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Literatura

Language and ideology: glossopoesis as a secondary narrative framework in Le Guin's The dispossessed

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## ABSTRACT:

Ursula K. Le Guin's The dispossessed (1974) has been read from a multiplicity of angles that mostly vary from focusing on the characters to highlighting the anarchist ideology that the story preaches. In this article, we promote a distinct analysis, which, despite also approaching the ideological themes in the novel, centres on the use the author makes of glossopoesis (creation of artificial languages) through Pravic, Iotic and Niotic. Bourdieu (1991), Freedman (2000), Conley and Cain (2006), Edward James (2003) and Ken Macleod (2003) critically motivate our discussion. As a result, we demonstrate how glossopoesis plays a significant representational role in the plot as a secondary narrative framework intended to communicate the author's beliefs both on language and politics.

KEYWORDS: artificial languages, Pravic, politics, analysis.

## **Resumo:**

Os despossuídos, de Ursula K. Le Guin (1974), tem sido objeto de discussão por diversas perspectivas, focando desde personagens à ideologia anarquista preconizada pela autora. Neste artigo, promovemos uma análise distinta que, apesar de também abordar os temas ideológicos do romance, centra-se no uso de glossopoese (criação de línguas artificiais) que a escritora faz através do Pravic, Iotic e Niotic. Esta discussão é motivada essencialmente pela leitura de autores como Bourdieu (1991), Freedman (2000), Conley e Cain (2006), Edward James (2003) e Ken Macleod (2003). Como resultado, demonstramos o significante papel representacional que a glossopoese desempenha no enredo como estrutura narrativa voltada a comunicar as concepções do autor concernentes à linguagem e à política.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: línguas artificiais, Pravic, política, análise.

on that line of thinking, whether in favour of it or not.

## Introduction

"Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it." Ursula K. Le Guin, The dispossessed (1974, p. 21).

Since Thomas More's Utopia (1516), which depicted an allegedly perfect society in which humanity would finally achieve a state of sublime social justice and security, many utopian/dystopian works of fiction have followed. Over the centuries, though, such political visions have been subject of regular attacks by those who argue that, in reality, those societies would only constitute totalitarian and tyrannical regimes (James, 2003). A great many works of science fiction (henceforth SF) and utopias/dystopias have tried to defend or contradict that notion. The dispossessed (Le Guin, 1974) is thus to be regarded as a comprehensive treatise

The epigraph above synthesises very well the ideological rhetoric found in Le Guin's award-winning SF novel. Accompanied by the subtitle 'An ambiguous utopia', however, the story relays the many-sided cultural



and ideological discrepancies between the twin planets of Urras, a multinational, capitalist, patriarchal world, and Anarres, a poor, isolationist and distressed socialist anarchy (Conley & Cain, 2006).

There are many questions of great significance in such a complex SF text as *The dispossessed* (Le Guin, 1974). By way of illustration, the story unfolds around the research of the protagonist, Shevek, his past life and visit to Urras. His revolutionary invention, the 'ansible', a fictional device capable of faster-than-light communication, posits complex metaphysical issues as the theory of the 'Block Universe', the existence of either free will or determinism and the nature of time, if synchronic or diachronic. However, for the sake of the succinctness required by the structure of an article such as this, we wish to focus on the political matters that the writer unearths.

Many essays have been written about this remarkable story, most of which focussed on the epistemological concerns that dominate the plot. While our paper also addresses these preoccupations, our concentration remains on the use of glossopoesis that the author makes, which is deserving of special attention for being a strikingly recurrent trace in Le Guin's work. For example, it is also present in *The left hand of Darkness* (1969), *The word for world is forest* (1972), *The pathways of desire* (1979), *Always coming home* (1985), and *Changing planes* (2003).

Remarking the paramount importance, she gives to the coinage of artificial languages in SF texts, the novelist herself once wrote in the preface to the *Encyclopedia of fictional and fantastic languages*, "It begins with naming. Those who write fiction with an entirely imaginary setting [...] play Adam: they must make up names for the characters and creatures of their fictive world" (Conley & Cain, 2006, p. xvii).

