brains." The weights, the masks, all were intended to keep observers from looking at the grace and beauty of another and feeling "like something the cat drug in."

The Handicapper General and her agents enforced this social order by means of fines and imprisonment. At one point early in the story, one of the protagonists discusses his fatigue with his wife. She suggests he remove some of the lead balls from the bag he wears to equalize his size and strength. He admonishes her strongly by reminding her of the penalty for that offense—"Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out..." He (being one of the more intelligent types, equipped with a hearing aid to distract him), reminds her of why he has to wear the handicaps: "If I tried to get away with it, then other people would try to get away with it and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else." This exchange takes place between George and Hazel, parents of Harrison Bergeron, just 14.

Harrison is in jail for plotting the overthrow of the government. As they are watching ballet dancers on television, the news cuts in, and a newswoman begins an announcement. After apologizing for her lovely voice ("a very unfair voice for a woman to use"), and continuing in an "absolutely uncompetitive...grackle squawk," she announces that Harrison Bergeron has escaped from jail.

He is described as "a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous." Anyone coming into contact with Harrison is

additionally warned "do not—I repeat, do not—try to reason with him." George recognizes Harrison, but the realization is soon blotted out by a sound in his head.

The story climaxes with Harrison appearing on the television screen, having invaded the studio. He announces he is now emperor, and tears off his myriad handicapping devices, revealing himself to be a "man who would have awed Thor, the god of thunder." A ballerina rises from among the group to join him. He removes her handicaps to reveal a woman that is "blindingly beautiful." They then command the band to remove their handicaps and play "real music," and begin to dance a beautiful dance, during which "Not only the laws of the land were abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well."

The beautiful dance concludes with a kiss that lasts "a long, long time."

At that point, the studio door bursts open and the Handicapper General (Diana Moon Glampers, a recurring name in Vonnegut's work) enters with a "double barrel ten gauge shotgun." She kills both Harrison and his partner, then points the gun at the musicians and orders them to put their handicaps back on. The television screen then goes black.

"Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone to the kitchen for a can of beer." Upon his return, he notices that Hazel appears to have been crying and asks her why. She states something on T.V. made her sad, but she had forgotten what. He counsels her to "forget sad things," and she answers, "I always do." There the story ends.

Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" also depicts a utopian society, location and time

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PROMETHEUS

The newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society

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2014 Hall of Fame Award Finalists

For more than three decades, the Prometheus Awards have recognized outstanding works of science fiction and fantasy that stress the importance of liberty as the foundation for civilization, peace, prosperity, progress, and justice. The Prometheus Hall of Fame Award for Best Classic Fiction honors novels, novellas, stories, graphic novels, anthologies, films, TV shows/series, plays, poems, music recordings, and other works of fiction first published or broadcast more than five years ago. The Hall of Fame committee is pleased to announce the finalists for the Hall of Fame Award.

The 2014 finalists for the Hall of Fame Award are as follows (in chronological order):

“As Easy as A.B.C.,” a short story by Rudyard Kipling published in *London Magazine* in 1912, presents an ambiguously utopian future that has reacted against mass society (which was beginning to emerge during Kipling’s day) in favor of privacy and freedom of movement.

“Sam Hall,” a short story by Poul Anderson published in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1953, depicts a regimented future America obsessed with security and facing a libertarian revolution aided by cybernetic subversion.

“‘Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman,” a short story by Harlan Ellison published in *Galaxy* in 1965, is a dystopian satire set in an authoritarian society dedicated to punctuality, in which a lone absurdist rebel attempts to disrupt everyone else’s schedules.

Falling Free, a novel by Lois McMaster Bujold published in 1988, explores free will and self-ownership by considering the legal and ethical implications of human genetic engineering.

Courtship Rite, a novel by Donald M. Kingsbury published in 1982, portrays a harsh desert planet’s exotic human culture founded on applying the mathematical concept of optimization in biology, political organization, and ethics.

For more information, contact LFS Publicity Chair Chris Hibbert (publicity@lfs.org).

