

Ursula K. Le Guin: Literature and otherness

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Abstract. The late Ursula K. Le Guin was a woman of strong convictions: liberty, equality of rights, and the dignity of the human being were her *dicta*. She did not only defend women's rights but the rights of every human being. The acceptance of the Other played a primary role in her writings. The revolutions she introduced in the genre of contemporary fantasy literature, mainly the profound shift of focus from the male perspective of the hero myth to include a feminine point of view and centrality and the transformation of narrative time structure are the reason to have chosen to center this analysis on the Earthsea cycle.

Keywords: Earthsea, dragons, women, death, time.

Ursula K. Le Guin: Literatura e Alteridade. *Ursula Le Guin era uma mulher de fortes convicções: liberdade, igualdade de direitos e respeito pela dignidade do ser humano eram os seus dicta. Não se limitou a defender os direitos das mulheres, mas os de todos os seres humanos. As revoluções que introduziu no género da fantasia, principalmente a radical mudança de foco do mito tradicional do herói, para nele incluir um ponto de vista e centralidade feminista são o cerne da análise do ciclo de Earthsea apresentado neste artigo. Le Guin foi capaz de encontrar um equilíbrio entre tradições diferentes, a cultura ocidental e a filosofia taoista, inovando e atravessando fronteiras imprevistas.*

Palavras-chave: *Earthsea, dragões, mulheres, morte, tempo.*

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My goal has always been to subvert as much as possible without hurting anybody's feelings.
(Le Guin, 1989a)

The *Earthsea* cycle is Le Guin's major fantasy cycle, a fictional world she started developing in 1964 and to which she returned almost until her death, in January 2018.⁽¹⁾ Unhurriedly, throughout 53 years, like the *Moirae*, Ursula Le Guin wove the destiny of humans and dragons, inhabitants of a fantasy world made up by a multitude of small microcosms (islands, islets, and rafts). However, the sum of all inhabited regions does not attain the totality of the fictional world because the West remained uncharted by humans, a place where some arrive only by flying the "other wind." As *Moirae*, Le Guin incorporates the three functions of Klotho, Lakhesis, and Atropos: to spin, to weave and to cut the thread of life, and also the role of Nyx, goddess of the night from whom, according to the Orphic Hymn #3 *To Nyx*,⁽²⁾ descend both gods and men or, applying the concept to *Earthsea*, both dragons and humans.

Earthsea is a universe in expansion, becoming more multifaceted with each new story, and changing the original mythical paradigm, adapting it to actual western Weltanschauung.⁽³⁾ The structure of the first three novels stands on the hero monomyth, following the crucial stages defined by Joseph Campbell (2004) and Jungian psychology.⁽⁴⁾ The readers accompany

1. The cycle began with the short-stories "The Word of Unbinding" (1989b) and "The Rule of Names" (1989c), published in *Fantastic* in 1964, and continued possibly until near her death, since Guin's last published short story of the cycle, "Firelight", written in 2017, was published posthumously in August 2018 in the Summer Issue of *The Paris Review*. The novels included in the *Earthsea* cycle are *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1993b), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1993c), *The Farthest Shore* (1993d) *Tehanu* (1993e) and *The Other Wind* (2001a) and a collection of short stories, *Tales from Earthsea* (Le Guin, 2001b). In October 2018 there will be published an illustrated collection containing all the novels, and most of the short stories – including those published in *Tales from Earthsea*. Two will, apparently, be excluded: "Firelight" and "Darkrose and Diamond" (1999). Whenever I refer to *Earthsea* cycle, I am taking in consideration all novels and short stories, written from 1964 to 2017. This essay is a full revised version of a paper presented at the International Conference *Literary Beasts/Ecrire l'animal*, held in the London Metropolitan University, in November 2004.
2. "I shall sing of Night, mother of gods and men./(Night – and let us call her Kypris – gave birth/to all.)" (Athanasakis, 1977, p. 7).
3. Further, in the essay I will come back to this idea, exploring it more deeply.
4. First editions of the initial trilogy: *A Wizard of Earthsea* in 1968, *The Tombs of Atuan* in 1971 and *The Farthest Shore* in 1972. Campbell and Jung are key theorists in the first novels of Le Guin's fantasy.

