

ON U.K. LE GUIN'S "SECOND EARTHSEA TRILOGY" AND ITS COGNITIONS:
A COMMENTARY*/

A commentary presupposes the classic status of the text it speaks about.

Walter Benjamin

To accept a classical writer without changing him/her means to betray her/him.

Heiner Müller

This article arose out of the unease I felt at the ending of my "Fantasy" article, where it now seems to me not only that spacetime forced me to give short shrift to Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* writings, but that what I said applies only to the first three books, focussed mainly on the protagonist Ged. I want thus to follow the inner logic of her three last books set in Earthsea.^{1/} My working hypothesis is that these three books (*Tehanu*, *Tales from Earthsea*, *The Other Wind*) constitute a "Second Earthsea Trilogy," of high interest precisely because it both continues and strongly modifies the first one. The second trilogy, while operating with the central presuppositions of the first one, amounts to its reconsideration and rewriting. At the end, I would wish to discuss what and how may be cognitive in this Second Trilogy.

1. The Creation of Ea(rthsea), Twice

The geographical layout of the Earthsea world, evident in the careful map carefully repeated at the beginning of most single books in what I shall call the "two trilogies," begins with the name of "Earthsea." It is a compressed oxymoron or paradox, akin to binaries such as "the left hand of darkness," repeated as the verse motto from this world's Creation song on or indeed before the first page of *Tehanu*:

Only in silence the word,
only in dark the light,
only in dying life:
bright the hawk's flight
on the empty sky.

The Creation of Éa

The verse "only in dark the light" may serve to introduce two of the main components of Le Guin's Earthsea vision: first, the contraries which complement each other such as dark and light; second, an order of preference in each verse which one suspects may harbour a hierarchy. As different from the full Daoist symmetry in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (where light was the left hand of darkness, darkness the right hand of light), the light here comes to be, comes out of, darkness, traditionally in most mythologies Mother Night (cf. also 57). Further, the word -- both an all-important matter and an ineradicable beginning for every writer, but in Le Guin even expressly thematised as a magically creative force, e.g. in the secret "true name" of each person which shares in his/her essence, and therefore mentioned in the very first verse -- exists, comes out of, can be heard only against the enveloping, motherly silence. Since light, again traditionally, means knowledge, cognition or understanding, I shall later investigate how far this obtains in the whole Trilogy. As to life, it exists, has meaning, has distinction only as it comes to be, as it is ceaselessly shaped against the background of dying (this shall become

overwhelmingly important in the last book, *The Other Wind*). And in the second half of the ditty, which the semicolon suggests is also a conclusion, the hawk's course can be seen as bright only (the adverb is here clearly implied) against the empty sky.

However, all the "against" oppositions, the background vs. foreground, were introduced by my comment: instead of what would seem to me the default concept of "against," Le Guin uses "on" or indeed "in." Why? There is a prosodic reason (in this steely delicacy one syllable more would be unbalancing), but I don't think it is the only or main one. "On" -- as a line (of flight) on a visual field -- is much more intimate, there is contiguity but no express opposition: if there were no sky flying would not be possible, if it were not empty but cluttered with visual "noise," the flight would be visible with difficulty if at all, certainly it would be less important or noteworthy. "On" seems to me here much akin to "a line on paper" -- usually a black line on white paper -- thus latching on and enriching the first three "in"s: the word (now written), the light, the life (now bright); in fact, is a line on or in the paper? Only the laziness of our look from above prefers "on." The three couples of silence-word, dark-light, and dying-life are thus contraries but not contradictories, not only complementary to but intimately participating in each other. Furthermore, the verses also enforce the primacy of each first term: silence, dark/ness, dying/death; which we can therefore without too much straining call parental, engendering or motherly. The terms word-light-life are then filial, younger, fresher, more evident -- or audible -- but never to be fully and properly perceived and understood without the co-presence of the parental quality (the opposite doesn't obtain). The three first lines, where the final prosodic foot progressively contracts from three syllables to one, getting thus more weighty as the lines go on, imply to me also a value progression: life contains light which contains the word. I shall risk the hypothesis, to be checked against the *Earthsea* cycle as a whole, that this also means life subsumes cognition which in turn subsumes writing. This is the hierarchy which I here find implied in amazing pithiness.

As to the term "Earthsea" itself, *The Creation of Éa* clearly states that before the earth was, the sea was. A glance at the map of the Earthsea world confirms that the measurable islands are bathed in a circumambient Ocean of which we do not know where it begins or ends, very similar to the relation of life to death. This too is (literally) a hierarchy. It may not be very evident in the narrations, which have to concentrate on people mostly living on dry land, but its water element connected to trees and the Old Speech subtly defines and infiltrates the younger element and powers. Indeed, "the dry land" par excellence, that is without any trace of humidity -- or sunlight or living contact -- is the land of the dead of individualism, which is faced both in *The Farthest Shore* of 1972 and *The Other Wind* 30 years later, the final books of the first and the second trilogy.

