

*Modern Critical Views*

# URSULA K. LE GUIN

Edited and with an introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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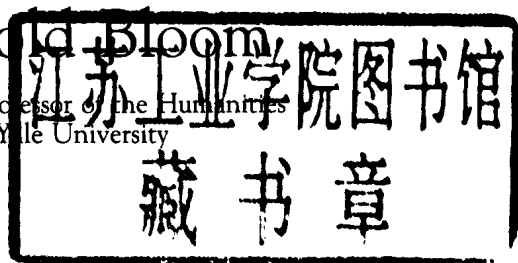
# URSULA K. LE GUIN

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*Edited with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
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**THE COVER:**

Illustrating the great ordeal-sequence of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the cover represents the two protagonists, Genly Ai and Estraven, making their way by sledge across the harsh terrain of the planet called Winter.—H.B.

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## Editor's Note

This volume gathers together what its editor considers to be the most illuminating criticism so far devoted to the fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin, arranged in the chronological order of publication. The editor's "Introduction" centers upon both *The Left Hand of Darkness*, her most widely esteemed novel, and upon her poetry, still too little known and appreciated.

The chronological sequence begins with David Ketterer's analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which expresses some reservations that later critics of the book address themselves to answering. Douglas Barbour's reading of the early Hainish novels also serves as a thematic introduction to some of Le Guin's later works. This opening phase of Le Guin criticism is rounded off by the general estimate of Robert Scholes, which sets her in the larger contexts of fantasy and of science fiction.

More detailed studies begin with Ian Watson's investigation of a characteristic Le Guin cognitive metaphor, the forest, in two of her best-known shorter pieces. Fredric Jameson's analysis of utopian narrative is deeply informed by his extensive knowledge of revolutionary literature. George E. Slusser's high estimate of the *Earthsea Trilogy* is given authority by his enormous erudition in the entire range of literary fantasy. With Gérard Klein's inquiry into the ethnology of Le Guin's work, another strand is uncovered in her complex pattern of intellectual sources.

T. A. Shippey returns us to the *Earthsea Trilogy*, with an expert essay upon magic and language. Le Guin's more conventional stories, *The Orsinian Tales*, are studied by James W. Bittner in an adroit reading which demonstrates that they are not anomalies in her work.

The remaining essays in this volume focus in depth upon what would appear to be Le Guin's principal achievements to date: *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed* and *The Beginning Place*. Victor Urbanowicz explores the anarchist dialectics of *The Dispossessed*, while Eric S. Rabkin provides an acute analysis of the relation between perspectivism and free will in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, an analysis neatly complemented by Jeanne Murray Walker's consideration of myth and history in that novel. Susan Wood, Dena C. Bain and Barbara Brown all investigate, in different but supplementary ways, the closely entwined perspectives of feminism, utopianism, Taoism and androgyny in this most

colorful and vital of Le Guin's works. *The Beginning Place*, Le Guin's most experimental and most recent novel, is examined by Brian Attebery in the context that he calls "Metafantasy." Finally, Carol McGuirk, in an essay written to conclude this volume, masterfully portrays Le Guin's optimism and humanism as elements that mark "the limits of subversion" both in *The Dispossessed* and in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. With McGuirk's eloquent demonstration of Le Guin's place in humanistic tradition, still wider perspectives are opened for the future of Le Guin criticism.

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# Introduction

## I

In a recent parable, "She Unnames Them" (*The New Yorker*, January 21, 1985), the best contemporary author of literary fantasy sums up the consequences of Eve's unnamming of the animals that Adam had named:

None were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to smell one another's scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another's blood or flesh, keep one another warm—that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food.

This might serve as a coda for all Ursula Kroeber Le Guin's varied works to date. She is essentially a mythological fantasist; the true genre for her characteristic tale is *romance*, and she has a high place in the long American tradition of the romance, a dominant mode among us from Hawthorne down to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot Forty-Nine*. Because science fiction is a popular mode, she is named as a science-fiction writer, and a certain defiance in her proudly asserts that the naming is accurate. But no one reading, say Philip K. Dick, as I have been doing after reading Le Guin's discussion of his work in *The Language of the Night*, is likely to associate the prose achievement of Le Guin with that of her acknowledged precursor. She is a fierce defender of the possibilities for science fiction, to the extent of calling Philip K. Dick "our own homegrown Borges" and even of implying that Dick ought not to be compared to Kafka only because Dick is "not an absurdist" and his work "is not (as Kafka's was) autistic."

