

# — URSULA K. LEGUIN AND —

## — THE FUTURE OF DISCOURSE —

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*Cette enquête portant sur les plus importants romans de LeGuin démontre que chacun de ses protagonistes, bien qu'étant à l'écart de sa société, cherche un antidote à cette séparation, en tenant de créer une union avec un "autre" privé; cette quête se transforme en un désir d'unité sociale et de communion avec les autres. Ce conflit entre le moi et l'autre forme la base de toute artiste engagée, qui veut transformer le monde, en faire une collectivité de frères et de soeurs, mais qui désire cependant demeurer détachée, dans son propre espace privé, et autistique.*

*L'oeuvre de LeGuin est une reprise de premières expériences pré-verbales, où il se trouve peu ou pas de différenciation sexuelle. L'artiste, avec son imagination unifiante, peut abattre les obstacles entre les êtres et peut empêcher la dominance d'un discours sur un autre. Pour changer le système, il faut aussi changer le sujet communicant – plutôt que de former un nouveau discours, les femmes et les artistes devraient persister dans leur remise en question, pour ainsi balancer les discours qui existent. C'est, à la limite, le message de l'oeuvre de LeGuin, qui trouve ses racines et qui retire sa puissance du domaine pré-verbal, et qui tend vers un discours "bisexuel."*

The ambiguous and problematical relationship of the self to models of all sorts – political, social, mythological, linguistic, psychological – is a major concern of contemporary fictionalists. This relationship can be boiled down to the paradox expressed by Whitman: how to combine the idea of flowing together, a loving "ensemble," with the "centripetal isolation of a human being in himself."<sup>1</sup> The paradox is that of identity (particularly as it is formed or not formed, by or against language): sameness and difference, symbiosis and separation. This dilemma and quest of the "hero" of the contemporary novel, it has been shown by some critics, is analogous to those of the author. This is true in LeGuin's case. LeGuin's protagonists are, typically, "lonely, isolated, out on the edge of things." LeGuin herself confesses: "I am pretty much a lone wolf, always have been." And she says that she was "a very unusual person," one who never quite fit

in: "I wasn't – you know, I never – my sweaters were never quite the right length or color. I never could do it right."<sup>2</sup>

In her novels, the most prevalent word for the situation of her protagonists is "cut-off." Cut-off suggests a final separation, as if a limb were severed from the body. This suggested dismemberment begs the questions, what body? whose body? The two most logical answers are the body politic and the mother's body. Yet, almost as typical as the isolation of LeGuin's protagonists is their periodic "involvement" – there is always a tether of some sort that connects them to the other. For example, Ged, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, never feels a part of the human world at large, the world of trade and commerce. But he does have a close involvement with the nonhuman environment that nurtures and sustains him. As a wizard, his creative relationship with the nonhuman world, a relationship that few others have, makes him someone special; a wizard's staff gains him free room, board and "passage" almost anywhere he goes. His personal struggle with the shadow can have public ramifications: although he wants to become one with the shadow so that he can feel whole and free, this act of union concomitantly saves the human world at large from a potentially destructive creature.

Genly Ai, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, is a stranger on a foreign planet. Due to things such as language, color, body size and, most importantly, sex, he can never feel a part of the societies to which he is ostensibly committed. He comes to enjoy his isolation, however, when he unites with his double, Estraven. Ai, like Ged, is special; he is the Envoy, the Mobile, one who has a creative mission – to unite two countries on one planet with a larger body of planets. George Orr, in *The Lathe of Heaven*, is a nondescript "milque-toast" who only wants to be left alone. But his unique power to dream-create new worlds obliges him to become involved, or at least concerned, with his creations. He is finally compelled to act, to restore continuity to a world that is being torn asunder. Shevek, the galactically famous creative scientist in *The Dispossessed*, feels cut-off from both Anarres and Urras. He

prefers his private world of numbers to the irritating world at large. However, his personal obsession – to unify the theories of Sequency and Simultaneity – becomes a public one: to unite the mother planet of Urras with the child planet Anarres. Hugh, in *The Beginning Place*, is a lonely young man who is frustrated both by a cold yet possessive mother and by his job as a checker in a Thrift-E-Mart where customers are "hands giving money, taking money." His isolation is intensified when he finds a secret place in the country which is bordered off from the world of burnt rubber and diesel fumes. However, he becomes involved with the people of the town of Trembreabrezi in this other world; he dresses like them and becomes their hero – the one who will kill the beast that separates the townsfolk from the rest of the people of the land.