The second half of the cited poem, the last two verses, relates to the first half as the particular to the general. First we were given the law of this world, coterminous with its perception. Now comes the course of events. The balance has here shifted: the parental function of the empty sky seems to me minimal, only an enabling function remains, somewhat offset by the emptiness. The stress is on the flight of the protagonist. Now, before they stood at the head of *Tehanu*, the cited verses stood at the head of *A Wizard of Earthsea*. In the first trilogy, even in *The Tombs of Atuan*, the hero was Ged, Sparrowhawk, and his end was honourable but, in retrospect, bright only in personal heroism but not necessarily in an opening to the future. The hero re-established a disturbed balance, his function was conservative. Depending on the situation, this may not be a swearword, but it now turns out the balance itself is very suspect. Now the hero, focus, and standpoint is a binomial heroine: Tenar, the motherly, who nurtures the life of and brings out into the light Therru as Tehanu, the dragon child who against all odds knows the words of dragons and men. The verses, being identical, affirm the unity of the two trilogies. But being as of *Tehanu* put into a different context and thus for the reader different (as Borges's Pierre Ménard found in his word-by-word rewriting of *Don Quixote* in the 19th Century), the verses also allow for this unity changing between *Earthsea*'s first and second life-cycle. Whatever Le Guin's reason for repeating them in front of what she

thought of -- at the time of writing it -- the fourth and last book of *Earthsea*, it has now, I would argue, turned into a pointer to this radically changed unity. In the two trilogies Earthsea is and is not the same world. The geography and the initial magic framework seem more or less the same. Yet the glance at them has changed (cf. Le Guin's account in *ER* 19-21). What Brecht would call a semi-revolution has intervened between the trilogies. A feminist or, as Alice Walker might say, a womanist revision of the first trilogy is here beginning, one that has "at the end of... *Tehanu*" (written at the end of the 1980s) "arrived at what [the author] felt to be now" ("Foreword" to *TfE* XI) and will continue by looking into the future -- which in a way is a return to the most ancient past, on a higher rung of the spiral. But also (if I may be permitted the word) a dragonist revision.

2. *Tehanu*: What Happens to Tenar

Farmer Flint's widow Goha on the island of Gont rescues in the first chapter the raped and badly fire-scarred child she names Therru. Herself once a somewhat less cruelly abused girl, the erstwhile sacred princess-prisoner Tenar of Atuan is now in the position earlier reserved for her male rescuer, Ged. Her heroism isn't in a showy clash of force but in unceasing courage which with stealth and other means of negative power hides Therru until she can grow up. She has no male network to rely on, only the kind island mage Ogion who dies early on, whispering joyfully "Over--all changed" (31, and cf. 52). This is emblematic of the bad "time of ruining, the end of an age" (16, and cf. 79); I would in fact read the death of this friend of Ged's as emblematic of the death, or if you wish the qualitative reappraisal, of (the universe of) the Gedian first Earthsea trilogy, focussed on the Mage -- read: Artist -- as a Young Man. In the first trilogy Tenar had left power struggles and retreated to the role of the farmer's wife. The world is still dominated by power-mad males but she now makes the crucial decision: "I served them and I left them... I will not let them have you." (3) Female solidarity shapes this book and wins out -- with some crucial help from enlightened dragons and just men, thus politically and psychologically much superior to Russ's vision and narrative in *The Two of Them*. It is also to my mind much better -- clearer and tougher -- than the abstract abused child and indifferent community in Le Guin's "Those Who Walk Away from Omelas," as well as than the solution indicated in that title. Instead of exodus, there is subversion: "The child irreparably wronged, whose human inheritance has been taken from her--so many children in our world, all over our world now--that child is our guide." (*ER* 25)

The second thing that happens to Goha/ Tenar is the return of the battle-scarred Sparrowhawk, who has now lost all his magical powers and himself opted out of male power-struggles. On the margins of the patriarchy, on a far-off mountainous and rural island, this is also a qualitatively new Ged who can, having descended from the heights of upper-class power, slowly reacquire the capacity for sympathy and sexual love. It was to my mind entirely appropriate that Le Guin held off in the first trilogy from the usual Theseus-Ariadne culmination in erotics, even if this left Tenar without a clear role after fulfilling her narrative function of cohabiting with the Tolkienian Ring (which, together with the Tolkienian just King and the whole standard set-up of "traditional [F]antasy,... a rigid social hierarchy of kings, lords, merchants, peasants" [*ER* 8] I found a useless but fortunately a secondary element in the first *Earthsea* trilogy). It is difficult to say whether she in that trilogy ended up as more of a narrative dropout or of a social dropout, just as it was difficult to say whether Ged had in fact saved the Earthsea world in the normative black-and-white Tolkienian fashion. The politics of women were left unclear, the politics of men -- mages -- subordinated to personal wholeness. Having rightly come back to find Tenar, Le Guin was in this novel also coming to a modified stance: "...a spark; like the certainty of a conception; a change, a new thing" (51). It turns out that the personal and the political cannot be sundered (the feminists, and earlier the socialists and anarchists, were right so far). The world can perhaps be saved from one acute danger by a