Vis-à-vis the presence of invented tongues in works of literature, and the consequent relevance of analysing them, Stockwell (2006, p. 3, author's emphasis) says, "[...] all creative fiction depends on a greater or lesser degree of difference between our actual world and the imagined world of the text. [...] literary authors tend to express themselves in ways that are commonly regarded as 'poetic' or 'expressive' [...]", and, in alignment with that, glossopoesis is typically a tool used by writers to inform only the more attentive reader in a 'poetic' or 'more expressive manner' what he or she wishes to keep hidden from others. Artificial languages in works of fiction are usually like puzzles and thus require more effort to decode. They are never intended to be obvious guesses. What is more, Terry Eagleton (2003) postulates that sometimes the authors do not write in accordance with their beliefs and purposes, because writing can be tricky, and the final result may give a different impression from the one intentioned, or because they are not sure of what their objectives are.

Hence, with the exploration chiefly of Pravic, but also of Iotic and Niotic, Le Guin's artificial languages, we uphold the premise that Anarres society is only supposed to give the impression of following a non-coercive ideology. The author thus uses glossopoesis as a secondary narrative framework that intensifies its satirical verve. As a result, the anarchistic planet becomes even more oppressive than other existing governments. This ambiguity surely amounts to be what the novel's subtitle is about; and that, in turn, might support the claims about the tyrannical character of hypothetical utopias. We wish to advocate that premise following the works of such theorists as Bourdieu (1991), on the language and power dichotomy, Freedman (2000), for a critical analysis of the novel, Conley and Cain (2006), on the Pravic language, and finally Edward James (2003) and Ken Macleod (2003), on the relation between SF and politics. An examination of some critical concepts is crucial, and at the same time, a close reading of the multiple occurrences of the artificial languages in the text should shed bright light upon the discussion.

#### On ideology through glossopoesis

Initially, there are two interesting facts to mention about Pravic, the language spoken on Anarres and the one Le Guin explores the most: primarily, it does not purport to be a natural language; instead it is admittedly an artificial language. Following the narrative, we learn that Farigy, an essential figure in the Anarresti revolution, aided by computers, is the constructor of the language (Le Guin, 1974). Second, the guidelines



of the language are grounded on the disputable Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which is indeed the number one showcase in SF works that make any allusion to language.

Sapir and Whorf, recognised linguists of the past, became persuaded that the intricate differences and peculiarities of languages must be connected with significant divergence in manners of thought (Deutscher, 2010). In other words, they maintained that our mother tongue shapes the way we think and perceive the world. Noticeably, it is easily perceptible how strong words can be. People have tried very ardently to prevent the use of what they see as offensive, sexist, racist or derogatory language.

In this regard, we would like to draw a parallel involving Pravic and the artificial language Newspeak, featured in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Láadan, the language of Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native tongue* (1984). The first thing they all have in common is that they all advocate the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Now, the second is that they all used language to reinforce ideology. Newspeak, for instance, intends to replace English as the sole means of oral communication in Oceania, a communist satirical version of Great Britain. The idea is to destroy words that do not attend to the Party's agenda and that way render it impossible for the citizens to think in any rebellious manner, the so-called 'thoughtcrime'. Other words are modified in order to remove their bad connotations. The word 'bad', for one, is substituted for 'ungood', and 'concentration camps', renamed 'joycamps' (Orwell, 1949).

The same happens in Elgin's *Native tongue* (1984), in which the future United States repeals every woman's civil rights. A group of women, then, decides to create a language to reflect their own world views and feminist theories. The language is said to express female perspectives in such a manner 'to influence on the discursive constructions that form the concept of social reality', always providing women with the right word that supposedly does not exist in other languages. To elucidate that, take the following: the language has a single word, 'be', for 'he', 'she' or 'it'. The word for 'woman', 'with', also means 'person'. It also has a discourse marking particle, 'wa', which may be added to the end of a sentence to specify that a person believes in what he or she is saying. Another particle, 'wi', implies that what is being said is evident to everybody (Elgin, 1984; Okrent, 2009).

