

## **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 Nevertheless, between There and Here intervenes a writing span of more than half a century, if we include those early unpublished inventions, not only studded with notable works, but in my view, growing stronger as it goes.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 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 (Moylan, 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.

As a direct foil to Le Guin's essay comes April Kendra's memoir, "On Almost Meeting Le Guin." Kendra speaks for all those readers who have discovered, cherished, lived with and loved Le Guin's work, but will never reach—or want to reach—the public forum of an academic article to convey what she means to them. Kendra expresses the compelling urges, on the one hand to pass that feeling back to the writer, and on the other, the sheer overpowering terror—it's not too strong a word—of meeting such a writer in the flesh.

At the other end of the spectrum, a Le Guin specialist lifts the mask of academic anonymity to tell how her work has shaped his life. Warren Rochelle's "fan-letter" is an exemplary mix of the personal, the academic, and the political, and a fitting closure, I feel, to this volume's essays.

The properly academic essays form two sections bracketing the personal "Interludes." It's notable that of our original proposals, four wanted to work on *The Lathe of Heaven*, more than on any other single work, while three had in mind a mixture of *Lathe* and *Left Hand of Darkness*. The section on Earlier Work opens with a Marxist/Utopian reading of *The Dispossessed*, as the culmination of a theoretical essay from a founder of SF theory, Darko Suvin. There can be very few academics working on SF who have not, at some point, used some of Darko's ideas, from "cognitive estrangement" to "the novum" and on. This essay is a notable addition to his oeuvre.

As a foil to Suvin's "Cognition," we have Beth Snowberger's essay on *The Lathe of Heaven* and *The Dispossessed*, reaching a very different position on Mt. Le Guin after traversing much the same ground, applying not merely new theoretical tools, but new tools drawn direct from science. In this case, superstring theory. This essay made one referee, a quantum physicist, actually go out and read *The Dispossessed*.

Amy Clarke supplies another new voice with her third generation feminist reading of the entire Earthsea series, a succinct and also up-to-date handling of cruces that feminist critics have discussed for years. Then Vera Benczik re-visits *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where, using no particularly new theoretical tools, she nevertheless achieves a fresh vista on that much traced journey over the ice. The third generation in all these essays is particularly evident in the references. Clarke, Keating and Snowberger all cite Suvin on Le Guin; Benczik and Keating cite Barbour and Bain; Suvin himself cites a current female professor of philosophy, Katherine Z. Elgin.

The fourth new voice in the group also ascends a very familiar face, but with an approach of unusual depth. Kathy Keating re-views *The Lathe of Heaven* via a discussion of Taoist thought that first contextualizes and then engages the *I Ching*, the "oracular" older work behind the *Tao te*

*Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*. The consequent reading of *Lathe*, especially in its relation of narrative movement and structure to the *I Ching*'s sense of "change" and the method of reading its hexagrams, breaks genuinely new ground in Le Guin criticism.

After the "Interlude" comes a section on Newer Work, where well-known SF critic Rich Erlich examines the satirical elements in *Always Coming Home*, with particular interest in attacks on monotheism. To Le Guin, it appears, as to Donna Haraway, "One is too few, and two is only one possibility" (180). Such possibilities appear in the work of other third-generation critics, firstly as Linda Wight sites the suite of stories in "The Matter of Seggri" (1993) against previous feminist SF texts using the trope of separatism. She does not completely endorse Le Guin's attempt to show how gender inequity can oppress men as well as women, but the essay sites "Seggri" discerningly in the ongoing field of both masculinity studies and feminist SF.

Howard Sklar, in contrast, bases a study of Le Guin's writing skills upon reader-response theory. He discusses the concepts of and differences between empathy and sympathy, and then provides an illuminating reading of the novella "Betrayals" (1994) from *Four Ways to Forgiveness*. Kasi Jackson, in contrast, examines Le Guin's animal stories against a history of feminist debates over the praxis and theory of science, which moves from animal behaviour in specific to science in general, with the work of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, casting light on a theoretical field along with the stories to which it is applied.

Donna Haraway makes a differently inflected appearance in Jenny Gal-Or's performative reading of "Newton's Sleep" (1991). Here the essay takes on the diffractive, fracturing, boundary-blurring nature of Haraway's style as well as her agenda, as Gal-Or demonstrates Le Guin's fictional fulfillment of Haraway's ideas. Equally feminist, but working from detailed comparisons of Le Guin's texts and Robert Scott's account of the *Discovery* voyage, Traci Thomas-Card shows precisely how, in the frequently anthologized "Sur" (1983), Le Guin critiqued, undercut and deconstructed the archetype of the Polar explorer, and at least one concept of heroism.