feat of heroism, say analogous to the antifascist Second World War, but the pervasive system of cruel power and privilege cannot be righted by one explosive outburst -- an ejaculative Tolkienian massing on the battlefield -- but only by protracted and complex collaboration for life between women, men, and dragons (and animals and plants). As in the *Creation* song, we begin with the most important, both basic and enveloping, concept of life: a girl's life, which then changes Tenar's and Ged's. Three scarred people, getting whole again, in the interstices of power -- though finally saved only by several arrivals of *dei ex machina*. More was lacking to bring together character and events, the personal and the political. This will be the explicit theme of the other two books in the "second trilogy," *Tales from Earthsea* (in particular the long story "The Finder") and *The Other Wind*, but the new outlook, the new glance which focusses on the changing world, was first found and begun exploring here.

3. "The Finder": The Theory of Earthly Politics

The long story "The Finder" could be called "An Ambiguous Utopia enters Earthsea." The adumbrations of *Tehanu* are here fully developed as a radical modification of the first trilogy's "absolute" magery, disguised as the story of how the mage school at Roke came to be. I shall return to the downgrading of magery in a later section. Here I wish to trace the overt equation of magery to gendered power.

What underlies Le Guin second trilogy, as is so often stressed in it, are rumblings of a huge change in social and cosmic being. The books struggle to understand and render it. The protagonist Otter/Tern/Medra is the camera focus for and enabler of that change because he is sensitive to it. Perhaps the closest it intersects with our non-magic and dragonless world is his anguished outburst: "Will the slaves go free? Will beggars eat? Will justice be done?" And further, the classic question of subversive movements, how do we organise against those whose interests are bound up with established power: "We can't do anything without each other.... But it's the greedy ones, the cruel ones who hold together and strengthen each other. And those who won't join them stand alone." (45) A populist counter-power must be developed, based on trust -- or solidarity -- as prefigured in the beautiful initial episode of Otter and Anieb who, as slaves in the mercury mines, pool their powers to kill the evil magician-cum-mining-boss and win freedom. Otter finds its seed in existence as the secret society of the Hand, "or the women of the Hand, though we're not women only" (46), but it is predicated on living in the interstice of the slaveholders', exploiters', and warlords' power. This thematises the interstitial life of Tenar and Ged on their peripheral island, this time in the potential centre of Roke, whose dwellers are however hampered by a persuasion analogous to feminist (or any other) separatism. The early Roke is a true refuge and escape haven but, ambiguously, the refuge is also a self-made prison, the escape has led to a larger and more comfortable jail--and thus abetted the injustice addressed by Otter (cf. also 68).

The sign of the Hand is a fist opening palm up as if in an offering. It is not the communist clenched and raised fist but it can be seen as a less triumphant and more dynamic, less scientific and more utopian, slyer and more secret, and certainly more feminine than masculine (as these adjectives are now understood) analogue to it. The debate between Otter and the original Roke women re-enacts Lenin's 1902 question "What is to be done?" and comes, *mutatis mutandis*, to a similar conclusion: an organised counterparty is needed, this time in feedback with a central school on the hidden island: "Roke's freedom lay in offering others freedom" (69).

Enter gender politics, in regard to which my stance is one of a critical ally of intelligent feminism.^{2/} I find the stress on women as the main force of resistance understandable and up to a point just. It is an intelligent stress for it also embraces men of good will: the man Otter and the woman Anieb could only have won freedom together, Anieb as inspirator and teacher, Otter as the acceptor and executor. That most men will attack Roke's liberation movement and

that some will betray it, that in a class society ruled by men the rulers will have internalised arrogance and conflictuality, I find persuasive. Also that Roke will, even after Otter's success and the rise of a school where women are *primae inter pares*, degenerate from its Arcadian communism into a gender elitism worse than Plato's Guardians because of prideful males, thus leading to the fiercely misogynic setup found by Ged and here hollowed from within. What I do not find persuasive is a kind of equation of women as such with nature and liberation: I would have dearly liked to find a dastardly woman -- Earthsea's equivalent of our world's Mrs. Thatcher, the impoverisher of miners, or Indira Gandhi, the steriliser of poor women -- who may even do the work of power-mad injustice better than the males. Le Guin knows about them, witness *The Dispossessed*, but she chose not to show it here. (Let me put it this way: could all women talk to dragons?) Obversely, her beautiful stories of heterosexual love -- which aroused the ire of "politically correct" Samuel Delany in the case of that novel -- shown after Tenar and Ged also in Otter and Ember on Roke, in the story "Darkrose and Diamond," and finally in Alder and Lily of the last book in *Earthsea*, testify that the author knows at least as much as the critic (I think: more).

4. *Tehanu* and *Tales from Earthsea*: The Theory of Magic; and an Approximation to Dragons

Magic may be very roughly defined as the possibility of the human mind to act directly and without other outer means on matter. It differs from religion in that it needs no divinities (though contaminations are frequent).