Similarly, Pravic is said to have been created according to antiauthoritarian and anticapitalistic principles (Conley & Cain, 2006). In view of that, singular forms of the possessive pronouns (my, your, his, her and its) in Pravic are used customarily only for stress; idiom avoids them. Le Guin exploits this feature throughout the novel. At one point, Shevek's daughter, Sadik, says to her father, "You can share the handkerchief I use [...]" rather than "You can share my handkerchief" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 316). Nonetheless, that pattern does not seem to be acquired naturally by the young speakers of the language; instead, it has to be taught, which points into the direction of ideological indoctrination of the youths, generation after generation. The following passage implies this interpretation:

Little children might say 'my mother', but very soon they learned to say 'the mother'. Instead of 'my hand hurts', it was 'the hand hurts me', and so on; to say 'this one is mine and that's yours' in Pravic, one said, 'I use this one and you use that'. Mitis's statement, 'You will be 'his man," had a strange sound to it. Shevek looked at her blankly (Le Guin, 1974, p. 58, author's emphasis).

It is curious to note that although such phraseology as 'the hand hurts me' sounds very odd to some who speak only English (the author's language), it is pretty natural in some foreign languages, like German: '*Die Hand tut mir weh*'. So, this corroborates with the understanding that it had to be forcefully taught rather than naturally acquired (Bruhn, 2013).

As in the making of Newspeak, in the construction of Pravic, the transformation of connotations is also a tool. That can be seen in the fact that the word for work also means 'play' (Le Guin, 1974). That is clearly intended to make people associate hard labour with enjoyable activities, which is, in turn, a firm reference to Whorfianism. Despite the approving timbre the text seemingly seeks to attribute to that, the similarity with the case of the Newspeak word for concentration camp, 'joycamp', is remarkable. Asseverating that, the pejorative or offensive words the speakers of Pravic use are 'kleggich', related to drudgery or uninspiring



work, and 'nuchnibi' meaning people who habitually evade work (Le Guin, 1974). Additionally, the words 'profiteer' and 'propertarian' constitute the most offensive curse – the equivalent in the language is, however, not given (Le Guin, 1974).

Besides, in order to conform with the anarchistic ideology, Pravic lacks formal address words like 'sir' or 'madam'. The only equivalent for those is an all-purpose, gender-neutral appellation, 'ammar', which is closest in meaning to 'brother' or 'sister', something in the style of the communist term 'comrade' (Conley & Cain, 2006). In a footnote, Le Guin explains that and other curious words of Pravic:

A small child may call any adult 'mamme' or 'tadde'. Gimar's 'tadde' may have been her father, an uncle, or an unrelated adult who showed her parental or grandparental responsibility and affection. She may have called several people 'tadde' or 'mamme', but the word has a more specific use than 'ammar' (brother/sister), which may be used to anybody (Le Guin, 1974, p. 47, author's emphasis).

No person owns another. That is emphasised in the passage that follows: "[...] it gave him a most extraordinary pleasure when Pilun [Shevek's daughter] called him 'tadde' (Le Guin, 1974, p. 361, author's emphasis). As a socialist utopia, children on Anarres are brought up in a sort of communal relationship rather than inside a particular family. Consequently, the words for father and mother can be used with many other people, and not just with a person's biological parents. The notion of property is circumvented even when relative to family dualities – parents-children – although the gender marks have been left untouched. The same is noted in the case of sexual relations:

The language Shevek spoke, the only one he knew, lacked any propriety idioms for sexual act. In Pravic it made no sense for a man to say that he had 'had' a woman. The word which came closest in meaning to 'fuck', and had a similar secondary usage as a curse, was specific: it meant rape. The usual verb, taking only a plural subject, can be translated only by a neutral word like copulate. It meant something two people did, not something one person did, or had (Le Guin, 1974, p. 53, author's emphasis).

