

# **Boldly to Re-Venture: New Writing on the Works of Ursula K. Le Guin**

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Introducing a critical volume on Ursula K. Le Guin in 2008 is a task that, to outrageously misappropriate a famous Australian poem, well might make the boldest hold “his” breath. Given the current accumulation of journal articles, essay collections, and full-length books on Le Guin’s work, bold indeed must be the soul who dares assume the usual omniscient, omnipotent editorial voice, implying that he or she has not only read all the original texts, but all the secondary work, and now knows better enough to pontificate upon it all.

It hardly seems necessary to supply the obligatory career sketch with an author like Le Guin: especially since said author is currently garnering starred reviews for *Lavinia*, a return to the historical novel, last seen from her with *Malafrena* (1979), which, we usually assume, grew out of the Orsinian tales composed in her oldest imagined country of all. Nevertheless, between There and Here intervenes a writing span of more than half a century, if we include those early unpublished inventions, not only studded with notable works, but in my view, growing stronger as it goes. The nearest parallel I can find is W. B. Yeats, whose fruitful span is also astonishing, and whose work “improves,” from the melopoeia of the “Celtic Twilight” and classics like “The Sally Gardens,” to the bareboned landmarks of final poems like “Under Ben Bulben.” Nor is it difficult to apply to Le Guin, as is so often done with Yeats, the adjective “great.”

It’s personally heartening to me, a late starter in publication, that over ten years of that writing span lie before Cele Goldsmith published “April in Paris” in 1962. Any writer would hope to emulate the ensuing progress: five, six short stories appearing in the mid ‘60s, along with three novels, before the quantum leap in 1969. The short story “Winter’s King,” the prelude, in so many senses, to *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Nor does it seem necessary to labour *Left Hand’s* import. Le Guin’s first Hugo and Nebula awards—so affirming to a young writer, as she noted in a recent interview (Chee, “Breaking”)—the visibility the novel brought to SF as a whole, when a literary luminary like Harold Bloom edited the first collection of critical essays; most importantly, perhaps, to

Le Guin as well as to others, her first public engagement with feminism, and her first visibility to feminists.

More gallons of ink must have been expended on *Left Hand of Darkness* than any other Le Guin opus, except perhaps *The Dispossessed* (1974). The blaze of attention has tended to mask her other remarkable achievements of the '70s. Stories that have become SF classics, like "Vaster than Empires and more Slow (1971), "The Day before the Revolution"(1974), and of course, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"(1973). Cheek by jowl with *Left Hand*, the first Earthsea trilogy—I shall use editorial force majeure here to apply Darko Suvin's suggestion that the later Earthsea books form a second series—then *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), and in the middle, *The Dispossessed* itself. Beyond that, *The Language of the Night* (1979) establishing Le Guin's lyrical, unruly, and individual critical voice with essays like "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie," "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown," and "Why Americans Are Afraid of Dragons." Also *Orsinian Tales* (1976), and a book of poetry, *Wild Angels* (1974)... does the woman ever eat or sleep?

Not, apparently, in the '80s, which produced another critical collection, *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989) with such pieces as "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." Short stories are assembled in *The Compass Rose* (1982), with such memorable inclusions as "The New Atlantis" and "The Author of the Acacia Seeds," then the further collection, *Buffalo Gals* (1987), which to stories of "Animal Presences" added the viewpoint of rocks, or in "View of the Road," trees.

Along with these come two further poetry books, and the novels *The Eye of the Heron* (1983), when Le Guin herself judges she first made the full transition to a female-centred novel (Chee, "Breaking"), and the major achievement of the decade, *Always Coming Home* (1985), a work where Utopian social thoughts unite, at last, with a Utopic experiment in form.

At this point most writers would be resting on their laurels. Not Le Guin. The '90s open with the first of the two new Earthsea novels, *Tehanu* (1990), in itself a major achievement, topped by *The Other Wind* (2001), which rewrites not merely Earthsea's gender politics but its cosmology, as the series moves into its most powerful resistance to Le Guin's longtime model, the binary oppositions of Jung and the Tao. These traditional hierarchies of light/dark, male/female, white/black, good/bad, now turn emphatically on their archetypal heads.

Along the way, we have five story collections, including *Tales from Earthsea* (2001), the "back-stories" of both Earthsea trilogies, *Searoad* (1991) Le Guin's "realist" variations on Living in Oregon, *Four Ways*

to *Forgiveness* (1995), with its notable novellas, and two more. Oh, yes, did I mention the three books of poetry, the book of criticism, *Steering the Craft* (1998), and the translations, one from Spanish, the other of that proverbial mind-cracker in both Chinese and European critical milieux, the *Tao Te Ching* ...?

Nor is the hard-pressed critical commentator allowed to relax in the 21st Century. So far we have another book of poetry, *Incredible Good Fortune* (2006), two more Spanish translations, the critical collection *The Wave in the Mind* (2004), with Le Guin's thoughts on the importance of rhythm, in particular; and two story collections, *The Birthday of the World* (2002) and the suite of post-modern parables, *Changing Planes* (2003). To open the millennium on the novel front, we have *The Telling*, in 2000, followed by the Annals of the Western Shore. *Gifts* (2004), *Voices* (2006) and *Powers* (2007)—categorized as YA, but as unlike most of the works scrambling to slipstream behind Harry Potter as any text could be. And in 2008, *Lavinia*, which tells the second woman's story running beside *The Aeneid*—not unhappy Dido's, but that of the woman Aeneas did marry.

The critical commentary is beginning to rival that on the *Tao Te Ching*. From here I discern some three critical generations, and three distinguishable though not mutually inaccessible faces, to use a geographical metaphor, by which critics and theorists most often approach the *oeuvre* that comprises Mt. Le Guin.