Homeland

By Cory Doctorow
Tor, 2012

Reviewed by David Wayland

Homeland is Cory Doctorow's direct sequel to his Prometheus award-winning novel *Little Brother*. Like its predecessor, *Homeland* takes place in the present, and is steeped in the recession that straddles the end of the GW Bush administration and current Obama administration. Marcus Yallow, the protagonist of *Little Brother*, now is 19 years old. Due to massive debt, Marcus has dropped out of college, and like so many people of his generation, also finds himself unemployed. The novel opens at Burning Man, the annual Labor Day weekend event, where Marcus and his girlfriend journeyed to experience the event. He also hopes to network into a new job, given the large number of tech-people who attend Burning Man. Impoverished as they are, they can make the journey by tapping into the trade and barter economic model. They join thousands amid the free-wheeling yet peaceful culture of the annual temporary Burning Man event, an exciting if temporary respite from the real world. To readers unfamiliar with Burning Man, Doctorow provides detailed descriptions of the actual events and background for how each event or tradition originated.

During a fortuitous and chance meeting with four notable real-world people at Burning Man, Marcus is given a chance to interview as a webmaster for a political candidate, Joe Noss, who is running as a pseudo-independent Democrat. Here Marcus is given a chance to participate in the big-P kinds of politics, "the kind that involves elections and so on," as Noss puts it during his first meeting with Marcus. Noss appears to be Doctorow's dream candidate, an "independent" voice, yet still within the liberal fold.

When a novel like *Homeland* tackles very current events, it must be considered against the backdrop of those events and how those events are interpreted. *Homeland* tries to walk the ideological minefield of supporting the political infrastructure and people who make massive spying and callous drone attacks possible, while at the same time decrying and pointing out the excesses brought about by the rent seeking of this same political infrastructure.

Whereas the ending of *Little Brother* and the beginning of *Homeland* appear to still cling to the idea that changes can come from *within* the system, the idea that *our* candidate will not be as bad as the other guy, this viewpoint seems to evolve somewhat by the end of *Homeland*. The intellectual hand-wringing is exemplified by Doctorow's own tweet on November 7, 2012: "Amazing to think that I'm relieved at the victory of the pro-wiretapping, pro-extra-judicial-assassination, anti-whistle-

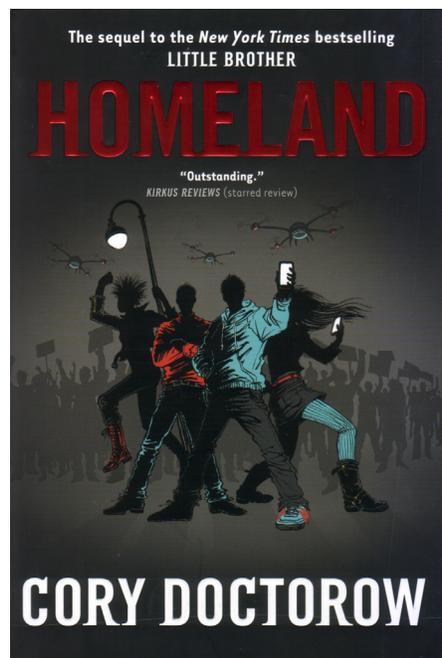
blower candidate." Would Joe Noss become the same "lesser of evils, but still evil" if elected into office? Would the very nature of political office corrupt and turn him like so many others? *Homeland* does not quite answer this question.

Setting aside politics, the novel itself dives into the modern privacy versus national security war, a war largely fought by government and resisted by those few who see the looming threat of Big Brother. Written before the whistle-blowing leaks by Edward Snowden, much of the focus is instead upon a Wikileaks/Bradley Manning story driver. At Burning Man, Marcus is contacted by Masha, someone he knew in *Little Brother*, and who used to work for the government. Having become disillusioned, she found others who shared her views, and became a recipient of dangerous information from various leakers. Now on the run, she gives Marcus a memory stick with a trove of information on government malfeasance. Shortly thereafter, Marcus sees a more dangerous foe, Carrie Johnstone, the vicious military contractor who hounded him in *Little Brother*. He believes Johnstone has kidnapped Masha, and knows that the information he received from Masha could imperil his own life if Johnstone is aware he has this information. As he returns to San Francisco and gets involved with Joe Noss' campaign, he also could endanger his changes for work if he gets involved in political action that distracts from Noss's campaign.