Ged, the black male hero, from birth to early adulthood; follow his descent to the underworld to recover a lost treasure; travel with him again in Ged's final voyage to the world of the dead to restore the pretense equilibrium, returning a drained mage and reborn man.

However, between the early 1970s and the early 1990s Le Guin's mind, as well as that of her first readers, had changed, evolved. The myth of the hero that had been dominant in western culture and suited for young adult male (Henderson, 1964) needed to be reshaped to continue to make sense to contemporary readers because, as it stood, it was too simplistic for modern reality and psychological needs.⁽⁵⁾ Due to cultural change, says Warren Rochelle, "myths need to be retold, over and over, to be useful. [...] For each generation then 'the myths and tales we learned as children – fables, folktales, legends, hero-stories, god-stories' must be retold, rethought, revisioned" (2001, p. 33).

The tapestry Le Guin weaved in the first three books of the *Earthsea* Cycle no longer echoed the author's ethos and she "rebelled" against dominant political and cultural western societies' elites that insisted in perpetuating a social and cultural state of affairs that is no longer actual. In the essay "Unquestioned Assumptions" (2004) Le Guin dismantles five basic western cultural assumptions that *Earthsea* cycle takes to pieces. Those assumptions are: "we're all men" and "we're all white" (p. 242), "we're all straight" and "we're all Christian" (p. 243), and finally that "we're all young" (pp. 244-247). At least four of these assumptions are openly dealt with more explicitly in the two final novels, *Tehanu*, and *The Other Wind*, as well as in *Tales from Earthsea*. The fictional world complexity grew in the telling, bringing into

However, Le Guin always subjected her own work to a constant critical appraisal, recognizing the need to evolve. Consequently, Campbell and Jung's works underwent critical reinterpretation and reevaluation, according to Le Guin's own cultural evolution and constant attention to the world/reality around her. Compare, for instance, the 1974 essay "The Child and the Shadow", with the following excerpt: "The purposive, utilitarian approach to fantasy, particularly folktale, of a Bruno Bettelheim or Robert Bly, and in general the "psychological" approach to fantasy, explaining each element of the story in terms of its archetype or unconscious source or educative use, is deeply regressive; it perceives literature as magic, it is a *verbomancy*. To such interpreters the spell is a spell only if it works to heal or reveal!" (Le Guin, 2007, p. 86).

5. As far as I know, Le Guin is the first writer that tries to deal with the need to adapt the hero myth to contemporary western culture. Evolution is a natural process in all myths that "stay alive" in a culture: to continue to make sense, myths evolve along with the changing Weltanschauung in which they are active or they "perish", become void of meaning and stop being used.

the center elements that stood in the periphery of the first three novels. To trace the profound transformations Le Guin introduced in the fantasy cycle, one needs to make a close reading of the texts, comparing the first three novels with the texts published after the 90s.

Ged's outstanding achievements narrated in the first novels are unquestioned, his courage remains a fact, and is even exalted by his stern refusal to occupy the first plan. His tale is sung but does not accurately register history (1993d, pp. 477-478). *Tehanu* starts, in what concerns the ex-mage, where *The Farthest Shore* ends. Ged is no longer a wizard; just an old man learning how to live as a simple man. As Moss says:

A man's in his skin, see, like a nut in its shell [...] It's hard and strong, that shell, and is all full of him. Full of grand man-meat, man-self. And that's all. That's all there is. It's all him and nothing else, inside. [...] [If he is a wizard then] it's all his power inside. His power's himself, see. That how it's with him. And that's all. When his power goes, he's gone. Empty. [...] Nothing. (1993e, p. 528)

Ged will have to try to fill the nut again with a different content – that of ordinary men. Therefore, he will no longer play an essential role in the later narratives, staying in the background. A source of wisdom, but without action. Moss's interpretation of Ged's state is not entirely correct. She too is biased, her knowledge partial. She cannot understand that the reborn man is not an empty shell but a true Taoist sage who attained the utmost goal of any Taoist: the *wu wei*.