In the process Thomas-Card often cites Marleen Barr's study of "Sur." And with a combination of new Le Guin text and first-generation critical voice, Marleen Barr herself reads *Changing Planes* against the changing planes, in both senses, of New York, the US, and the world in general after 9/11. Barr's knowledge of fiction both inside and outside SF, her enthusiasm for Le Guin's work, and her very pertinent comparison to another pattern-maker, needle-worker Ita Aber, provide a fitting finale for the purely academic sections.

There are gaps not unnaturally left in (re)viewing such a prolific author. We have no essay, due to illness and other problems, on Le Guin's poetry, or/and her translation, as the two converge in her work with Gabriela Mistral's poems. We have nothing on her children's books, or the position of her essays in the now formidable fields of SF or feminist SF criticism. We have nothing on later work such as *The Telling*, or the Annals of the Western Shore. Limited by space and time from tackling these projects, I found my own thoughts turning to the importance of rhythm to and in Le Guin's work as a whole.

Rhythm, as opposed to scansion, eludes most contemporary critical frames. It is not susceptible to ideological analysis, cultural or gender theory, and attempts to relate it to race can produce alarming stereotypes. One theoretical foothold is Julia Kristeva's post-Lacanian formulation of language as two "dispositions" (133): the "symbolic" or "attribute of meaning" (134), which is continually invaded by the "semiotic." For Kristeva this springs from pre-Oedipal drives (136-7) which perpetually disrupt the symbolic, particularly with rhythm: poetic language produces a "pulsation of sign and rhythm," (139), a fracturing, like Celine's ellipses (141) that "impose a music, a rhythm," which can "wipe out sense" (142). Nevertheless, the symbolic can never be completely erased (134). Purely semiotic utterances are literal non-sense.

Two essays from *The Wave in the Mind* indicate Le Guin's longstanding interest in this difficult and nebulous topic. The first uses rhythm to define the central structural unit in *The Lord of the Rings*, reading the finished text at the level of part, chapter and incident (98-107). Most critical discussion of rhythm operates either at this level, or by close reading sentences and paragraphs, which I soon found sliding toward aesthetic judgements and discussion of vocabulary, rhythm's Siamese twin.

Despite these tendencies, such analysis finds a rich field in Le Guin's work. But in this example, rhythm at sentence level foreshadows the tenor of the work as a whole:

Current-borne, wave-flung, tugged hugely by the whole might  
of ocean, the jellyfish drifts in the tidal abyss. (*Lathe of Heaven*,  
7)

The sentence's four opposing blocks, two compound adjectives, two clauses, echo the rhythm of ocean on beach: Here—and-back. Here—and-back. But this continued change within continuity, of dynamic alternations and oppositions, is also the pattern of the yin/yang dynamic as Kathy Keating reads it in the *I Ching*. And her reading argues that this is the overall structure of *Lathe of Heaven*, where change occurs,



and re-occurs, and re-occurs again, fluidly, unexpectedly, in the “same” places, yet never entirely the same.

At the same time, the two compound adjectives and “tidal abyss,” “tugged hugely,” lean to the more “embroidered,” to use Yeats’ term, side of vocabulary. Elsewhere *Lathe* reaches a contrasting simplicity:

... they made love. Love doesn’t just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; re-made all the time, made new. (136)

Here too the rephrased repetition echoes the central motif. But the closing clauses, rhythmically necessary, actually detract slightly from the antithesis of bread and stone, and the entirely homely simile.

Words and rhythm blend more perfectly later, this time in a literal vision:

I can stand here in the old pasture where there’s nothing but sun and rain, wild oats and thistles and crazy salsify, no cattle grazing, only deer, stand here and shut my eyes and see: the dancing place, the stepped pyramid roofs, a moon of beaten copper on a high pole over the Obsidian. If I listen, can I hear voices with the inner ear? Could you hear voices, Schliemann, in the streets of Troy? If you did, you were crazy too. The Trojans had all been dead three thousand years. Which is farther from us, farther out of reach, more silent—the dead, or the unborn? Those whose bones lie under the thistles and the dirt and the tombstones of the Past, or those who slip weightless among molecules, dwelling where a century passes in a day, among the fair folk, under the great, bell-curved Hill of Possibility? (*Always Coming Home* 4)

Here there are no rhythmic superfluities. The long opening clause checks into the shortening phrases that throw up first the whole section’s motif, the wild oats, then brake to a heavy pause with the colon at “see.” Then the actual vision appears, returning through a triple of lengthening syntactic units to the run that ends with a singing polysyllable “on a high pole over the Obsidian.”