Marcus and his girlfriend, Ange, decide to carefully release information from the memory stick Masha gave him. They go through a process to make their computer as secure and hidden as possible, and drop carefully selected texts into a Darknet site, one only certain friends can access, so they can vet the files and determine how and what to release. Before they say the word "leaker," some of that information gets out to the press, and quickly becomes news, placing them firmly in the sites of anti-leak forces in the government.

Marcus also gets involved in a local Occupy protest, which quickly turns into violent repression. Doctorow is skilled at researching current events, and bleeding-edge technology. His passion for maker culture, detailing the concept of legal intercepts, the idea of paranoid linux, permanent and all-intrusive surveillance, make for a thrilling read. Yet despite what actually happens in the world, it seems that the protagonists are more worried about businesses surveilling people than government (despite Wikileaks and the massive Snowden NSA leaks, all government related). Johnstone, the villain in the shadows, isn't shown as a true public employee stooge, but rather a private contractor, a Blackwater-like operative. Motives are rooted in money. Another bane of Doctorow's otherwise great writing is his predilection for info-dumps and lengthy see-what-I-know lectures.

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—*Bergeron v. Omelas*, continued from page 1

indeterminate. In this society, everyone is happy, but their happiness is not the dull, bovine contentedness depicted in *Bergeron*. Here the people are sophisticated, joyful and beautiful. The story contains no dialogue or central characters, only Le Guin's vivid description of this lovely society as it prepares for a festival. Omelas has no King, no Army, no Soldiers. There is "Religion yes, Clergy no." Beautiful nudes wander the streets, "offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh." There is a non-habit forming drug available that offers "a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond belief..." But, Le Guin adds that not many people need this drug, for the reality of their existence is wonderful enough for most people. Also, there is beer, "For the more modest tastes."

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Omelas is not what it has, but what it lacks—"One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt."

But that is not to say that Omelas has no reason for guilt, as Le Guin then reveals that the source of Omelas' happiness is a terrible crime, concealed in a basement under one of the "beautiful public buildings." There a child, who "looks about six, but actually is nearly ten," lives confined to a tool room. "The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festering sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually." Occasionally, people come to see the child, but they only open the door to look at it "with frightened, disgusted eyes." Sometimes the child speaks, asking to be let out and promising to "be good," but it receives no answer beyond an occasional kick to get it to stand up. It is explained in the story that the other children of Omelas are usually informed of this child's existence when they are between eight and twelve, "and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back..."

In precisely what respect this child is responsible for the happiness of Omelas is never explained, neither do we learn how this particular child was selected to bear this burden. Of this particular child's background we are told only that it "...has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice."

"They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery."

Perhaps to their credit, this fact is not borne lightly by the cities's collective conscience:

"No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do...The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child."

But Le Guin ends the story with one more fact, "and this," she says, "is quite incredible." From time to time an adolescent who has seen the child for the first time, and at other times an adult, leaves the basement where the child is kept and then—

"...they leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible it does not even exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."

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Analysis of these stories must necessarily begin with identification of the polemics involved, a fact that itself sets forth what is no mean task—independently these works present enough questions of morality (both individual and collective), that they could shape the foundation of a useful philosophical career. Taken together, the questions of justice, morality (both individual and collective), civil rights and even the very questionable (in my opinion) capacity of government to foment good rather than evil increases exponentially. I will make it my purpose in this work to identify and discuss a few of those questions, but caution the reader that in so doing it will likely be necessary to draw conclusions when facts are lacking, and present even more questions for (paradoxically) clarity in the discussion. To do so is to run the very real risk of putting words in the mouths of the original authors and I will avoid doing so to the best of my ability. However, if the authors of these works intended to provoke debate and present difficult philosophical questions for those who may choose to grapple with them, then I believe it is fair to say that they assumed that risk.