In *Earthsea* cycle final fictions, the four loose threads from the initial trilogy are woven into new ideas: dragons, women, death and time. The knowledge of their true nature was lost to human memory, buried in the collective unconscious under layers of history and consciousness laboriously built throughout centuries of conscious human evolution. In the first three novels, dragons, women, death and time remained in the periphery of the plot. They intervene, they act, but mages and society as a whole did not know them, did not understand their nature: "we're all men."

Dragons act in *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Farthest Shore*. However, the human characters in the novels always mediate the image the reader forms of them. Therefore, they are pictured as strange winged beings that, though speaking the Language of Creation, are beyond comprehension:

beings of power, but treacherous and unpredictable; bringers of destruction for no good rational reason, yet known to be more than just animals. Alternatively, as Ged puts it:

The dragons are avaricious, insatiable, treacherous; without pity, without remorse. But are they evil? Who am I, to judge the acts of dragons?... They are wiser than men are. It is with them as with dreams, Arren. We men dream dreams, we work magic, we do good, we do evil. The dragons do not dream. They are dreams. They do not work magic: it is their substance, their being. They do not do; they are. (1993d, pp. 334-335)

“Dragons have no masters,” therefore a dragonlord is only “one whom the dragons will speak with” (1993c, p. 248).

Furthermore, there is a strong taboo concerning the relationship between men and dragons: no man should ever look into the dragon’s eyes for he would be destroyed by the primordial knowledge and lose his mind. The eyes are the mirror of the soul. To look into the eyes of a dragon is to enter the realm of primordial knowledge, forbidden to mortal men.

Summing up, until the fourth novel, *Tehanu*, the knowledge humans have of dragons is based in stories half-remembered, wobbly ideas and taboos. Besides, this seems to be the main feature of human knowledge in Earthsea and outside fiction: always partial, half-recalled, full of restrictions and preconceptions that have their origin in fear of the unknown and the eagerness for stability. Dragons, women, death and time are dreaded themes, misunderstood and better left unquestioned. According to men, no one can understand dragons any better than one understands women (and their magic), or death, or time.

The myth of creation, retold annually throughout Earthsea, cannot wholly perform its function of uniting people and giving sense to their lives, bonding the communities. It shares the same features of all knowledge taught in the dominant male culture of the archipelago, that of the Inner Lands: it is only partially retold, adapted to men’s social and cultural conditions. However, in the process of adaptation, men forgot part of the story and retained just what still made sense to their conscious mind: Segoy, the Eldest, created the world out of the water by naming every bit of matter; then he created dragons. There is no explicit connection made in *The Creation*

of Éa, as it is remembered and sang, between dragons and humans, though some reminiscence of ancient knowledge persists in the common idea that dragons are older than humankind, share the same creator, Segoy, and there are strange stories alluded to, but protected by some kind of secrecy.⁽⁶⁾

As to the peripheral position of women in Earthsea, much of what was said about dragons also applies to them. A role is allotted to Women, who are respected as long as they comply with the following eight tasks: “bed, breed, bake, cook, clean, spin, sew, serve” (1993e, p. 509). If they can do these correctly, they deserve respect. However, if they have the power of magic, or if they act outside their restricted assigned role, they are feared, rejected outcasts.

There is a clear relationship between women, the Old Powers of Earth, and the chaotic matter Segoy ordered. Both share a common origin with mages’ magic, but while magic is studied, revered, and stands as the central pillar of society and its culture, the Old Powers are dangerous forces, uncontrollable, unpredictable, like dragons, women or time. Women of power, that is, women who do not live solely by the eight tasks mentioned above, or that in some way are perceived as being odd or different according to the standards of normality, constitute a threat.

Tenar, in Atuan, is a dangerous woman because she is the reincarnated priestess of the Old Powers. In the Inner Lands, the fact that she brought the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, with the Rune of Peace, is not a token that can guarantee her the respect of ordinary people. Her skin is of a different color, she speaks an odd language, she mingled with mages, and was a priestess – therefore she is strange and is sent to the periphery of society.