Magic is usually taken as the element differentiating Fantasy from SF. I have argued this is not necessarily so, not a *differentia specifica* ("Considering"), and I take it -- very gladly -- that the downfall of magic as sacred power in the second *Earthsea* trilogy doesn't hurt my point. Le Guin has long ago asked why Americans fear dragons, and more recently she has eloquently described how people fearing change turn to Fantasy (but not only to it) for "stability, ancient truths, immutable simplicities. -- And the mills of capitalism provide them.... Commodified fantasy... invents nothing, but imitates and trivialises. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity.... Heroes brandish their swords, lasers, wands, as mechanically as combine harvesters, reaping profits..." (see the whole passage in "Foreword" XIV). Insofar as this obtains for the overwhelming majority of its writings, Fantasy is part and parcel of a blind refusal not only of the horrors but also of the achievements of bourgeois civilisation -- not merely of science and rationality but also of liberty equality and all-encompassing (non-racialised) fraternity, adding to this sorority and filiality -- perhaps we should call this last revolutionary slogan rather friendliness or conviviality. However, analogous strictures might be advanced against SF (even if often symmetrically obverse for its technolatry), though perhaps to a somewhat minor degree--one hopes. What this says about potential as well as really obtaining cognitiveness in Fantasy I leave for a separate consideration at the end.

As Le Guin has always perfectly understood, magic is most intimately bound up with *power*. Thence its aporias: magic started out in the first trilogy as power of mages (supposedly in the interest of all humanity) over nature, but it was always enmeshed with power over human nature too, and in the second trilogy it is revealed as preponderantly male power for dominating nature as female and females as nature. Power is, so argues a wise witch against the naive young Dragonfly in the eponymous short story, "making people do what you want, or pay you" (*TfE* 211). The cynical apprentice mage Ivory then paints her a picture of corrupt power: some "[Roke] Masters... hold aloof, following arcane knowledge... but using their knowledge for nothing. Others hide their ambitions under the grey cloak of wisdom.... And at the center, nothing." (213) And in particular, they refuse female mages, refuse the fact Roke was founded mostly by such and by winnowing the more ancient sacred practices of local witches and wizards -- sorcerers -- appealing to the "Powers of the Mother" ("Description" 288-89 and 293-

96), and claim that refusal of sexuality is needed for magery; all of this results in refusing to admit Dragonfly/Irian, a dragon chrysalis, as they had suppressed and demonised dragons in general. In face of change, they cling to “order, safety, and peace”, and therefore see the Roke Rule and world pattern as breakable glass rather than as breath and fire (cf. *TfE* 260). Just like the macho Fortress USA (or for that matter Fortress Europe), they haven’t learned that the house its safe which opens its doors (265), or at least allows the wind to blow through the windows (*OW* 231).

Not only does Ged forsake magic (or vice versa -- in the second trilogy it’s anyway a good riddance) but the whole story “Darkrose and Diamond” refuses magery (as well as commerce) in favour of art; only slightly more allegorically veiled, so does the key strand of Alder in the final novel, crucial for destroying fear of individualist death, that basis of male magery, through the alternate metaphysics of his love for Lily. As Tenar says, she learned Old Speech easily, but “the runes of power, the spells, the rules, the raising of the forces -- that was all dead for me. Somebody else’s [i.e. a male warrior’s] language.” (*Tehanu* 95). What “wizardry” remains after such deconstruction in the second trilogy? It is either a formalizing translation of the craft masteries of finding, weather-working, changing, healing, illusion creating or knowledge of songs (cf. 70), which in a differently described world could dispense with the hypothesis of magic; or it is consubstantial with trees, most particularly the Immanent Grove on Roke, going deep into the motherly earth; or with the Old Speech which remains untouched in the second trilogy (indeed a key to its dénouement), and to which I shall return.

And then:

And then there remain, unexplainable away, *the dragons*.

Near to midway of writing the second trilogy, Le Guin cites in *ER* 21 the prefigurative incident in *Tehanu* where Tenar is shown a silk fan by an old weaver. It turns out to have on its back, usually hidden, finely painted dragons grouped in the same spots as the men and women in the capital city on its usually displayed side:

She... saw the two paintings, made one by the light flowing through the silk, so that the clouds and peaks [from the dragon side] were the towers of the city, and the men and women were winged, and the dragons looked with human eyes.

“You see?”