After reading Dick, one can only murmur that a literary critic is in slight danger of judging Dick to be "our Borges" or of finding Dick in the cosmos of Kafka, the Dante of our century. But Le Guin as critic, loyal to



her colleagues who publish in such periodicals as *Fantastic*, *Galaxy*, *Amazing*, *Orbit* and the rest, seems to me not the same writer as the visionary of *The Earthsea Trilogy*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed* and *The Beginning Place*. Better than Tolkien, far better than Doris Lessing, Le Guin is the overwhelming contemporary instance of a superbly imaginative creator and major stylist who chose (or was chosen by) “fantasy and science fiction.” At her most remarkable, as in what still seems to me her masterpiece, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she offers a sexual vision that strangely complements Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* and James Merrill’s *Changing Light at Sandover*. I can think of only one modern fantasy I prefer to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and that is David Lindsay’s *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), but Lindsay’s uncanny nightmare of a book survives its dreadful writing, while Le Guin seems never to have written a wrong or bad sentence. One has only to quote some of her final sentences to know again her absolute rhetorical authority:

But he had not brought anything. His hands were empty, as they had always been.

(*The Dispossessed*)

Gravely she walked beside him up the white streets of Havnor, holding his hand, like a child coming home.

(*The Tombs of Atuan*)

There is more than one road to the city.

(*The Beginning Place*)

But the boy, Therem’s son, said stammering, “Will you tell us how he died?—Will you tell us about the other worlds out among the stars—the other kinds of men, the other lives?”

(*The Left Hand of Darkness*)

When her precise, dialectical style—always evocative, sometimes sublime in its restrained pathos—is exquisitely fitted to her powers of invention, as in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin achieves a kind of sensibility very nearly unique in contemporary fiction. It is the pure storyteller’s sensibility that induces in the reader a state of uncertainty, of *not knowing what comes next*. What Walter Benjamin praised in Leskov is exactly relevant to Le Guin:

Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. . . .

The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest. This need was

the need created by the myth. The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest. . . .

Elsewhere in his essay on Leskov, Benjamin asserts that: "The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out." One can be skeptical of Benjamin's Marxist judgment that such a waning, if waning it be, is "only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history." Far more impressively, Benjamin once remarked of Kafka's stories that in them, "narrative art regains the significance it had in the mouth of Scheherazade: to postpone the future." Le Guin's narrative art, though so frequently set in the future, not only borrows its authority from death but also works to postpone the future, works to protect us against myth and its nightmares.

I am aware that this is hardly consonant with the accounts of her narrative purposes that Le Guin gives in the essays of *The Language of the Night*. But Lawrence's adage is perfectly applicable to Le Guin: trust the tale, not the teller, and there is no purer storyteller writing now in English than Le Guin. Her true credo is spoken by one of her uncanniest creations, Faxe the Weaver, master of the Foretelling, to conclude the beautiful chapter, "The Domestication of Hunch," in *The Left Hand of Darkness*:

"The unknown," said Faxe's soft voice in the forest, "the unforetold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action. If it were proven that there is no God there would be no religion. No Handdara, no Yomesh, no hearth gods, nothing. But also if it were proven that there is a God, there would be no religion. . . . Tell me, Genry, what is known? What is sure, predictable, inevitable—the one certain thing you know concerning your future, and mine?"

"That we shall die."

"Yes. There's really only one question that can be answered, Genry, and we already know the answer . . . the only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next."

The fine irony, that this is the master Foreteller speaking, is almost irrelevant to Le Guin's profound narrative purpose. She herself is the master of a dialectical narrative mode in which nothing happens without involving its opposite. The shrewdly elliptical title, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, leaves out the crucial substantive in Le Guin's Taoist verse:

Light is the left hand of darkness  
and darkness the right hand of light.  
Two are one, life and death, lying

together like lovers in kemmer,  
like hands joined together,  
like the end and the way.