Notable from the beginning has been the Taoist face, first mapped, perhaps, by Douglas Barbour in 1973. Unearthing evidence of the Tao's presence and function in Le Guin's *oeuvre* is an ongoing critical enterprise, as in Dena C. Bain's and Elizabeth Cummins' (then Cogell) 1970s work, soon supplemented by critiquing uses of the Tao in Le Guin. At this point the Taoist face may also be traversed by feminist critics.

As second-wave feminist thought has worked on the philosophical underpinnings of women's oppression, the question of binaries and superior/inferior oppositions has been a lasting focus. And since Taoism is so apparently thoroughly binary, Le Guin's long fidelity to its imagery and its paradigms has collected some serious flak along with simple explorations and explanations. An article by Jewell Parker Rhodes in the late '80s, which actually targeted the use of the androgyne in *Left Hand of Darkness*, also pointed out the problems with a binary that can simplify and essentialize a man/woman opposition that '80s feminists were eagerly, angrily, or desperately finding had already fractured into Women. As Audre Lord asked Mary Daly at the end of the '70s, Who you calling Woman, white girl?

The feminist face of Mt. Le Guin is one of the most frequently

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traversed, from the early strictures of Joanna Russ on that male/female hero in *Left Hand of Darkness* (90-91) to the pointed remarks of Sarah Le Fanu in the '80s on the dead weight of the liberal humanist hero at the centre of the great '70s novels (137). Despite Le Guin's own public espousal of feminism, and its often militant infiltration of her work from *Left Hand* on, as feminism has diversified, among the praise, so have the critiques.

Most frequently, such critiques centre on Le Guin's enduring heterosexuality, her determination that love, usually heterosexual, can bridge even galaxies, and what she herself has called the central topic of her work: marriage ("Introduction to *Planet of Exile*," 143). Outliers such as Elyce Helford, using post-colonial as well as feminist theory, have complained about what appears appropriation of non-white cultures, as Le Guin herself attempts to redress the not always repressed racial bias in, particularly, SF.

Among these critiques, essentialism is not infrequently mentioned, especially from the '90s on. First Woman had to become Women, then, in the burgeoning field of masculinity studies, Man almost at once became Men. I myself find that some of Le Guin's more exhilarating essays produce a certain draft of second thoughts up the back of the neck. "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" is a good case. It's very righteously valorizing to think that WE, by virtue of our mere sex, don't produce those tales "starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK!" (169) as heroes', and by implication men's stories do. That we, out "wrest[ing] a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another" (165) could produce the novel like a "medicine bundle" (169) that Le Guin herself sewed so brilliantly in *Always Coming Home*.

But, memory ripostes, is all men's work so linear? What, for instance, about Laurence Sterne? The last thing *Tristram Shandy* does is go from here to there.... Even more uncomfortably, there's Homer, and after him, Vergil. "In medias res" was coined for Greek and Roman epics, the template of "heroic" tales. Those loops may not be a carrier bag, but a (human) appendix, perhaps? And there's always the grand-daddy of modern novels, with those wanderings of Don Quixote; not to even begin mentioning modern novelists like Robbe-Grillet.

There has been rather less critique on the third face of Mt Le Guin, which the Utopists map. Here too, there was much early unearthing of sources, as with the anarchism of Kropotkin (Smith), and siting, particularly of *The Dispossessed*, among the famous '70s SF heterotopias and "critical" Utopias (Moynan, Somay) The second generation, following very short upon if not overlapping the first, began to critique aspects of *The Dispossessed*, in particular its heterosexuality, as with

Samuel Delany's pioneering "To Read *The Dispossessed*" (1977). Numerous commentators have followed, whose debates frequently spill over onto the mountain's feminist face. An entire recent collection, reviewed by Mike Cadden in this volume, debates the possibly bourgeois nature of *The Dispossessed*.

As these expeditions continue, a variety of new climbing tools—I am unable to resist this slightly passé extension of the metaphor—have appeared, from post-colonialism to queer theory as well as masculinity studies, and eco-feminist or other environmentally based approaches. Le Guin specialists, such as Elizabeth Cummins, Mike Cadden, and Warren Rochelle, have emerged, whose scholarly focus has been largely on her texts. Indeed, Mt. Le Guin is beginning to resemble *Beowulf* in Tolkien's essay, "The Monsters and the Critics": a massive site—not, in this case, a ruin—that provides an inexhaustible source of academic building material (8).

Reading for this volume, I also began to discern the three critical generations adumbrated above. Though these blend and overlap, the first includes pioneering approaches and source identification, among which should also be counted Le Guin's entry in the first anthology of feminist SF criticism, Marleen Barr's *Future Females* (1981). The second generation, who began to debate and critique earlier with Russ and Delany, is now extending into the third, who, just as *Beowulf* is being re-read against post-modern theories, are coming to scale the faces and re-view the famous prospects of Mt. Le Guin with new voices, and sometimes, different tools.

Le Guin's international standing appears in the history of this volume. The first call for papers brought responses from academics and non-academics across three continents. Beyond the US, abstracts and proposals came from the UK, from Sweden, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Hong Kong, and Australia. At least two of the essays here use English as a second or even third language, and some of their authors have read or are studying Le Guin in second language programs in non-English universities.

Deliberately, the scope of the volume also exceeds the purely academic. At its heart, we have a new essay from Le Guin herself, "Living in a Work of Art," an aesthetic/philosophical pondering on beauty, and whether beauty might instill moral awareness, especially if encountered in youth. These thoughts spring from a memoir that opens a door—yes, the metaphor is also deliberate—on Le Guin's own youth: the experience of growing up in a Maybeck house in San Francisco, a house where early and continuous experience of aesthetic beauty may foster an expectation of order and harmony that might in turn lead to an active desire for moral clarity.