These stories may be read together as examples of Utopian societies within the paradigm presented by the twentieth century. If we accept Harrison Bergeron as an example of a socialist utopia, where all are made and kept equal by means of "hatchet, axe and saw"(with thanks to Neil Peart), one may also view Omelas as an example of a free, even capitalist society. I believe that if that was the authors original intent, Le Guin fails on several points as I intend to demonstrate—but that aside, the fact remains that a classical criticism of capitalism has been (and continues to be) analogous with the society in Omelas - that some, even many, benefit, but do so necessarily

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—*Bergeron v. Omelas*, continued from previous page

at the expense of those on the bottom. For there to be inhabitants of a society whose lives are filled with wealth, there must necessarily be those whose lives are filled only with grinding poverty. Furthermore, their poverty makes that wealth possible, for in order for a capitalist to make his billions selling widgets, there must be people available to make those widgets. Further, someone must make the sandwiches that feed those workers, clean the bathrooms those workers use and make the shoes those workers wear. It is to the benefit of the capitalist that profit margins constantly widen - the less those providing those services profit from their labor, the more money is pure profit available to him. In short, it is in his best interest that the child be kept (so to speak) in the tool room, and further in his interest that the child's situation become even more wretched. Those who champion capitalism and the free market can be and often are criticized on the grounds that they truly cannot want all in a society to profit, their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding—if everyone were rich, no one would be rich. And so obscene wealth lives cheek by jowl with wretched poverty, everyone living with the tacit acceptance that every ribbon and bow on a wealthy woman's dress was put there by an individual so wretched she could scarcely bear the sight of him, much less engage him in a conversation.

By contrast, "Harrison Bergeron" can be read as a poignant indictment of socialism. A government cannot mandate that everyone succeed equally—so in order to achieve equality, it must (and does) mandate that everyone fail equally. It is a society governed by the least common denominator, held (and kept) to the lowest possible standard. If everyone cannot be made to be athletic, then everyone can be made clumsy. If all cannot be beautiful, all will be made ugly.

Such a social order can only be enforced at the point of a gun, and those straying from the collectivist path must be dealt with swiftly and in the harshest possible terms, as in fact Harrison finally is. Such a social order cannot tolerate individuality or individual achievement, because such a philosophy must necessarily regard human beings as, first and foremost, dangerous animals whose passions must be controlled. If word were to get out that someone was more beautiful, skilled or talented than others, envy, greed and selfish desire would appear in the body politic—worse yet, people would begin identifying actions they may take to secure such things for themselves and then finally, the dread specter of human achievement would appear. As George put it, we'd be right back to the dark ages—everybody competing.

It would appear at first blush that both societies have achieved a sort of utopia, albeit one achieved at opposite ends of the sociopolitical spectrum—in *Omelas*, all are free to be ecstatically happy, and if that happiness comes at the cost of one human being consigned to misery (however wretched and unjust that misery may be), statistically speaking, they have achieved a society more successful than any yet devised by man. In Harrison Bergeron's world, all are equally miserable, but are too stupid to know they are unhappy, whether that stupidity is the product of the "dumbing down" of their society, their inherent lack of cognitive ability or artificial means used to

distract them. The motto of that society could truly be that ignorance is bliss, and if the means to achieve their blissful equality is mass injustice, it is injustice equally applied. But is it equally applied? And what is the role of government in these societies, if any?

First things first. In "Bergeron," one might be tempted to conclude that equality has been achieved—Vonnegut himself declares this a society in which "everyone is finally equal" at the outset. But apparently not everyone is—in Diana Moon Glampers only appearance, she is not described as being in possession of any handicaps when she kills Harrison and the Dancer. She then turns the gun on the musicians and orders them to put back on their handicaps and continue on with their business. The Handicapper General appears as a stark representative of what must be a complex ruling class in this society. She, at least, is privileged out of proportion to the subjects for her own lack of external handicaps. Further, this must necessarily be so—in order to rule others and determine what handicaps they require, one can hardly be encumbered by handicaps themselves. And so, in this society (like all totalitarian societies) there appears to be a ruling class that is, by reason or circumstance above the rest, not bound by the same rules and obligations as the ruled.