The way is the Tao, exquisitely fused by Le Guin into her essentially Northern mythology. "Kemmer" is the active phase of the cycle of human sexuality on the planet Gether or Winter, the site of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Winter vision, even in the books widely separated in substance and tone from her masterpiece, best suits Le Guin's kind of storytelling. Mythology, from her childhood on, seems to have meant Norse rather than Classical stories. Like Blake's and Emily Brontë's, her imagination is at home with Odin and Yggdrasil. Yet she alters the cosmos of the Eddas so that it loses some, not all, of its masculine aggressiveness and stoic harshness. Her Taoism, rather than her equivocal Jungianism, has the quiet force that tempers the ferocity of the Northern vision.

## II

"Visibility without discrimination, solitude without privacy," is Le Guin's judgment upon the capital of the Shing, who in 4370 A.D. rule what had been the United States, in her novel, *City of Illusions*. In an introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, belatedly added to the book seven years after its publication, Le Guin sharply reminds us that: "I write science fiction, and science fiction isn't about the future. I don't know any more about the future than you do, and very likely less." Like Faxe the Weaver, she prefers ignorance of the future, and yet, again like Faxe, she is a master of Foretelling, which both is and is not a mode of moral prophecy. It is, in that it offers a moral vision of the present; it is not, precisely because it refuses to say that "If you go on so, the result is so." The United States in 1985 still offers "visibility without discrimination, solitude without privacy." As for the United States in 4370, one can quote "Self," a lyric meditation from Le Guin's rather neglected *Hard Words and Other Poems* (1981):

You cannot measure the circumference  
but there are centerpoints:  
stones, and a woman washing at a ford,  
the water runs red-brown from what she washes.  
The mouths of caves. The mouths of bells.  
The sky in winter under snowclouds  
to northward, green of jade.  
No star is farther from it than the glint  
of mica in a pebble in the hand,  
or nearer. Distance is my god.

Distance, circumference, the unmeasurable, god, the actual future which can only be our dying; Le Guin evades these, and her narratives instead measure wisdom or the centerpoints. Yet the poem just before "Self" in *Hard Words*, cunningly titled "Amazed," tells us where wisdom is to be found, in the disavowal of "I" by "eye," a not un-Emersonian epiphany:

The center is not where the center is  
but where I will be when I follow  
the lines of stones that wind about a center  
that is not there  
                    but there.  
The lines of stones lead inward, bringing  
the follower to the beginning  
where all I knew  
                    is new.  
Stone is stone and more than stone;  
the center opens like an eyelid opening.  
Each rose a maze: the hollow hills:  
I am not I  
                    but eye.

One thinks of the shifting centers in every Le Guin narrative, and of her naming the mole as her totem in another poem. She is a maze maker or "shaper of darkness/into ways and hollows," who always likes the country on the other side. Or she is "beginning's daughter" who "sings to stones." Her Taoism celebrates the strength of water over stone, and yet stone is her characteristic trope. As her words are hard, so are most of her women and men, fit after all for Northern or winter myth. One can say of her that she writes a hard-edged phantasmagoria, or that it is the Promethean rather than the Narcissistic element in her literary fantasy that provides her with her motive for metaphor.

In some sense, all of her writings call us forth to quest into stony places, where the object of the quest can never quite be located. Her most mature quester, the scientist Shevek in *The Dispossessed*, comes to apprehend that truly he is both subject and object in the quest, always already gone on, always already there. A Promethean anarchist, Shevek has surmounted self-consciousness and self-defense, but at the cost of a considerable loss in significance. He represents Le Guin's ideal Odonian society, where the isolated idealist like Shelley or Kropotkin has become the norm, yet normative anarchism cannot be represented except as permanent revolution, and permanent revolution defies aesthetic as well as political representation. Shevek is beyond these limits of representation

and more than that, "his hands were empty, as they had always been." Deprived of the wounded self-regard that our primary narcissism converts into aggression, Shevek becomes nearly as colorless as the actual personality upon whom he is based, the physicist Robert Oppenheimer. Even Le Guin cannot have it both ways; the ideological anarchism of *The Dispossessed* divests her hero of his narcissistic ego, and so of much of his fictive interest. Jung is a better psychological guide in purely mythic realms, like Le Guin's Earthsea, then he is in psychic realms closer to our own, as in *The Dispossessed*.