In *The Farthest Shore*, Tenar is mentioned only three times, as someone who took part in essential past adventures.⁽⁷⁾

Moving now to the third peripheral theme, death, it remains on the threshold of the first two novels. Ged goes to the world of the dead following a child and summons the shadow that will pursue him throughout *A Wizard of Earthsea*, but the theme is not developed. In *The Tombs of Atuan*, Tenar serves the Old Powers, but these have to do with life and death, they are a manifestation of the powers of the Great Mother and should not be

6. Namely, the stories collected in *Tales from Earthsea*.

7. She is mentioned in passing in the first chapter of *The Farthest Shore* (p. 309) and then two more times by Ged in p. 441.

interpreted as having only a negative meaning. In the whole cycle, Ged is one of the few characters who acknowledges the ambivalence of these Powers.

In what concerns the third novel, though death is one of the major themes, it is not its central issue: Ged and Lebannen's quest is to stop a mage who is meddling with death to gain power over the living. It is with the life and the harmony in Earthsea, in the world, that they are concerned. If they do not stop Cob, the future King will not have a kingdom at all. *The Farthest Shore* is, at the same time, a *Bildungsroman* in the sense that one of Ged's functions is to shape the character of the future kind, teach him that death is a natural consequence of living.

Nevertheless, death seemed a senseless waste. The dead inhabited a world built exactly like the real, living world, but without any use, or purpose. The dead wandered about with nothing to see, do, or feel. Mothers ignored their children, lovers forgot their loved ones, and heroes roamed the dusty land senselessly. Death was only the doorway to limbo.

This vision of death and its domain is in contradiction with the Taoist philosophy, and this contradiction underlies the whole cycle. However, this description of death did not make sense, considering Taoist philosophy is a structural feature of this fictional world. Built upon the idea of balance between yin and yang, death had to be more than what was described or, at least, different.

According to Taoist philosophy, death is as natural as life itself, part of Nature and the way it evolves, part of the Tao: "where there's birth, there's death; where there's death, birth. Where there's a possible, there is the impossible, – with the impossible, the possible is" (Chuang-Tzu, 1998, p. 11). The underworld cannot be just what is portrayed in the first three novels of the cycle: a dreadful world, dominated by pain, psychological punishment, and total indifference. In Taoism, life and death are connected with time –not the linear time of western culture, but with time evolving perpetually, with change, with the cycle of Nature, evolving from equilibrium to imbalance to achieve a new (different) equilibrium.

The wind and the seas, the powers of water and earth and light, all that these do, and all that beasts do and green things do, is well done, and rightly done. All these act within the Equilibrium. From the hurricane and the great whale's

sounding to the fall of a dry leaf and the gnat's flight, all they do is done within the balance of the whole. (1993d, p. 361)

The equilibrium of Earthsea cannot be attained if the four peripheral issues are not brought to the center of the plot, and dealt with thoroughly. Society cannot be in equilibrium if the relationship between men and women is not balanced. If they do not understand where they stand in the grand scheme of creation, intelligent species cannot live harmoniously in the world. If death is meaningless, Life cannot be fully experienced. If time is not understood as the essence of evolution, human societies will not evolve and will perish, menacing the whole Equilibrium.

After Ged's final quest, Earthsea continued without experiencing the full benefits of having a King in the throne, of having a proper center, because much else was still unbalanced in the minds of every inhabitant of the Inner Lands, as well as in the social, political and cultural structures.

The end of *The Farthest Shore* could not be a conclusion to Earthsea. If it were, Ged's life would have been one painful experience of humility. A great mage, probably greater than the venerated Erreth-Akbe, but the whole world would remain unbalanced. As long as men were the center, action the motto, time linear and women peripheral, Earthsea would keep bothering Ursula Le Guin's philosophy and her acute sense of creative responsibility, issues she addresses in *Earthsea revised* (1993a).

From 1972 on I knew there should be a fourth book of Earthsea, but it was sixteen years before I could write it. [...] but now, instead of using the pseudo-genderless male viewpoint of the heroic tradition, the world is seen through a woman's eyes. This time the gendering of the point of view is neither hidden nor denied. [...] In my lifetime as a writer, I have lived through a revolution, a great and ongoing revolution. When the world turns over, you can't go on thinking upside down. What was innocence is now irresponsibility. Visions must be revised. (1993a, pp. 11-12)