A series of shorter sentences bring a turn of aspect, from Here to There, to Troy and the past, and the central, unpunctuated statements that end with the roll, reminiscent of *Urn Burial*, of “three thousand years.” After which the paragraph moves into its final rhetoric, another mix of simple and polysyllabic words, “thistles,” “dirt” “tombstones,” and the rhythm begins to lift with “slip weightless among molecules” to the small sections bringing the polysyllable that closes both paragraph and

image in an echo of “Obsidian,” as it underlines the bravura flourish of “bell-curved,” on the Hill of “Possibility.”

Like Yeats, Le Guin does seem to move toward simplicity, or at least austerity, in both the rhythm and content of her later work. As *Always Coming Home* opens among wild oats and thistles, *A Wizard of Earthsea* starts among village goats. But such is a beginning is traditional for fantasy heroes, as is Ged’s prompt move to higher things. Magic. Palaces. Wizard schools. *Tehanu*, on the other hand, starts in farm-life, descending at times to the edge of poverty, and the austerity of a few goats, and a patch of bean vines (251-52), is where it ends.

At the same time, *Tehanu* can show the skill of experience making less do more, rather than more do more, as in the previous quote. Here is a key “data dump” between Tenar and Moss:

‘Dearie,’ she said, ‘a man, you mean, a wizardly man?  
What’s a man of power to do with us?’

‘But Ogion –’

‘Lord Ogion was kind,’ Moss said without irony.

They split rushes for a while in silence.

‘Don’t cut your thumb on ‘em, dearie,’ Moss said. After which ‘Ogion taught me. As if I weren’t a girl. As if I’d been his prentice, like Sparrowhawk. He taught me the Language of the Making, Moss. What I asked him, he told me.’

‘There wasn’t no other like him.’

‘It was I who wouldn’t be taught. I left him. What did I want with his books? ... I wanted to live, I wanted a man, I wanted my children, I wanted my life.’

She split reeds neatly, quickly, with her nail.

‘And I got it,’ she said.

‘Take with the right hand, throw away with the left,’ the witch said. ‘Well, dearie mistress, who’s to say? Wanting a man got me into awful troubles more than once. But wanting to get married, never! No, no. None of that for me.’

‘Why not?’ Tenar demanded.

Taken aback, Moss said simply, ‘Why dear, what man’d marry a witch?’ And then, with a sidelong chewing motion of her jaw, like a sheep shifting its cud. ‘And what witch’d marry a man?’

They split rushes. (*Tehanu*, 55-56.)

Where playwrights can score dialogue with significant silences, writers have to rely on “business”—more words. So here the apparently trivial

“women’s” occupation of splitting rushes for baskets operates as a suite of variations to indicate pause and emphasis, which the rhythm underscores. The first leisurely, “They split rushes for a while in silence,” quickens to the snaps, echoing Tenar’s emotion, of “neatly, quickly, with her nail.” Then, “They split rushes,” cuts this phase of the scene with a brevity only foreshadowed in the “simple” quote from *Lathe*.

In contrast is Kalessin’s first arrival, emerging from Tenar’s reverie on the cliff:

She watched the slow beat of the wings, far out in the dazzling air. Then she got to her feet, retreating a little from the cliff’s edge, and stood motionless, her heart going hard and her breath caught in her throat, watching the sinuous, iron-dark body borne by long, webbed wings as red as fire, the out-reaching claws, the coils of smoke fading behind it in the air.

Straight to Gont it flew, straight to the Overfell, straight to her. (41)

The rhythm here is almost somnambulistically smooth, the second sentence extraordinarily long, commas again weighting the critical words: “sinuous,” “claws,” “fire.” The next paragraph opens with a classic triple repetition whose final word links by assonance to the previous paragraph: “her” with “air,” and again, “air.” The sound device suggests how closely this approaches actual poetry. But the type of rhythm here also moves us past the felicities of skill and experience in a finished text, to adumbrate rhythm’s earliest and perhaps most vital role in the work.