Again, ideology is underscored by the use of glossopoesis, through the quirks and features of the language. Following that, as it is proper of a communist/socialist society, there are no formal mentions of religious thought or activity:

'The vocabulary makes it difficult', Shevek said, pursuing his discovery. 'In Pravic the word 'religion' is seldom. No, what do you say – rare? Not often used. Of course, it is one of the Categories: the Fourth Mode. Few people learn to practice all the Modes. But the Modes are built of the natural capacities of the mind, you could not seriously believe that we had no religious capacity? That we could do physics while we were cut off from the profoundest relationship man has with the cosmos?' (Le Guin, 1974, p. 15, author's emphasis)

Nevertheless, some passages give the impression that the Anarrestis, partisans of the Odonism, regard their ideologies with somewhat a quasi-religious reverence, for they gladly name themselves Odonians, after their late leader Odo. Their beliefs go deep into every aspect of their lives, restricting their thoughts and behaviour. After confabulating on the nature of sexual intercourse, for example, both Shevek and Beshun reveal their sentiments. The narrator mentions that intimately they had the thought of having owned each other through sex. "This frame of words could not contain the totality of experience any more than any other, and Shevek was aware of the area left out, though he wasn't quite sure what it was" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 53). Moreover, how can he be sure, he does not possess words for that in his language, his thoughts are restrained. For the world of The dispossessed, that is a big deal since the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is considered a fact. The problematic is then exposed when the narrator corrects their thinking according to the ideology: "But they had both been wrong" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 53).

Boechler (2014) points that the normative forces of Pravic tread on a dangerous line between social freedom and social imprisonment, for society and the language that reflects it (or the other way around) exert a normalising impulse on their speakers. Indeed, there is a strong connexion between language and power. Albeit, Le Guin's society claims to be non-coercive because of the absence of a government and consequently of laws; it appears that power always finds its way to being exerted on the masses.



Commenting on that, Bourdieu (1991) contends language has a strong association with groups' or classes' identities. His theory centres its dispute on a comprehensive evaluation that associates more on the belief that social values are learnt through modelled standards or behaviours rather than solely by being communicated via the use of language. By that view, language is one of the many categories through which ruling classes control their subalterns while other classifications also include art and religion. Moreover, even when it comes to language, there are subcategories, which conjointly with words also include tone, gestures and facial expressions (Bourdieu, 1991). In the case of Anarres, and the narrative supports this, the ideology passed on from generation to generation through language and behaviour, through the close watch of one another becomes oppressive and inescapable: "[...] the social conscience, the opinion of one's neighbors" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 150).

That language exerts power in the political world is indisputable. English, for example, has been given the status of an international lingua franca, and for that reason, native English speakers have an innate benefit concerning global communication whereas others have to skirmish to keep up with it by learning a foreign language. What is more, the volume of content generated in English is unparalleled when compared to any other modern language. Besides, more people now than in any previous period of human history are influenced by one dominant culture. According to Bourdieu, language also has symbolic power, that is, the power to define meaning, and in due course what is legitimate.

The almost magical power of words comes from the fact that the objectification and de facto officialization brought about by the public act of naming, in front of everyone, has the effect of freeing the particularity (which lies at the source of all sense of identity) from the unthought, and even unthinkable (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 224).

It follows that Pravic encompassed two elements of the triad identified by Bourdieu (1991) as the 'symbolic systems', that is, language and religion, the third one being art. We can state that, because, as already established, the people on Anarres regard their ideology with the absolutism usually found in religious beliefs; their leaders, Odo and Farigy, it appears, are considered messiahs. The ideology is placed in a higher hierarchical level than human sentiment and thought. Drawing from that prospect, the Anarresti instruments for knowing and constructing the world of objects, their symbolic forms, are deeply influenced or even shaped by their language, considering that Le Guin held the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as accurate and functional.

The fact that Pravic is not a natural language but had been designed according to particular philosophical values only reinforces the coercive nature of its conceptualisation structures. Furthermore, the revolution leaders imposed it on the citizens at the beginning of Anarres colonisation. The first settlers had to learn it, and indeed, they must have struggled with it for quite some time, as exposed by the following snippet:

[...] They had to learn Pravic as adults; they must have thought in the old languages for a long time. I read somewhere that the word 'damn' isn't in the Pravic Dictionary – it's Iotic too. Farigy didn't provide any swear words when he invented the language, or if he did his computers didn't understand the necessity (Le Guin, 1974, p. 234, author's emphasis).

The imposition of the new language is another similarity with Orwell's *Nineteen eighty-four*. The elitist origin of the tongue, that is, being encoded and fabricated by a single person and his computer, rather than by a broader diverse group of representatives is a resemblance of Elgin's Barren House women who encoded Láadan and passed it onto the other women. The imposition process, however, is never perfect, and as a result of that, a few unorthodox loanwords still find their place in the nation's vocabulary, namely 'bet' and 'hell' (Conley & Cain, 2006).