Each of LeGuin's protagonists, then, although cut-off from his respective society and cherishing that isolation, is compelled to seek an antidote to this separation. The opposition to the isolation or separation manifests itself in a striving for union with some personal, private other (or mother) – shadow, Yarrow in *Wizard*; Estraven, Faxe in *LHD*; Heather, Alien in *Lathe*; Odo, Takver in *TD*; Irena, Allia in *Beginning Place* – which ultimately transforms into a striving or yearning for social unity, communion with others. This antinomy is the foundation of the artist *engagé* who desires to change the world (or at the very least hopes her creations will have some effect on outward reality) into a collectivity of brothers and sisters, yet wants to remain detached, in her own private space, with some semblance of entity that otherwise would be lost or subsumed by the push and press of business and politics.

To say, however, that the role of LeGuin's protagonists is a metaphor of the artist in the world is not enough. One needs evidence. In searching for this evidence, one is obliged to consider the dynamics involved in the artist's dilemma. This dynamics, which is essentially the conflict between separation or autism and symbiosis, and the attempt to establish boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, dictates the move-

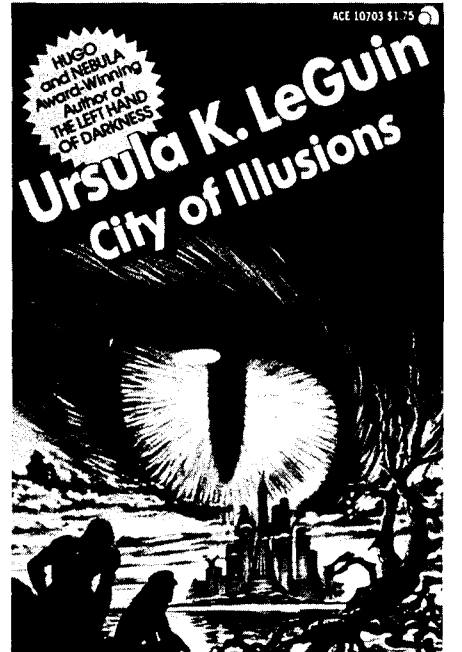
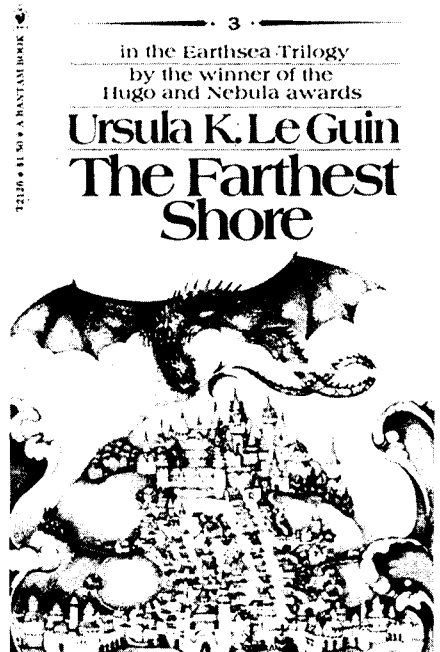
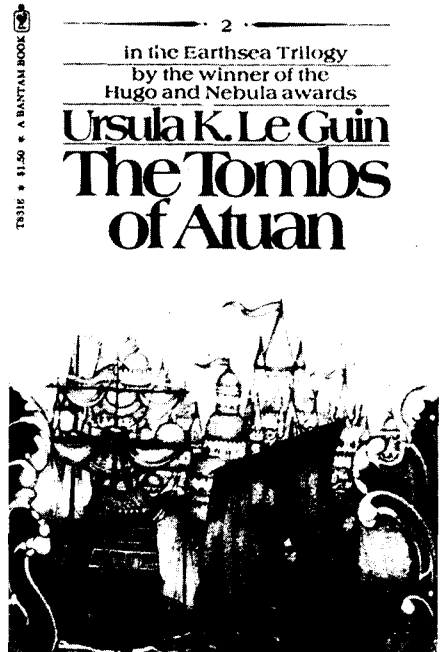
ment and structure of each LeGuin novel; characteristically, the movement is from union to separation and back again, and from barrier to barrier in an attempt to remove or blur boundary distinctions but with a recognition of their necessity. In *TD*, for instance, as Shevek moves back and forth from isolation to fusion with Takver, his main task as he sees it is to break down walls (significantly, the last line from LeGuin's poem "Invocation" reads, "O let me sing down the walls, Mother!"). Although complete unity seems to be an illusion, Shevek continues to strive for it. By the end of the novel, however, the reader is obliged to concur with Robert Frost that good fences make good neighbours. In *Beginning* Hugh unites with Irena in order to move more freely across the border that divides the private (inner) world from the public one. In the private land, the language of which contains no word for border, he removes the thing that has formed a barrier between the people. But at the end of the novel there is the implication that it is sometimes better that the gate to the other world be closed. LeGuin's novels (to use her phrase), go "rolling and bowling about what they're all about," constantly refining and reworking the same basic theme, the same crucial dilemma.