Tehanu is the novel where taboos regarding women, dragons and time start being dismantled. With them, inevitably, the question of male power is also challenged. Tenar, despite her inability for magic, is a woman of power for she can question prejudices, she seeks the hidden meaning under the

cloak of the convention, and she challenges the pride and arrogance of power and ignorance. She experienced different ways of living as a woman in Earthsea: she was a priestess, a companion to and apprentice of mages, a wife, a mother, and a farm-keeper. At the beginning of *Tehanu*, she is a widow raising an abused and crippled orphan child. Long before, she had chosen to leave Ogion's kind protection to experience the standard role of women in Earthsea: "bed, breed, bake, cook, clean, spin, sew, serve." However, she is also a woman of knowledge that does not forget easily. Her quest is to find what a woman's power is, or stating it differently: what power is. Although she does not fully realize the extension of her knowledge, acquired in different parts of the archipelago and through a variety of experiences, the reader, through her recollections, can view the whole scheme of creation and start filling the gaps of the incomplete information provided in the first three novels. The power of a woman lies in her ability to be different things through time, and the roots of that power are deeply plunged at the beginning of creation. Mossy formulates Tenar's quest in an uneducated and biased statement:

Oh, well, dearie, a woman's a different thing entirely. Who knows where a woman begins and ends? Listen, mistress, I have roots, I have roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands. I go back into the dark. [...] I go back into the dark! Before the moon I was. No one knows, no one knows, no one can say what I am, what a woman is, a woman of power, a woman's power, deeper than the roots of trees, deeper than the roots of islands, older than the Making, older than the moon. Who dares ask questions of the dark? Who'll ask the dark its name?" (1993e, pp. 528-529)

Nonetheless, Tenar knows best: she can and will question the dark its name. It is through Tenar that the lost knowledge of the dragons is recovered and brought back to the first plan. Remembering a tale the old mage Ogion had told her, she teaches her adopted child not only the traditional *Creation of Éa* but also the lost knowledge kept by a dragon-woman: the story of the Woman of Kemay which states definitely that, "in the beginning, dragon and human were all one. They were all one people, one race, winged, and

speaking the True Language”⁽⁸⁾ (1993e, p. 492). It is here that the dark has its name: in the creation of nature and in its evolution in time.

These first dragons are a symbol of the primordial unity, before any differentiation. Len Hatfield says that for these dragons there is no dichotomy between mind and body, subject and object (1993, p. 58). The first dragons created by Segoy are the expression of the primordial unity. However, since Earthsea was initially structured as a universe in balance between two opposites, the one had to give place to the two. All creation exists in time and, as Tenar says, “in time nothing can be without becoming” (1993e, p. 492). It is the fundamental Taoist principle that unites everything in Nature. Not western male linear time, not the circular time of the male hero tale, but the feminine time, the time of endless evolution and transformation through the acceptance of the Other and having its roots in the past. Burchill formulated this idea when she states:

becoming-woman as a mode of repetition constitutive of the future is distinguished from the repetition or reproduction of feminine gender traits in that, instead of contenting itself with including difference as a variant within (an enlarged field of) the Same, it extracts from the sedimentation of the past, elements ‘pertaining to difference’, which it then enfolds – or reiterates – in new configurations that no longer take their bearing from the past as it is congealed, nor from the present as the deployment of variations informed by this past. (2010, p. 94)⁽⁹⁾

Asking the dark its name, Tenar discovers Dragons became two different races with altered interests and ways of life. With the differentiation came hate and distrust that lead to conflict, and further differentiation. Kalessin/Segoy confirms what, somehow, Tenar already knows from old tales:

8. The story is told in *Tehanu*, pp. 490-493.

9. Based on Burchill assertions, Donaldson studies Le Guin’s fantasy cycle from a postmodernist feminist theory and comes to a similar conclusion regarding the feminine and her connection with time as becoming stating “‘becoming’ is about infinite possibilities and not the achievement of a unified ‘identity’ and it therefore enables the destabilisation of categories that have inhabited somewhat static and stable positions in the symbolic order, such as the term ‘woman.’” (2013, p. 41).