“I see,” she murmured. (*Tehanu* 115)

This is a materialisation of the “double vision” always possessed by Therru, whose one eye has been burned away but in whom the dragon and human nature also coexist, and it is used by Le Guin to formulate what she saw the dragons in her *Earthsea* narrations as, at that point: “Dragons are... a way of knowing.... the dragons of a new world, America, and the visionary forms of an old woman’s mind.... In the first three books, I think the dragons were, above all, wildness. What is *not owned*.” (*ER* 21-22) The *status quo* rightly sees them as dangerous, for in *Tehanu* and after it their wildness grows to be “not only... dangerous beauty but... dangerous anger.... So the dragon is subversion, revolution, change... [against] oppression. It is the wildness of the spirit and of the earth, uprising against misrule. -- And it rejects gender.” (but see the uncut whole in *ER* 23-24 and further)

Thus the dragon embodies “the other, the not-human.” Yet it is also “our own imagining, a speaking spirit, wise, winged, which imagines a new order of freedom.” (*ER* 25-26).

How and why did dragons come about on *Earthsea*? In *Tehanu* (12-13), this is explained as a species divergence, a split from primeval wholeness on the order of Thales’s hermaphrodite story (as recounted by Plato): “in the beginning, dragons and people were all one.... one people, one race, winged and speaking the True Language. -- They were beautiful, and strong, and wise, and free.” Then came the split (*verw nadan*, *Vedurnan*, the Division), a myth of origins not far from Rousseau, between on the one hand the makers-cum-learners, who also became what *The Dispossessed* memorably named the proprietarians, and on the other those who wanted to live in a perpetual instant of freedom, “in love with flight and wildness,... ignorant and uncaring [of study and learning, or... houses and cities]”; and murderous conflicts arose between them.

Eventually they separated to the opposite sides of Earthsea and became two quite different peoples or species, but among the humans and the dragons there are some who remember the ancient kinship. The dragons' True Language of the Making, however, was (partly?) preserved as the wizards Old Speech. The dragons chose the elements fire and air, the humans earth and water.

I do not quite understand the dragons. It would be possible to argue for some inconsistencies between the vehicle and tenor, e.g. in the feral young, but I don't really think that matters. It might be simpler to say with Le Guin: "The dragons remain mysterious to me" (*ER* 22, cf. also *TfE* xv: "nobody can explain a dragon"). They are perhaps a model which has nothing above itself, which is unconditional and unsurpassable, all that *quo magis non dici potest*, a materialised and irascible numinosity, the principle, the end/ing, the head... (cf. Nancy 157). I do understand what I summarised above. And that they are supremely important to Le Guin and the *Earthsea* vision. Still, some worries nag at me. I shall have another try at dragons at the end.

5. *The Other Wind*: Mysteries of Dragons and Last Things

The title comes from the song cited in earlier books:

Farther west than west
beyond the land
my people are dancing
on the other wind.

But before the happy ending, the final, last, greatest peripety: going Cob's disturbance of the sociocosmic balance in the first trilogy one better. The new, gravest disturbance is signalled by Alder's beloved wife calling him to the "dry land" and not responding there to her "true name" in Old Speech but only to her everyday name of Lily. It turns out to consist in the unanimous urgency of the human dead to be liberated from their status of shades in the "dry land" and to attain Non-being -- a kind of Nirvana, in Le Guin's very unorthodox post-Daoist cosmic syncretism. This radically non-individualist catastrophe has no single wicked author: the nature of things, of the badly made human contract with the cosmos, is rebelling against the contractors.

It becomes clear in *The Other Wind* that the Split between men and dragons was, beyond the proprietarians' greed for material possessions, also caused by their metaphysical individualist greed: the yearning for personal immortality as a soul in afterlife. "Men want to own life, possess it, as if it were a jewel in a box," says the woman-turned-dragon Irian (225). In our world, the monotheistic Churches usually paint the other world as a place of delight for those who deserve it, even quite fleshly in Mohammedanism. None of that in Earthsea. The *verw nadan* contract ensures that all will "deserve" it, but what the fabric of nature allows them to get instead is a worse variant of the European Antiquity's dark underworld -- without sunlight or fleshly life, and furthermore bereft of the Hellenic underground rivers. The result of such a truly devilish pact leads to a good approximation of a Hell without devils, but with the possibly greater horror of total and everlasting non-relating to life: sun, water, other people, plants or animals: "To stand empty-eyed, unspeaking, in the shadows of a shadow city" (79) -- the exact and full inversion of the glad stanza from the *Creation of Éa* cited at my beginning. A ghoulish Un-creation. The dragons insist, as do the Kargish people, that the devilish contract (in post-Daoist terms this would be the totally wrong Way) allowed for people "never to die and never to be reborn" in return for learning how to do sorcery, how to "master" nature: "Only their bodies die. The rest of them stays in a dark place and never gets reborn." (125) Obversely, the dragons,

animals, and the Karg don't go to the "dry land" but "rejoin the greater being of the world. Like the grass, the trees, the animals." (145)^{3/}

It doesn't matter for my purposes how the happy ending in detail happens, suffice it to say that it does, there is not a harrowing but a taking back of hell: "great multitudes of men and women, who... stepped across [the wall] and were gone: a wisp of dust, a breath that shone an instant in the ever-brightening light." Alder and Lily too "[cross] together into the sunlight" (239).