### III

Le Guin's greatest accomplishment, certainly reflecting the finest balance of her powers, is *The Left Hand of Darkness*, though I hasten to name this her finest work to date. At fifty-five, she remains beginning's daughter, and there are imaginative felicities in *The Beginning Place* (1980) that are subtler and bolder than anything in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). But conceptually and stylistically, *Left Hand* is the strongest of her dozen or so major narratives. It is a book that sustains many rereadings, partly because its enigmas are unresolvable, and partly because it has the crucial quality of a great representation, which is that it yields up new perspectives upon what we call reality. Though immensely popular (some thirty paperback printings), it seems to me critically undervalued, with rather too much emphasis upon its supposed flaws. The best known negative critique is by Stanislaw Lem, who judged the sexual element in the book irrelevant to its story, and improbably treated in any case. This is clearly a weak misreading on Lem's part. What the protagonist, Genly Ai, continuously fails to understand about the inhabitants of the planet Winter is precisely that their sexuality gives them a mode of consciousness profoundly alien to his (and ours). Le Guin, with admirable irony, replied to feminist and other critics that indeed she had "left out too much" and could "only be very grateful to those readers, men and women, whose willingness to participate in the experiment led them to fill in that omission with the work of their own imagination." Too courteous to say, with Blake, that her care was not to make matters explicit to the idiot, Le Guin wisely has relied upon her extraordinary book to do its work of self-clarification across the fifteen years of its reception.

The book's principal aesthetic strength is its representation of the character and personality of Estraven, the Prime Minister who sacrifices position, honor, freedom and finally his life in order to hasten the future,

by aiding Genly Ai's difficult mission. As the ambassador of the Ekumen, a benign federation of planets, Ai needs to surmount his own perspective as a disinterested cultural anthropologist if he is to understand the androgynes who make up the entire population of the isolated planet alternatively called Gethen or Winter. Without understanding, there is no hope of persuading them, even for their own obvious good, to join with the rest of the cosmos. What is most interesting about Ai (the name suggesting at once the ego, the eye, and an outcry of pain) is his reluctance to go beyond the limits of his own rationality, which would require seeing the causal link between his sexuality and mode of consciousness.

The sexuality of the dwellers upon the planet Winter remains Le Guin's subtlest and most surprising invention:

A Gethenian in first-phase kemmer, if kept alone or with others not in kemmer, remains incapable of coitus. Yet the sexual impulse is tremendously strong in this phase, controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative. When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated (most importantly by touch—secretion? scent?) until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role (? without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer—partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored).

The narrator here is neither Ai nor Le Guin but a field investigator of the Ekumen, wryly cataloging a weird matter. Her field notes add a number of sharper observations: these androgynes have no sexual drive at all for about 21 or 22 out of every 26 days. Anyone can and usually does bear children, "and the mother of several children may be the father of several more," descent being reckoned from the mother, known as "the parent in the flesh." There is no Oedipal ambivalence of children toward parents, no rape or unwilling sex, no dualistic division of humankind into active and passive. All Gethenians are natural monists, with no need to sublimate anything, and little inclination towards warfare.

Neither Le Guin nor any of her narrators give us a clear sense of any casual relation between a world of nearly perpetual winter and the ambisexual nature of its inhabitants, yet an uncanny association between the context of coldness and the unforeseeable sexuality of each individual persists throughout. Though Lem insisted anxiety must attend the unpredictability of one's gender, Le Guin's book persuasively refuses any such anxiety. There is an imaginative intimation that entering upon *any* sexual identity for about one-fifth of the time is more than welcome to anyone

who must battle perpetually just to stay warm! Le Guin's humor, here as elsewhere, filters in slyly, surprising us in a writer who is essentially both somber and serene.