And rule they do, for in "Bergeron," the heavy hand of government is not understated. From the opening sentences, the references to the "211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution" and the introduction of Diana Moon Glampers as "Handicapper General" the power of government to enforce the social order is obvious, the means to do so (from fines and imprisonment to, in the final scene, summary execution) hardly subtle. The consent of the governed to this state of affairs is hinted at in the references to the constitutional amendments that brought about this society, but one must ask—when persons grant government powers that become irrevocable, how much consent is any longer involved in the day-to-day decision to continue or abolish the government's continued possession of those powers? In "Bergeron," the promise of "true equality" is a system in which none are allowed to think as individuals and, even if they were such thinking would be made impossible by the physical impediments to thinking put in place. If such thought were possible, physical resistance is made difficult, if not impossible by physical impediments to free movement and finally, where government force fails to extinguish the slightest hesitation one might have to full-fledged acceptance of its decrees, zeitgeist fills those gaps; witness George's obedient parroting of justifications to Hazel when she suggests he remove or lighten his impediments for the sake of comfort.

But to list these forces in that order, with zeitgeist occupying the last rung in the "order of mention" probably does a great disservice to an analysis of the social forces that keep this social order in place—for it is zeitgeist, the meme, the unquestioned assumptions and stock answers put forth that lead to the climate that allows such a tyranny of the majority to first evolve, and eventually swallow the freedom of even the majority to resist.

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—*Homeland review*, continued from page 3

Toward the end of the novel, as Marcus and Liam, a fellow Occupier, discuss their future, Liam scoffs at Marcus's idea that electing Noss to public office will make the world a better place:

He barked a laugh. "You're kidding, right? You really think it makes a difference who we vote for? After you've seen the darknet docs, seen how someone uses the system to get rich, then used their riches to change the system to keep them that way? Jesus, Marcus, what is this, high school civics?"

One page later, when Marcus muses that his government turned his city into a police state, kidnapped and tortured him. While he originally thought that it isn't the system, but the people in office, he has realized that the good apples become bad apples. There are always emergencies, and people use those emergencies. He seems to finally realize what he didn't see in *Little Brother*, that working within the system just gets you worked over.

A tragic aspect of the novel is reading the Afterword by Aaron Schwartz, the young internet prodigy who killed himself after becoming the focus of an over-zealous prosecutor going after him for hacking and releasing documents into the public domain. Schwartz's last sentence—"Let me know if I can help" became a distressing read knowing he is no longer alive, his promise and passion extinguished.

Homeland is an important novel, a powerful novel. Doctorow might not be a libertarian, but like George Orwell the socialist exposing the ills of socialism through his fiction (*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), Doctorow cares about freedom, and rails in a powerful voice against those who seek to control our freedom and those who work to limit our rights and abilities to live and act free.

Alongside Night: The Graphic Novel

By J. Neil Schulman,

Art by Lee Oaks, Script Adaptation by Chris

McCarver, Lettering by James Gaubatz

Pulpless.com, 2013

Reviewed by Anders Monsen

Originally published in 1979, J. Neil Schulman's first novel, *Alongside Night*, dealt with the economic malaise of America in the late 1970s. Although written over 30 years ago, the economic malaise the novel then covered remains current today, as America staggers out of the shadows of what the press has named the "Great Recession."

Schulman recently turned his debut novel into a feature-length film starring Kevin Sorbo, Jake Busey, Tim Russ and Garrett Wang of *Star Trek: Voyager* fame, Gary Graham from the TV show *Alien Nation*, and cast of many dozens more. [See

IMDB for more details at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1667061/>]

The new graphic novel is based on the screenplay, trimming content from the 180-page novel down to 110 pages of art and text. Updates have been made, since in 1979 there were no smart phones, minimal NSA surveillance compared to today's mass information gathering, and many other technical advances following the computer revolution since Apple's 1984 commercial.