The dilemma is a fundamentally human one – that of identity – but more specifically it is that of the identity of the artist, whose problems are analogous to those of the autistic child. To say that the artist is like the autistic child may sound ludicrous to many. Yet, like the autistic child the artist moves into her own private reality,

largely to create; in her fantasy world she (the artist or "autist") can affect reality, influence the inner environment, away from the symbiotic unit. This fantasy world, moreover, is a recreation of the experienced symbiosis with the mother-environment-community and the problems involved in allaying the possibility of total dissolution. Indeed, LeGuin, in a recent article, asks, "Why do we tell tales, or tales about tales – why do we bear witness, true or false? We may ask Aneirin, or Primo Levi, we may ask Scheherazade, or Virginia Woolf. Is it because we are so organized as to take actions that prevent our dissolution into the surroundings?"<sup>73</sup> And Robert Kiely reminds us that "Even Robinson Crusoe dealt with isolation by re-creating the conditions of the society from which he had been separated."<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, if George Steiner's strong argument (in *After Babel*) that we, especially artists, are moving towards a kind of autism is valid, then there is a need to continue to investigate this idea, particularly when Steiner contends that the "study of the evolution of language is the study of the human mind itself," and concludes that "the problem of Babel is quite simply, that of human individuation."<sup>75</sup> While we all pass through an autistic phase, some, such as the artist, experience this phase more intensely than most; and, in keeping with the solidarity of memory and imagination, the artist brilliantly integrates this very early phase of ego-reality into forms of higher organization. Although the descriptions of the autistic child and its mechanisms, by various investigators, are

markedly akin to LeGuin's protagonists, I will demurely suggest that, at the very least, there is a rough or graded analogue between the autistic child and the artist – not necessarily a close similitude or total coincidence of characteristics.

The autistic operation, like the artistic operation, is essentially a linguistic one. This is one of the main thrusts of LeGuin's discourse. A juxtaposition of her discourse with that of contemporary psychoanalytic discourse, as exemplified by, for example, Jacques Lacan, Margaret Mahler, and D.W. Winnicott, would reveal that, with amazing accuracy and insight, she is portraying the experiences and trials which are the foundation of the individual, particularly the creative individual in her relationship to language. Close scrutiny of LeGuin's texts, which are so preoccupied with balance or equilibrium, allows us to define, or re-define, autism as it relates to the artist and the Symbolic order of language: autism is a form of separation from the potentially overwhelming mother-environment that is not the same kind of separation instigated by public language, which is abrupt and which fragments identity. The autistic operation, the movement of which appears to be towards isolation, is paradoxically an attempt at two kinds of balance: 1) it contains public language – puts it on hold, keeping it in check or balance – and invents its own private, neologistic language (True Speech; mind-speech; dream language or "Barsoomian bisyllable;" the cool language of numbers; the language of Tembrebresi) which allows it some semblance of identity; and



2) it spurns the potentially overwhelming world with the mother-environment but balances this by a recreation of that symbiotic world of fusion and oneness in its own fantasy world – this is the world of each LeGuin novel, that is typified by its search for union.

The autistic/artistic operation is a peculiarly beautiful but unique and puzzling sort of compromise: one is neither assimilated by the Symbolic order (public language, paternal discourse) nor by the Imaginary order (or over-symbiosis). It is a form of separation that is a – *created* – union, and it can have the same kind of liberating force as Julia Kristeva's Semiotic: the semiotic being a pattern of forces inside language that has been retrieved by artists such as Joyce, Artaud, and Céline, whose language "musicates through letters" and is able to "resume within discourse the rhythms, intonations, and echolalias of the mother-infant symbiosis – intense, pre-oedipal, predating the father."<sup>6</sup> This archaic dimension of language, pre-discursive, pre-verbal, is an immediate expression of the bodily contact with the mother before the paternal order of language comes to separate the subject from the mother.

Just as Kristeva takes pains to set up a dialogue between the pre-oedipal Semiotic and the Symbolic, LeGuin too interpenetrates the private realm with the public one. Her work consistently moves toward a union of opposites, of differences. I would, however, agree with Jacques Lacan that complete unity is an illusion: LeGuin's protagonists, despite all appearances, never achieve the kind of unity for which they, and LeGuin, strive. LeGuin's texts operate in a kind of middle area: they imply that we are not helpless before some inevitable destiny, but that also we can not engineer a perfect (communal) future. The longings of her characters, therefore, cannot be realized in life. The structure of her novels reveals or betrays this and that is one reason why the novels avoid closure – another story needs to be told, another attempt at union begun. So a novel ends and is still not completed, not a product, not a separated object. Identity must be constantly created; that which is creative must create itself. When the struggle to realize the self is ended, so is one's life.