This role is substantiated in the second essay from *The Wave in the Mind*, where Le Guin cites Woolf’s own full quote: this implies that without the right rhythm, words themselves will not assemble. The inchoate idea will not “unlock.” Then Le Guin describes writing *Tehanu*:

... the story came in flights—durations of intense perception ... which most often occurred while I was waking, early in the morning.... Then I had to get up, and go sit outdoors, and try to catch that flight in words. If I could hold to the rhythms of the dragon’s flight, the very large, long wingbeats, then the story told itself. (“Collectors, Rhymesters and Drummers,” 183-84)

Though Le Guin probably means the pattern of the narrative overall, “very large, long wingbeats” describes precisely the rhythms of the quote

above. And where Woolf indicates that writing cannot begin without the right rhythm, Le Guin tells the consequences of its loss.

... When I lost the beat, I fell off, and had to wait ... until the dragon picked me up again. (184)

A famous anecdote preserves a perhaps similar but less happy experience. The person from Porlock is generally credited with breaking Coleridge's "dream" from which "Kubla Khan" reputedly began. I think it as likely the person broke the rhythm that runs swift, unerring and dream-sure through the surviving piece of the poem: the relic of a dragon flight that Coleridge, unlike Le Guin, could never reclaim.

These instances present rhythm as more than a part or product of writing: it is also writing's enabler, or even its source. For Kristeva, rhythm, like all semiotic elements, springs from the *chora*, the female body that the Symbolic Order must repress to allow language (137). But many writers derive inspiration from some other sub-terrain. In "The Fisherwoman's Daughter," Le Guin repeats Woolf's description of the writer, "letting her imagination down into the depths of her consciousness" (227). Narrating the progress of a novel in *Misery* (1990), Stephen King refers repeatedly to ideas produced by the guys down "in the sweatshop" (132, 173, 180). And R.L. Stevenson divided writing between "the part done when I am sleeping," by "the Brownies," and the editing and marketing, "done when I am up and about" (207).

Consequently, inspiration is often sourced in the unconscious, the sub-conscious, or even, as I have heard some SF and F writers call it, the "lizard brain." But the true lizard brain is in the cerebellum or pons, concerned with breathing and heartbeat and "automatic function." And the "unconscious" and "sub-conscious," like the "*chora*," are metaphorical constructs. A more likely biological source is supported by empirical research.

The human right brain was long read as the weaker twin, even as a "vestige" of the dominant left (Edwards, 31). Then Roger Sperry's work showed the right brain possesses an equally massive form of processing, but parallel rather than sequential (32): where the left brain is verbal and analytical, the right is "global, rapid, complex, whole-pattern, and spatial" (33). Betty Edwards, author of a classic work on teaching art, considers either "brain" can actually lead, or they can work together, or even keep knowledge from each other (34). In fact, the double function has long been intuited, but in the usual hierarchical binary, the right brain has been identified with the literally sinister, supposedly weaker hand in the left/right opposition (35-37).

Scientific evidence now shows that the right brain lets us “understand metaphors ... dream ... create new combinations of ideas” (38.) All crucial to the basis of writing, as for thought itself. Edwards teaches art students to “see” differently (50-53), and the results are spectacular (18-19). As she herself puts it, the students must learn to silence the left brain: to overthrow their acquired symbol system (81-82.) Which is precisely how Kristeva theorises “poetic language” (re)-invades symbolic sense with unruly semiotic elements, a process in which rhythm plays a major part. The tie of rhythm and creative inspiration is then explicable in both Kristevan and empirical terms. Rhythm comes from the pre-Symbolic *chora*. Rhythm, like metaphor, springs from the nonverbal right brain. But how does this help writers, if language is a left-brain mode?

Edwards points out that in fact, “L-mode” and “R-mode” thinking are not physically limited. Two percent of right-handers mediate language in the right brain, eight percent in both, while 15% of left-handers do the same, and 15% use the right brain alone (42). Being left-handed, it seems I actually have a better chance of writing with L and R-mode combined. But the statistics indicate some right-handers do too. Perhaps we can all learn to draw on the right brain, like Edwards’ students. Or perhaps, supremely gifted writers like Le Guin and Coleridge, who acknowledge or imply their reliance on rhythm for impact but also for inspiration, have already learned to do so. To reclaim Le Guin’s own metaphor, they do not merely ride the dragon: they know how to set the dragon loose.

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