This is of course an eschatological discourse: changing the mode of death and immortality, making humanity whole, speaking of last things, a kind of lay Day of Judgment. As in every Comedy, it ends in a marriage bond, here of Lebannon and Sesarakh, so to speak the Ged and Tenar of the younger, post-magic generation. It is lay, for it is about freedom. It may be encapsulated in the old song remembered by king Lebannen and, on the last page, by Tenar coming home to Ged: "O my joy, be free!" (198 and 246 -- the whole latter part of this book is to my mind luminously poetic).

What of this may be receivable for our non-Earthsea world? This is a question about the cognitive status of *Earthsea*, perhaps the best that Fantasy (if it is still that) has to offer us.

6. Of Cognition, and an Inconclusive Ending

I am in a quandary here, as I've been for ever and a day committed to the split between SF and Fantasy (perhaps my own version of *verw nadan*). The reason for it is the presence vs. absence of cognitiveness in these two genres. By cognition I mean a transitive understanding, which the readers can transfer from the pages of fiction to their own personal and collective lives. Reading has other delights of form, but this delight contains them all, and why settle for anything less, especially in these highly endangered times of ours where we badly need the cognitive delight? I believe Le Guin too is committed to learning and understanding, the tacit and spoken light of knowledge, though her farthest dragons are not. As for Fantasy in particular, I argued at length in "Considering" that its general absence of cognitiveness is bound up with denial or repression of key elements of earthly history, what we usually classify as political and economic interpersonal regularities, tendencies or strictures (I don't much believe in laws). If so, "why should men listen to stolen stories unless they concern important things -- that is, the doings of men?" (*ER* 7) Thus the question here is: how might the second *Earthsea* trilogy carry historical cognition or understanding? If it does to a significant degree, is this an exception? Or is it not Fantasy? Or should my stance towards Fantasy be "revisioned"?

Let me first mention only two of its key, splendid achievements, beyond Le Guin's delight in the revisioning of women and the diversity of humans, totally incompatible with racism and sexism (two matters which she has often spoken about and which are, I hope, implied in my foregoing text). First, she has triumphantly managed -- like her beloved Tolstoy -- to reconcile a supreme collective interest, in this case of the human species, with her memorably vivid personalities (I would have to mention here almost all her characters, from Tenar, Therru, and Ged to Alder and the wonderful princess Sesarakh) as well as a Thoreauist conviviality with non-human nature. The love of plant life -- grass, bushes, flowers, and most of all trees -- may have been encouraged by her readings of Tolkien, but her delight in animals of many sizes and shapes, from the stubborn goats on Gont to Alder's kitten (reminding me of Shevek's startling vision of the donkey in *The Dispossessed*), has few peers in literature -- though let us not forget, as she did not, Cordwainer Smith. Their irreducible warm corporeality, short-circuiting life and knowledge outside of human morality (cf. *OW* 52-53), feeds into, and is no small part of the mystery of, the dragons, whom detractor mages call, with exquisite compound wrongness, "merely animals." Second, her contemptuous refusal of theism, and most pertinently Christian monotheist individualism (the soul). Already in her early SF novels the dominant belief was what the future language called Thurro-Dovism (Thoreau-Daoism, suitably transmogrified by history). As in the

original Dao, the transcendental needs here no faces, only a Way, which may be thought of as a wind with the dragons of human imagination frolicking in it. Yet in a way *Earthsea* is a myth -- an unclear term that lends itself to misuse, I explained in *Metamorphoses* -- comparable in depth and power to move to what the Christians claim as Vangels, not only in its meaning of *eu-angelium*, the glad tiding. (It even uses the same supremely effective narrative trick of rewriting the same story in different variants, though being the product of a limited single human's experience rather than of a revolutionary community it has not managed the Evangelists' four variants but only two. Think what we might have if Dostoevsky could have rewritten the *Brothers Karamazov* in four equally powerful versions, the last one a bit crazily mystical!) I don't know to which side this parallel might be considered blasphemous, for me to neither. The major difference, of course, is that the *Earthsea* writings are not blueprints for direct belief but overtly fictional parables for indirect cognitive transfer to the readers, where possible.

However, I don't pretend to exhaust the *Earthsea* strengths thereby, but my points Three and on will be here left aside to face the problem of history.

How does history -- our history, the author's and reader's history -- enter *Earthsea*? In it dragons live -- at least tendentially, and at the end really -- outside history (as the original human-dragons unity did), only humans live in history, bound up both with making things and knowledge of good and evil. But there is no politico-economic history, only magic domination. This usual norm of Fantasy usually means there is very little or no cognition in it, be it (to stop at the classics) Conan's lone machismo pitted against the world or the subterfuges of Leiber's sympathetic thieves in the interstices of the bazaar. Now Le Guin has noted how there obtains a (supple and anamorphic) parallel between the time or historical moment of the author's world and the historical moment of *Earthsea* -- see the "Foreword" to *TfE* cited at the end of Section 1 -- which allows her to imagine new shapes of destiny in *Earthsea*. The time, the cosmic juncture, of *The Other Wind* is a historical moment parallel to that of the rise of new wars and new global disarray, the huge sufferings of ever more among "the poor and powerless" (*TfE* 2) of the world under US military hegemony in the later 90s, where the wizards' meddling with the laws of life and death endangers the whole world. A collective decision about magery and mortality, not a single heroic mage, is now absolutely necessary. (I am not sure -- but this is a matter of my speculation about historical horizons -- that Le Guin has fully gauged the perils of turbocapitalism not only for people but also for nature, or better for vertebrate life. She speaks sometimes as if nature will eventually right itself. Yes we are already seeing the hurricanes, tsunamis, and rising sea-levels. So much the worse for all of us.)