In reading the graphic novel I studiously avoided re-reading the original. I wanted to see how the book appeared today, in the new format, rather than look at what changed. The story centers on Elliot Vreeland, a high school student and son of a noted free-market economist. Updated to "Las Vegas, five years from now," the current mood in America, not much different from 30 years ago, is one for the most part against the free market, for a controlled society and economy. Elliot, a lone rebel thinker in his school, is pulled out of school and informed that his father is dead. This is a ruse, as his family has decided to go on the run since the government is rounding up dissidents and free-thinkers. Their escape plans goes awry, Elliot gets separated, and in his quest to find his family falls in with an underground Agorist movement.

The events in the novel are boiled down into non-stop action, and the pace makes the pages turn quickly. Elliot takes the reader through various adventures to a thrilling conclusion, all admirably suited for the big screen.

However, what works for the big screen falters for *Alongside Night* when translated into panels of art, especially given the size of the book, which is more a trade paperback format rather than typical graphic novel or comic book. The occasionally faded and sepia-toned graphics, mixed with occasional tiny lettering, makes the story visually a disaster. It gives the characters an almost anonymous look and feel. Faces are indistinct, backgrounds washed out, and the art lacks the detail one expects from a graphic novel or comic book. Had but the artwork contained more color and sharper tones, and the lettering easier to read, many drawbacks of the graphic novel would have been erased. There are great ideas in *Alongside Night*, ideas that were relevant many years ago and remain relevant today, perhaps even more so. The characters are real, fascinating, and compelling. As Brad Linaweaver writes in the introduction: "*Alongside Night* was a warning when it first came out. Now it is contemporary reality." But these ideas probably are best suited in the traditional novel format. It will be interesting to see how the movie version compares.



—*Bergeron v. Omelas*, continued from page 5

An excellent example of this is found in the fact that before reaching the age of 14, Harrison has been institutionalized to “treat” his “condition”—and his condition is clearly an insistence on seeing himself as an individual rather than a member of a group, bound only by tyranny from exploring his own thoughts, abilities and ideas to their limits. There can be no thought more threatening to a totalitarian social order, and no weapon against that threat more effective than social ostracism—the idea that such persons must be sick, abnormal, not fit for the company of “decent” people. The definition of “decent” people is as simple as the entertainment in the gray, mediocre hell of Harrison’s world—“decent” people conform to the dominant political ideas, and do not object to even the most gross violations of their human rights if those rights are seen as threatening to the vision of society put forth by the social architects of that society. Those who do not conform, and insist upon asserting their status as individuals, to be judged and rewarded on the basis of their own actions and abilities, are “sick.” If they do not get “well,” they must be excised from the body politic.

For everybody’s own good, of course.
Or, if you prefer, “For The Children...”

Omelas, as I have said, may seem at first blush to be the polar opposite of this state of affairs, but regarding the role of government in that society, Le Guin is vague, at best. Evidence of government can be found, particularly in her reference to the “public buildings,” one the host of the tool room in which the unfortunate child is held. If indeed this is a “public building,” that suggests a social order with the power to designate some buildings as public and others as private, and some system for such designations. Furthermore, no mention is made of the system which designated this child as the “Christ figure” of Omelas (the one who must suffer so horribly so that all others can live in paradise) but some such system or collective thought process had to exist. Even if selection of this particular child for this role was completely arbitrary, some means led the mob to final selection of the child (perhaps a vote, or the “first kid we see”), followed by some means of organizing the mob to take the child, and finally designating a place where the child would be kept. All this suggests some social order greater than the sum of Omelas’ parts. But, it is pointed out in the story, Omelas has no soldiers. It seems unlikely one

would specify no soldiers, yet feel no need to mention that there are policemen if in fact there were. So, it would seem Omelas is a city that operates only on its promise of great joy, and no one is forced to do anything. Furthermore, and once again as the title suggests, any or all are free to leave the city whenever they see fit.