LeGuin's identity theme is probably "stated" as well as it can be in the preceding definition of autism, which was the product of a juxtaposition of her discourse with contemporary psychoanalytic dis-

course. It is LeGuin's way of portraying the artistic paradox: how to be isolated – in a private world which nourishes continuity and creativity mainly by way of a private language – without having to be insulated, from the other, from the world of change, from people and potential "progress." Another way of putting it is to say LeGuin portrays the desire for simultaneous separation and symbiosis; LeGuin creates out of this simultaneity, or at least out of the "potential space" that may exist before or after the union. Yeats once said, "I have often had the fancy that there is some one Myth for every man, which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he did and thought."<sup>7</sup> Whatever work LeGuin does will be a variation on that one "Myth." The workings of this identity theme through the novels proves to be the homologue for all the various concerns and devices of the novels. This theme consistently manifests itself, germinating and informing theme and structure, acting as the narrative within the narrative. All of the following are subsumed under the rubric of identity: the obsessive nature of her protagonists and their bouts with insanity; doubling of characters; the use of boundaries and the distinction or lack of distinction between inside and outside, self and other; the ubiquitous oral imagery – images of food and eating as well as of being engulfed, devoured, or overwhelmed; omnipotence and the magic power of words; and the polarities from which each novel builds: dream-reality, rebirth-death, stasis-action, continuity-change, creativity-destructiveness, female-male, private communication/language-public communication/language.

A knowledge of the dynamics of identity in LeGuin's canon also helps us to understand her predilection for male protagonists, which has been questioned by some feminist critics. It is not, it seems to me, a simple matter of her being co-opted by male or paternal discourse. She creates according to the image that presents itself to her and insists on its elaboration. This image is intimately allied with her identity theme. With this in mind, there can be several reasons for the "choice" of male "heroes": 1) Because of the kind of woman-person-artist that she is, her way of symbolizing one of the things she is looking for – which is the principle of maleness and femaleness combined into a wholeness (this is most clearly evidenced by *The Left Hand of Darkness*) – is through males: the unity or wholeness is there at



Ursula K. LeGuin  
Credit: Henk Pander

its inception where she aligns herself with her protagonists; female-artist is at one with male-protagonist-artist; 2) This search for wholeness through male protagonists is also, paradoxically, a kind of distancing which is ultimately a separation (the male is different, apart from the female) that is a form of union (the protagonist is a part of me); 3) Since one's primary identity is instigated in the pre-verbal, pre-oedipal stage where there is little or no gender distinction, and since she is so insightfully recording that experience, it seems reasonable that gender will be flexible (indeed, her protagonists are hardly traditional male characters and they invariably have many "female" characteristics); 4) A component of bisexuality – and the double paradigm of childhood schizophrenia, autistic and symbiotic – is the pre-oedipal child's condensation of the mother-father images. This fusion-confusion is underscored by LeGuin who, in a preface to her story "Winter's King," tries to explain why she used the feminine pronoun for all Gethenians, while preserving such masculine titles as King and Lord, "just to remind one of the ambiguity."

*The androgyny of the characters has little to do with the events of the story, but the pronoun change does make it clear that the central, paradoxical relationship of parent and child is not, as it may have seemed in the other version, a kind of reverse Oedipus twist, but something less familiar and more ambiguous. Evidently my unconscious*

mind knew about the Gethenians long before it saw fit to inform me. It's always doing things like that.<sup>8</sup>

This "something less familiar" is one reason why LeGuin's writing strikes such a deep chord in us. It is a chord tracing back to experiences in our own individual lives, pre-verbal experiences unformulatable directly in our memories, when we were struggling along a path towards our status as persons. A sophisticated revival of this early experience, in which there is little or no gender distinction, can, while recognizing some difference, break down walls between people and not allow the discourse of one to rule over the other. Jane Gallop writes, "This problem of dealing with difference without constituting an opposition may just be what feminism is all about (might even be what psychoanalysis is all about)."<sup>9</sup> As Carolyn Heilbrun notes, it is a tendency of some feminists to exaggerate the differences in the potentialities of men and women.<sup>10</sup> This is where the artist can help because the power of unitive imagination is not accorded to all people. It is to be found most frequently in those who have no strong sense of individuality, of *who* they are. I think LeGuin would agree with Kristeva that to change the system one also has to change the speaking subject; that is, rather than formulate a new discourse, women and artists should persist in challenging, and thus balancing, the discourses that stand. This is perhaps the ultimate message of LeGuin's work, which is rooted in and gains its potency from the pre-verbal realm, the semiotic. The "potency" of the semiotic can never be denied and can become a social force:

This identification with the potency of the imaginary is not only an identification, an imaginary potency (a fetish, a belief in the maternal penis maintained at all costs), as a far too normative view of the social and symbolic relationship would have it. This identification also bears witness to women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, hatreds of the second sex.<sup>11</sup>

Since the semiotic originates in that pre-oedipal period which recognizes no distinctions of gender, it tends toward a "bisexual" discourse. Because the literature of semiotic discourse – of which LeGuin's work is an example – is opposed to all fixed, absolute significations, and "since the ideologies of modern male-dominated class-society rely on such fixed signs for their power (God, father, state, order, property and so on)," Terry Eagleton writes, "such literature becomes a kind of equivalent in the realm of language to revolution in the sphere of politics."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Tony Tanner, *City of Words* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup>"Lagniappe: An Informal Dialogue with Ursula K. LeGuin," *Selected Proceedings of the 1978 Science Fiction Research Association National Conference*, ed. Thomas J. Remington (Cedar Falls: University of Northern Iowa, 1979), p. 278; "Ursula K. LeGuin: In a World of Her Own," inter-

viewed by Nora Gallagher, *Mother Jones*, 9 (January 1984), 23.

<sup>10</sup>"It Was a Dark and Stormy Night; or, Why are we Huddling about the Campfire?," *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (Autumn 1980), 198.

<sup>11</sup>*The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup>*After Babel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 75, 473.

<sup>13</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 157.

<sup>14</sup>"At Stratford on Avon," *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: A.H. Bullen, 1903), pp. 161-2. Norman H. Holland is particularly fond of this quotation.

<sup>15</sup>*The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975; reprint ed., New York: Bantam, 1976), pp. 85-6.

<sup>16</sup>*The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 93.

<sup>17</sup>Carolyn Heilbrun, "A Response to Writing and Sexual Difference," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (Summer 1982), 809.

<sup>18</sup>Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 7: 1 (1981), 31-2.

<sup>19</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University Press, 1983), p. 189.

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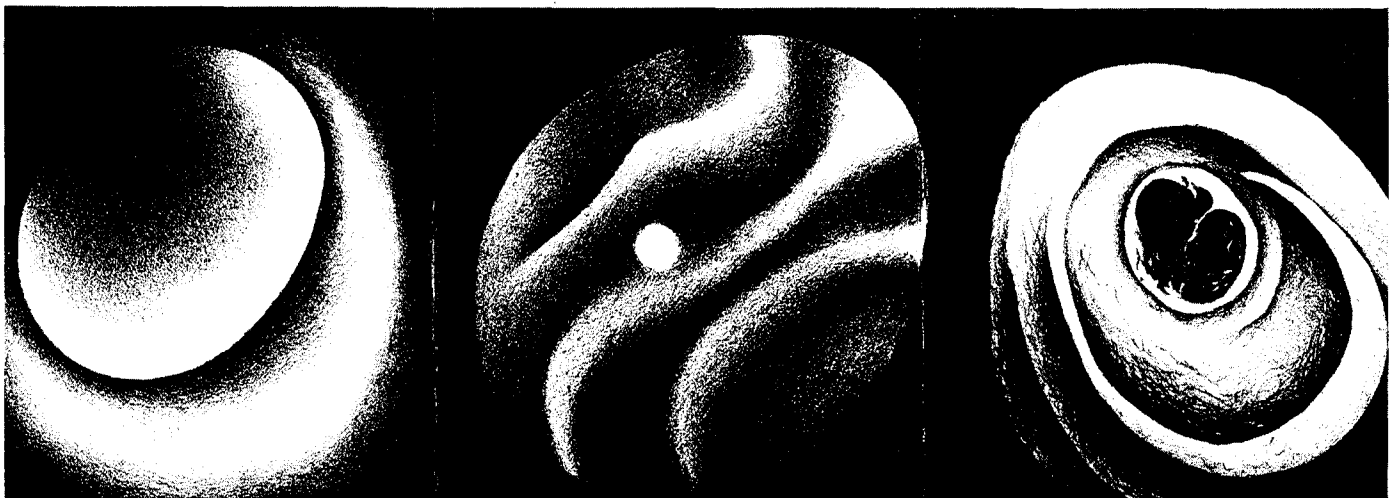


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