Has Le Guin therefore managed to evade the gravely non-cognitive nature of Fantasy, while paying her dues by the use of magic (however downgraded), True Speech, and by the quite non-cognitive political set-up of medieval feudalism (even if modified by an enlightened king, in some ways farcically fallible)? Is this simply condensed, mythical history?

To face this, let me return to the dragons and True Speech, indelible markers of distance from SF. *Dragons* are Le Guin's emblem for wild freedom "of the spirit and of the earth," not owned and dangerous, simultaneously Nietzschean super-animals and the Other of the furthest reaches of human imagination and trans-historic delight. They also embody a modern intellectual's deep irritation at the claims of social morality and politics to set goals and limits to her imagination. Yet beyond ephemeral recipes of the season, any narration is always already political in a deeper (say Aristotle's) sense -- as Le Guin full well realizes, though best in gender politics. What does then their frolicking "on the other wind" mean for us? I think it is ambiguous: partly a valid refusal of orthodoxy, partly an understandable but I think vain yearning, as Brecht put it, not to let even just anger make one's (narrative) voice grow hoarse. Yet a slight hoarseness doesn't much matter if your anger remains cognitive, and Le Guin proved it in *The Word for World Is Forest*. The dragons' splendour may hide a not fully articulated or reflected upon split between proprietarian and creative reason.

True Speech -- and here my distance from Le Guin's envisioning may show -- is to my mind also ambiguous. Straining to accommodate it, let me try to translate this into my idiom.

What may from where I stand, a disaffected radical from the bourgeois class, be such runes or formulas which have had immediate or long lasting “reifactory” powers, as Le Guin calls the words directly creating things? In the unspeakable carnages of World War 1 for no more than redrawing frontiers of imperial power, such was Lenin’s call to “turn the imperialist into a civil war ,” i.e. to turn the soldiers’ arms against their commanders. It worked. More lasting, pertaining to long duration, was Marx’s vision of fetishism of commodities as underlying the capitalist maleficent re-enchantment of the world, alienating living labour into capitalist profit and reification.^{4/} Could True Speech, say the Naming of people, be translated into this key? I don’t see how: how does the true name of Medra give us more understanding than Otter (I think it gives less)? Is there a possibility of True Speech in economics and politics? If so, it is absent from *Earthsea*. It seems to me to conflate unduly poetry -- a dragon matter -- and political economics -- a human matter, not explainable simply in the moral terms of greed.

Does this mean *Earthsea* is in any way, even cognitively, automatically “inferior” to SF? Of course it doesn’t. My no doubt limited analogies here are twofold. The *first* reposes on a very simple model of two measuring rods, say thermometers with mercury. One thermometer can go from zero to 100 degrees, the other, made for human bodies, only from 30 to 43 degrees centigrade. The bigger one is to me SF, the smaller one Fantasy. But since the huge majority of SF uses very little of the genre’s cognitive potentialities, most come only up to, say, 33 degrees: three quarters of what would be possible is wasted. Obversely, a very few Fantasy works (Le Guin) come up to, say, 41 degrees -- I’d put Tolkien, in this somewhat ridiculous metaphor, at 37 -- and are thus superior to 98% of really existing SF writings. It is not the case that any narration is 100% cognitive in this genre and 0% in that one, and my *Metamorphoses* and “Considering” speak only about an overall tendency and an implicit normative horizon, as befits historical poetics. My *second* model derives from “Liebig’s barrel,” which I was taught as a chemistry student. The great Justus Liebig wanted to explain the interrelation of chemical elements to fertilizing the soil. He imagined a big vertical barrel with staves of unequal length, so that the lowest stave determines the height of liquid that can remain in the barrel. Staves represent the elements: you can put as much sodium or potassium as you want into your fertilizer, it will do no good if the magnesium stave is short, if the pinch of magnesium is below the critical threshold that makes plants grow.