Once we were one people. And in sign of that, in every generation of men, one or two are born who are dragons also. And in every generation of our people, longer than the quick lives of men, one of us is born who is also human. Of these one is now living in the Inner Isles. And there is one of them living there now who is a dragon. These two are the messengers, the bringers of choice. There will be no more such born to us or to them. For the balance changes. (2001a, p. 152)

The unique beings that are born in every generation of men and dragon form two additional entities that are not quite human nor dragon; third and fourth alternatives that help balance the race. The two specific beings mentioned by Kalessin as living in the Inner lands are Tenar and Tehanu. Tehanu is one of the dragons born to humans, as was the Woman of Kemay. Tenar is one of the humans born to dragons. She was the priestess of the Old Power, the one that is perpetually reborn: "All human beings were forever reborn, but only she, Arha, was reborn forever as herself" (1993c, p. 214).

Tenar's nature allows her to ask the dark its name. That is also why she can look Kalessin in the eye and talk to the Creator. Being human she cannot fly, being dragon she is free, untamable, more substantial than the role allotted to her as a woman. Tenar and Tehanu are the results of the *conjunction oppositorum*, two different balanced beings sharing two natures, and they will be responsible for the final dismantling of the assumptions referred to by Le Guin: we're not all men, we're not all white, we're not all straight, we're not all Christian, and we're all young.

Tenar's ability to remember the past is directed to the nature of human and dragons. She never forgot the images drawn on the walls of the Painted Room, and it is to her that the weaver of Re Albi reveals the pictures of dragons with human eyes weaved on the backside of the fan (1993e, pp. 576-577). The essential difference between these two paintings lies in the eyes of the figures: in the fan, the dragons have lively human eyes, and in the Painted Room, the winged figures have sad blind eyes. Tenar feels that those gloomy eyes have to do with the inability to die experienced by the inhabitants of the Inner Land, a task that will be carried out with the help of Tehanu-Dragon.

The changes in Earthsea will be profound and with unpredictable outcomes. The unbalance felt was the consequence of mistakes made

throughout centuries by people acting out of ignorance or pride. The caution taught by the wizards of Roke is, most of the times, a mere rhetorical stance because the knowledge they possess is partial and biased. Theirs is the one-sided knowledge of consciousness. Furthermore, their prejudice towards different kinds of magic, like the one performed by women, prevented them from attaining a wholly balanced picture of the outcome of any action. The prophecy regarding the new king was fulfilled, and changes began to be felt on the political level. However, for these changes to be effective, another must occur. Magic must find its new reformer because the old set of Rules no longer functions and Roke does not have a leader. *A woman on Gont* must also fulfil the prophecy of Master Patterner.

In *The Other Wind* the structure of the novel does not have one leading character, as in the previous narratives, but a set of characters, each responsible for part of the action. The transformation of Earthsea no longer depends on the heroic acts of one male character. The shared responsibility is one more change that Le Guin introduces in the traditional monomyth. Eight characters, four male, and four female, play each their part: Tenar, Tehanu, Irian, and Sesarakh lead the group having the task of questioning old biased truths and bringing forth the knowledge hidden in the collective unconscious; Lebannen is the king who assumes his responsibility to protect the people and assure that what has to be done will be done. He also has to set an example of a balanced relationship between men and women, based on respect and the acceptance of differences. Adler is the one called forth by chance to act when fear and prejudice paralyze the educated ones. Master Patterner is the link that binds the prophecy and the future, a true Taoist, while Master Summoner has the task of redeeming past actions.

The final equation – dragon, women, death and time – is solved. Led by women, people begin to look for what has been forgotten, reconstructing the puzzle of memory. The real kinship of dragons and humans is confirmed, as is the conflict that led them apart.

The meaninglessness experienced in the land of the dead was, in fact, a hard punishment: the complete lack of sense that drained beauty out of life. Everything that humans achieved in life, through hard work and action, lost its meaning in the utter eternal apathy.

Tehanu and Adler are the ones to start dismantling the wall circumscribing the world of the dead, allowing them to dissolve freely into Nature.

complementarity and evolution. Each must discover his/her way, in the natural change of balance/unbalance that assures the future. It must be built with a foot on the past, another in the future so a balanced present can be achieved, always demanding open-mindedness. Probably, one of the best tributes one can offer Dame Ursula Le Guin is to remember her as an open-minded person whose literary work served no agenda but one: constant evolution.

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