It is clear that in Omelas (unlike Bergeron), submission to the brute, naked force of government or the mob does not adequately explain or justify the submission of the people to the social order. Neither does greed or selfishness in all cases, for many are troubled, so troubled by the plight of the child that they return again and again to witness its suffering. How many can truly feel untroubled joy, or sleep peacefully every night with this weighing on their consciences? Furthermore, there are (as the title makes clear), those who leave Omelas, presumably never to return, for parts unknown. Those so sickened by the sight of the child that they would walk away from all the joy that is there for nothing still do nothing to help the child, which seems rather inconsistent. Helping the child would cost Omelas its joy, but leaving Omelas not only costs these individuals their joyful place in Omelas, the child is still imprisoned; the source of their unhappiness (indeed, anyone’s unhappiness in this city) remains as wretched as ever. The only thing that has changed is the circumstances of those who have left.

And so we come to the passage where Le Guin describes the feelings of those who first come to see the child—“No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do.

And here, I submit, we have our answer.

Although the phrase “there is nothing they can do” is cryptic, it is also definitive. We may, if we wish, read sarcasm into the phrase, but it loses none of its definitive nature if we do so. It remains a fact that in this city where nothing (not even membership) is required of the citizenry, those who would leave their joyful home and all they have known since birth would do that before bending their knee to help this pitiful creature.

One answer presents itself, and its commonality with the totalitarian world of Bergeron makes it desperately compelling—that answer is the so-called “social contract.” Those that walk away from Omelas do nothing because to do so would violate the social contract of Omelas explained to them when they are first told of the child’s existence—it would cost them their joy, and also cost everyone else in Omelas the bounty of their society. Those that walk away are apparently willing to forsake their own desires, but not those of the rest of the city. They make this decision to obey the social contract, and ignore the dictates of their consciences (indeed, the consciences of any decent person) even when the social contract serves to support a brutal and hideous injustice.

In both of these stories, the majority of the people have

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—*Bergeron v. Omelas*, continued from page 7

surrendered themselves to this social contract, and while the scope of their relative injustices can be said to be different, the depth is not. In each of these societies, that injustice is established and flourishes because, for the alleged “good” of all, each individual in those societies surrenders their autonomy, their individuality, their rights and responsibilities as sentient human beings. The surrender is both sword and shield—sword in that it requires surrender of individuality, and then shield from responsibility when others are similarly stripped. One may presume it serves a third purpose as a salve to the conscience, for when looking upon the misfortune of another who is suffering under the literal or figurative lash of societal demands, one can think back on their own sacrifice and not feel too bad about it.

And so, although the methods are different, the same product exists at the end—by surrender to this “social contract,” this alleged responsibility of each individual to sacrifice for all other individuals, the result is injustice. Brute, naked force is hardly required, for the threat of their actions resulting in consequences to others (however richly those consequences may be deserved) paralyzes and morally bankrupts the citizens of Omelas just as effectively as the Handicapper General’s shotgun does the citizens of “Bergeron.” And both societies surrender any meaningful claim to the title of “civilization” as a result.

So finally, “Those Who Walk Away From Omelas.” Where do they go? Le Guin does not say. Let us hope they go to a place where they, and all others there, see themselves first, foremost and always as individuals, responsible for themselves, and responsible only for their own actions. Owing nothing to others but respect for their rights to self ownership, and to conduct (or to refuse to conduct) all such transactions with other consenting beings as they see fit, free from the tyranny of a social contract upon whose terms they were never consulted, upon whose terms they never agreed, and from whose terms they have received no consideration. Let us hope they went to a place where they then proceeded to form their own contract with the world and others in it, extracting nothing from others by force or coercion and tolerating none who would attempt to so extract anything from others.

Such a place may not be Heaven on Earth—it certainly doesn’t sound like it. Such a place would require daily work and constant diligence, and that diligence would only increase, as the bounty of that society increased (as it must) and others, fairly bursting with obligations they are all too ready to impose upon others for the sake of morality and their brand of justice turned jealous eyes toward it. But all of the only good we can ever hope to find on Earth resides there—as well as Justice.

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