Furthermore, if these writings are parables or very loose allegories, this does not at all imply the need for instant one-to-one translatability of any one element of Fantasy (as of SF neither). What pointer does Therru’s escape into dragonhood supply to a young woman or say a downtrodden immigrant into our metropolises, an activist may well demand? My answer would be that it points to two matters. First, as Le Guin suggested, that the wronged and wounded have a privileged epistemological and political status: our actions should focus on them and not on property, law, order, security, etc. Second, and to my mind secondarily, this points to dragonhood and making whole in general, as a *pars pro toto*, a minor narreme that stands for something paradigmatically important (and is also a whopping good story, that Heinlein could have called “the little seamstress”). Is the burned-away side of her body -- hand, eye, beauty -- redeemed by her turning into a dragon? I think Le Guin would agree the outrage cannot be fully redeemed. To assume that the hurt flesh and psyche can be subsumed into the frolicking in free imagination would be to fall back into standard religion. Modern allegories, Kafka’s, Brecht’s or Le Guin’s, are not as Jehoshua’s rabbinical parables, where he could explain the one-to-one translatability. They are fluid, multivalent, and open: the vehicle doesn’t exist only to be incorporated into but also to codetermine the tenor (see more in my “With Sober”).

I end with more questions than answers, but I trust posing right questions at least whittles down the possible answers. My provisional conclusion, to be thought about further, is that it seems some (very few) among the most interesting new writings in Fantasy, from Le Guin to Miéville, do not quite fit my parameters. There are, logically, two possible answers to it. Either we have here to do with a not-yet named and thus unrecognised genre of estranged fiction, possibly nearer to Kafka but turned into an epic story after Tolkien, for which new parameters

are to be found. Or I was simply wrong and my essay on Fantasy would need to be at least supplied with a further section, if not rethought *ab ovo*. *Chi vivrà vedrà*, as my Italian neighbours say: Who lives long enough, may see the answer. The answer, after all, is historical: and history is rushing on faster than we think.

In the meantime let us rejoice in what the second *Earthsea* trilogy did to the first one, the powerful grace of it. "O my joy, be free!"

Notes

*/ This essay was written in August 2006 in Uppsala, Sweden. I owe thanks to Sociology of Literature Professor Johan Svedjedal and the University of Uppsala housing office (Akademihotellet), also to the indefatigably kind librarians of the Carolina and the Dag Hammarskjöld libraries, and to my friend and young SF scholar Dr. Jerry Määttä who for the third year in a row served as post drop, computer and movie guru, and more. I consider this as an unfinished part of a much larger article on Le Guin (Fantasy?) and Cognition.

The essay wouldn't have come about but for Ursula K. Le Guin—and I don't mean simply her writing these brilliant and sweetly fierce books that further life. We are such old friends by now that we can afford to disagree with and even (rarely) be angry at each other. She wrote me in 2001, I believe, that she had sent me an angry snailmail letter about my essay on Fantasy in *Extrapolation* a year earlier, and in particular about what I had to say in it on *Earthsea*. The letter I (un?)fortunately haven't received. Yet, regardless of a few disagreements with her after the mid-70s, I take Le Guin's writing and wisdom very seriously. So the fact that she had written such a purloined letter was enough to make me pause and ponder. Other signs and portents increased my sense of urgency.

Oh, and she also had sent me in July a copy of her unavailable talk *Earthsea Revisioned* (thanks!). I am glad my notes about *Tehanu* were complete by the time I read it, so that my full agreement with it -- barring three sentences, one of which shows remnants of her waning Jungian interests, i.e. 6 lines out of ca. 700, so maybe I'm in a 99.2 per mille agreement -- came as a most pleasant surprise and confirmation. I have added three or four (acknowledged) nuggets from it to my text, particularly about the mysterious dragons. (This doesn't mean she will agree with me in matters or approaches that go beyond what she was writing in that booklet. But one can always hope.)

1/ I am writing this away from home and with roughly one week's time, in a situation that enforces a focus only on Le Guin's texts, without the enlightenments that could come from critical literature. The brevity detrimental to fuller argumentation. But the judo masters tell us your weakness may be turned into strength – if you know how.

2/ Le Guin's feminism is akin to Virginia Woolf's, and a significant work could be written about Le Guin's evident interest in her. To mention just one matter, *To the Lighthouse* also focusses on islands (one only, in truth, but itself imaginatively composed of Cornwall and the Hebrides), the end of an epoch, and incidentally has a protagonist named Lily. The main difference may be that it's about a family, which disintegrates into lonely individuals: "We perish each alone," preaches Mr Ramsay. The urge to freedom and against tyranny, against empire and patriarchy, is however the same.

3/ This may be well compared to one of the classical formulations of pantheist-cum-atheist mortality, Usbek's Letter 76 in Montesquieu's delightful estrangement (and double vision) of *Persian Letters*: "When my soul shall be separated from my body, will there be any less order in the universe? Do you believe that any new combination will be less perfect or less dependent

upon general laws, or that the universe will have lost something...? Do you think that my body, having become a blade of wheat, a worm or a piece of lawn, would be changed into a work less worthy of nature...? All such ideas... originate in our pride alone." Montesquieu's idea of necessary disloyalty to our local civilisation in order to interact equitably with others is a direct precursor of Estraven the Traitor.

4/ Marx's capitalism is often phrased in terms of a whole horror-fantasy repertory, cf. my "Living."

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