Imperfect as it is, the imposition process still takes place among the new generation, as implied by an emblematic occasion on which Shevek remembers he is reprimanding his daughter: "Sadik! Don't egoize!" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 147, italics in the original). The same expression is found again in the passage: "Stop egoizing," the doctor said (Le Guin, 1974, p. 119). 'Egoize' is a verb that seems to impart giving too much importance



or attention to oneself rather than focusing on everybody else. That is another feature of the language that has two sides. Although it appears to stimulate selflessness, Pravic's structure instead keeps the community members apart, divided and dehumanized (Boechler, 2014). As Freedman (2000) points, altruism is also a derogatory epithet, as for them, it is just the linguistic representation of inverted greed, and consequently, another deviation of the Odonian thought. The repetitive dream of walls that Shevek has may have a metaphorical meaning in that he feels this division provoked by the language and is told so by his unconscious.

The languages of Urras, on the other hand, are a completely different affair. Iotic, for example, is the language of the global superpower, A-Io. Out of scientific interests, for it is the interplanetary lingua franca, and as it is the official language of business and scholarship, Shevek starts learning it and about it, says the narrator:

The grammar itself, being complex, illogical, and patterned gave him pleasure. His learning went fast once he had built up the basic vocabulary, for he knew what he was reading; he knew the field and the terms, and whenever he got stuck either his own intuition or a mathematical equation would show him where he had got to. (Le Guin, 1974, p. 107)

Iotic has a curious dialect called Niotic (quite like Norwegian languages, Norsk and Nynorsk). Some of the occurrences of that dialect in the story make it sound like many other fictional renderings of African American speech; it is the language of the proletariat. The learning of such languages goes smoothly and naturally for Shevek. Those languages, mainly Niotic, do not attend to a fixed set of control principles, and as such, apparently, do not pose any learning difficulty. The description of those two tongues is weak and only in contrast with Pravic, i.e., what Pravic is or has, Iotic and Niotic are not or have not.

As Csicesry-Ronay Jr. (2008) writes, dystopias or utopias are the most familiar places for revolutions of words and their values. The fissure between words and acceptable implications must be radically condensed. Dystopias often portray such tyranny of excessive rationality that attempts to regulate the reach of thinkable likelihoods by controlling the number and range of signification it will permit rather than letting those evolve naturally. In accordance with that, James (2003) writes that Le Guin's novel is an exploration of the peremptory impossibilities of building a purely anarchist society, through the struggle for freedom of speech and opinion. Shevek is the impersonation of that struggle, and as such, represented a severe threat to tearing down the metaphorical walls that enclosed the Anarresti society and kept it away from improvements or advancements.

From a critical perspective, it is possible to state that *The dispossessed* (Le Guin, 1974) follows the paradigm established by the SF subgenre of positive utopias similarly to the first-of-its-kind Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). In the story, a traveller leaves his or her country and gets to utopia, only in this case, Shevek leaves utopia and arrives in a dystopia when considered from his standpoint. In this scenario, because of the absence of political debate, insofar as also of privacy, the story's hero finds himself quite alone in his conflicts with aspects of his society. However, he does not have anywhere to discuss it with his fellow countrymen. He has no way to find individuals like him, willing to question their 'religion'. His conflicts soon become battles against his 'neighbours'. "He is as isolated as any dissident in a totalitarian state" (Macleod, 2003, p. 230).

It appears that Le Guin is promoting a sort of self-critique on her own ideology. Interestingly, although the story does give such an impression, the problematic characteristics of the Anarresti society are far more severe than economic scarcities or isolation. Right at the beginning of the novel, when the narrator uses the metaphor of walls for the first time, it is implied what the planet had become for its citizens, although that fact escapes their perception. "Looked at from the other side, the wall enclosed Anarres: the whole planet was inside it, a great 'prison camp', cut off from other worlds and other men in quarantine" (Le Guin, 1974, p. 2, the emphasis is ours). The planet and its civilisation become a literal prison, whereas the Pravic language and its resulting culture turn into a prison for their minds. The people of the planet enslave themselves to the system without realising it. Economic emergencies had developed totalitarian authority in the face of total lack of preparation or prescience of the society's members. Anarresti citizens are assigned urgent jobs with



no concerns as to their lives and well-being, as in the case of Shevek and Takver who are separated for several years. Those job assignments are said to be voluntary, but necessity makes them unavoidable.