The one Gethenian we get to know well is Estraven, certainly a more sympathetic figure than the slow-to-learn Ai. Estraven is Le Guin's greatest triumph in characterization, and yet remains enigmatic, as he must. How are we to understand the psychology of a manwoman, utterly free of emotional ambivalence, of which the masterpiece after all is the Oedipal conflict? And how are we to understand a fiercely competitive person, since the Gethenians are superbly agonistic, who yet lacks any component of sexual aggressiveness, let alone its cause in a sexually wounded narcissism? Most fundamentally we are dualists, and perhaps our involuntary and Universal Freudianism (present even in a professed Jungian, like Le Guin) is the result of that being the conceptualized dualism most easily available to us. But the people of Winter are Le Guin's shrewd way of showing us that all our dualisms—Platonic, Pauline, Cartesian, Freudian—not only have a sexual root but are permanent because we are bisexual rather than ambisexual beings. Freud obviously would not have disagreed, and evidently Le Guin is more Freudian than she acknowledges herself to be.

Winter, aside from its properly ghastly weather, is no Utopia. Karhide, Estraven's country, is ruled by a clinically mad king, and the rival power, Orgoreyn, is founded upon a barely hidden system of concentration camps. Androgyny is clearly neither a political nor a sexual ideal in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. And yet, mysteriously and beautifully, the book suggests that Winter's ambisexuality is a more imaginative condition than our bisexuality. Like the unfallen Miltonic angels, the Gethenians *know* more than either men or women can know. As with the angels, this does not make them better or wiser, but evidently they *see* more than we do, since each one of them is Tiresias, as it were. This, at last, is the difference between Estraven and Genly Ai. Knowing and seeing more, Estraven is better able to love, and freer therefore to sacrifice than his friend can be.

Yet that, though imaginative, is merely a generic difference. Le Guin's art is to give us also a more individual difference between Ai and Estraven. Ai is a kind of skeptical Horatio who arrives almost too late at a love for Estraven as a kind of ambisexual Hamlet, but who survives, like Horatio, to tell his friend's story:

For it seemed to me, and I think to him, that it was from that sexual tension between us, admitted now and understood, but not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose: a



friendship so much needed by us both in our exile, and already so well proved in the days and nights of our bitter journey, that it might as well be called, now as later, love. But it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came. . . .

The difference is more than sexual, and so cannot be bridged by sexual love, which Ai and Estraven avoid. It is the difference between Horatio and Hamlet, between the audience's surrogate and the tragic hero, who is beyond both surrogate and audience. Estraven dies in Ai's arms, but uttering his own dead brother's name, that brother having been his incestuous lover, and father of Estraven's son. In a transference both curious and moving, Estraven has associated Ai with his lost brother-lover, to whom he had vowed faithfulness. It is another of Le Guin's strengths that, in context, this has intense pathos and nothing of the grotesque whatsoever. More than disbelief becomes suspended by the narrative art of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

#### IV

That Le Guin, more than Tolkien, has raised fantasy into high literature, for our time, seems evident to me because her questers never abandon the world where we have to live, the world of Freud's reality principle. Her praise of Tolkien does not convince me that *The Lord of the Rings* is not tendentious and moralizing, but her generosity does provide an authentic self-description:

For like all great artists he escapes ideology by being too quick for its nets, too complex for its grand simplicities, too fantastic for its rationality, too real for its generalizations.

This introduction could end there, but I would rather allow Le Guin to speak of herself directly:

Words are my matter. I have chipped one stone  
for thirty years and still it is not done,  
that image of the thing I cannot see.  
I cannot finish it and set it free,  
transformed to energy.

There is a touch of Yeats here, Le Guin's voice being most her own in narrative prose, but the burden is authentic Le Guin: the sense of limit, the limits of the senses, the granite labor at hard words, and the ongoing image that is her characteristic trope, an unfinished stone. Like

her Genly Ai, she is a far-fetcher, to use her own term for visionary metaphor. It was also the Elizabethan rhetorician Puttenham's term for transumption or metalepsis, the trope that reverses time, and makes lateness into an earliness. Le Guin is a grand far-fetcher or transumer of the true tradition of romance we call literary fantasy. No one else now among us matches her at rendering freely "that image of the thing I cannot see."