What is more, the judgment of fellow countrymen is a much more cruel and implacable punishment than any judicial court of today. Independent thinkers are labelled 'nuchnibi' – oppression through language (Freedman, 2000). George Orwell, who had nurtured deep interest in the law and power dichotomy, synthesized his insights by stating the following, also quoted by Freedman:

In a society in which there is no law, and in theory, no compulsion, the only arbiter of behaviour is public opinion. But public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals, is less tolerant than any system of law. When human beings are governed by 'thou shalt not', the individual can practise a certain amount of eccentricity: when they are supposedly governed by 'love' or 'reason', he is under continuous pressure to make him behave and think in exactly the same way as everybody else (Orwell, 1970, p. 252, author's emphasis).

In effect, Freedman (2000) maintains that the elimination of all political and legal systems left the pathway open to a more oppressive and inescapable tyranny of public opinion and informal pressure. Such tyranny is in some ways all the more difficult to fight against because, in theory, it simply does not exist. It is an invisible structure of power, for if anyone wishes to rebel, against whom is their uprising going to be? For Shevek, the rebellion is partially against himself, and the many misleading conceptions his native tongue tricks him into having.

## Conclusion

Given what we exposed, it is safe to state that Pravic, primarily, can be considered an allegory for anarchistic thought, elaborated to make it possible for the audience to contemplate a satirical representation of our society. However, we can conclude that the use Le Guin makes of glossopoesis, even at the expense of a profound poetic license, required by the firm connexion with the strongest view of language determinism, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, has also pointed that manipulation of the masses through language has always occurred.

Finding a practical and working solution for humanity that could benefit everyone and be equally just and sustainable is indeed an unthinkable challenge that has shown to be out of humankind's grasp up to now. That has been extensively demonstrated in Le Guin's *The dispossessed*. There are no easy or straightforward answers. It seems no matter how many alternatives humans can come up with; there will always be a way to pervert them and turn them against the lower classes of society. While the author seems to advocate an individual political system, namely anarchy, she does not religiously follow it, and thus also imagines the consequences of the application of it. She is realistic as to the horrible problems it can pose regarding people's fundamental liberties. At the same time, nonetheless, she actively criticises capitalism and all the flaws inherent to it, simultaneously recognising the more substantial amount of freedom and well-being enjoyed by the people under such economic vision when compared to communist governments, for example. Equally, she also condemns unreservedly the restraints often imposed by socialist governments.

The narrative also seems to be disparaging the natural ability society has to be deluded by ideas that may sound egalitarian but end up being unpractical or greatly despotic. That can be noted in the fact that though Shevek has the opportunity to set foot on Urras and experience a more attractive way of life, he still prefers his home planet. That is comparable to how many people remain attached to communist and socialist ideals, even after having witnessed several frustrating and horrifying examples of their practice, instead of devising innovative models.

Fascinatingly, as we mentioned in the introduction of our article, writing can be tricky and sometimes the outcomes of a text can go much further than what its author intentioned. In that sense, we do not claim that Le Guin aimed to give her text traces of a pseudo-prophecy, as in the case of the texts we cited throughout



our paper – *Nineteen eighty-four* (Orwell, 1949) and *Native tongue* (Elgin, 1984). However, Pravic can also serve as a robust metaphor for political correctness discourse that appears to have gone far out of hand in our days. Freedom of speech has been curbed because of ideologies. The world of today has also created a prison for people's minds.

All in all, Le Guin's novel does pose more questions than answers, but that way it fulfils brilliantly the social function of any literary work of fiction, predominantly that of SF: to question reality and make others do the same; to imagine possibilities and impossibilities so that we may all have more critical mind-sets. Also, if the issues raised by the plot cannot yet be adequately responded, we have already started the discussion, in a great deal, thanks to the use of glossopoesis as a secondary narrative framework.

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