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Abstract

Sees the world-view of Earthsea, as well as much of the symbolism, characteristic of pre-Christian Nordic and Celtic thought. Focus on present life rather than future is a significant theme.

Additional Keywords

Celtic mythology—Influence on Ursula K. Le Guin; Le Guin, Ursula K. Earthsea books—Sources; Nordic culture—Influence on Earthsea books; Norse mythology—Influence on Ursula K. Le Guin; Time in the Earthsea books

Going North and West to Watch the Dragons Dance: Norse and Celtic Elements in Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* Trilogy

Christine K. Thompson

In all of her novels Ursula Le Guin is concerned with the problem of how her characters experience time in their lives. In works involving space travels, characters like Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* sacrifice a present life with family and familiarity for the sake of contributing to the future; but they are haunted thereafter by a sense of personal loss. In other works, like the recent *Always Coming Home* or the early *Earthsea* Trilogy, the connections between past, present and future are imbedded within a densely constructed cultural milieu, rather than being embodied in the personal circumstances of a particular character.

Le Guin's debt to Northern European myth has been noted by several commentators on her work.¹ She herself acknowledges the influence,² but explains that she did not deliberately construct the world of *Earthsea* so much as discover it in her subconscious. She considers that "a genuinely mythic dimension in a work of literature cannot be imposed... consciously" (Spivack, p. 133), that rather "it arises in the process of connecting the conscious and unconscious realms" (*Language of the Night*, p. 79). However, what surfaced from her unconscious, in the process of discovering the world of *Earthsea*, and what she intuitively recognized as requisite for her purposes was a culture reflecting pagan European values and the physical world out of which such values arose.

Her familiarity with and profound respect for an anthropological perspective is apparent in the extent to which concrete details of her imagined world are woven into a complex of social values and attitudes. Thus if one looks more closely at the elements from early Germanic and Celtic sources, one can appreciate how the values of such a society are consonant with Le Guin's attitudes to time. The heroes of each of the three novels face and overcome a potentially fatal attitude to time — an overregarding of past or future and an inability to value the present. In this paper I will concentrate on the first and last novel of the trilogy where the Nordic elements are stronger.³

The geographic of the world of *Earthsea*, depicted in consummate detail, is that of a northern temperate zone similar to the Celtic and Viking world. In such a climate the central factor is the shift between light and dark, from summer to winter. The ceremonies of the novel are rituals to mark the passage of the solstices, and the turning year is measured by Midsummer and Sunreturn, as the Winter Solstice is called, by the uncertain days surrounding these point of change, and by the Equinoxes, when the planet is briefly balanced between light and dark, and symbolicaly, good and evil, life and death. Balance is of course one

of the key concepts in the ethical thinking of the dwellers in *Earthsea*, and as been noticed about the narrative, Ged, the hero, is vulnerable to evil when the light is weakening between Midsummer and Sunreturn, while his successful ventures happen during the other half of the year (Manlove, p. 293).

In *Earthsea*, as in the religious world of the Norse, trees and the well or fountain are revered. Roke, the island where the wizards are trained, is in the center of the world, and the central room of the School in the House of the Wizards is an open courtyard with a fountain surrounded by trees. In *The Farthest Shore* those trees are named as ash, elm and rowan, all trees that have magical significance in Nordic and Celtic culture. The young hero Arren is first seen sitting under a rowan tree, indeed his true name we learn is Rowan. Since this is the tree planted all over Scotland by houses to ward off harm, and Arren's destiny is to be the king who has been prophesied to unite all of *Earthsea* in a new age of peace and harmony under his wardenship, he is appropriately named. Ged himself was born in the village of Ten Alders, and his mage stick is made of yew wood, another two trees from Celtic lore. The Immanent Grove, the sacred spiritual center of *Earthsea* where the Wardens of Roke, meet to do the work entrusted to them of maintaining Equilibrium and Balance in their world, is an oak grove, another of the sacred trees of the Celtic and Germanic world: "It is said that the trees of the Grove themselves are wise. It is said that the Master Pattern learns his supreme magery there within the Grove, and if ever the trees should die so shall his wisdom die" (FS, p. 13). As in the Nordic world, there is no building to house the sacred.

Apart from the fountain on Roke, water is a recurring symbol throughout the trilogy. Ged's gift to the old couple cast away in youth on a sandy shoal, who give him as a parting gift half of the ring of Erreth Akbe, is to charm up a spring of pure water for them. The narrator says of the sea that "there rise stones and monsters, but no evil powers: evil is of the earth" (WE, p. 152). What typifies the land of the dead is the lack of water: "there is no sea, no running river or spring, in the dark place where once Ged had gone. Death is the dry place" (FS, p. 198).

In addition to these concrete details of the physical world there are several concepts that reflect the influence of Northern myth: the use of the number nine, and the symbolism involved in traveling towards the north and west. Nine of course is the magical number that recurs throughout Norse and Celtic myth. In *The Wizard of Earthsea* Ogion tells Ged early in his apprenticeship that

"mastery is nine times patience" (WE, p. 28) – a truth Ged does not want to hear; there are nine Masters of Wizardry on the magic island of Roke, and they set up nine walls of silence around them when they are choosing a new Archmage. There are nine dragons on the island of Pendor that Ged goes to do battle with, and the dragon Yevaud offers Ged nine precious stones from his treasure hoard to leave him in peace. And in *The Farthest Shore* the constellation which is ascendant over Ged and Arren's voyage to find the door "through death" is made up of nine stars in the shape of the Rune of Ending, in the shape of the number nine. C.N. Manlove lists several other configurations of nine in both novels (pp. 289-290).

As insistent as the magical nines is the significance in journeying to the north and the west. Indeed the working title for the novel until shortly before publication was *The Farthest West*.⁴ When Ged journeys north into Osskil he becomes vulnerable to assault; it is a journey into physical dangers from cold and snow, and into psychic dangers from the stone of Terrenon, one of the Old Powers of Evil. Only by fleeing in the shape of a hawk can he save his own life. The north is the place of mortal danger and of testing, where to survive, even in flight, is proof of his heroic stature. There are overtones in this episode of an encounter with one of the Norse Giants where Ged wins by outwitting his foe.

The use of the west in the novels is constant with Celtic mythology where traditionally land of the dead lay to the west. When Ged and Arren go to find the "hole in the world" where the dead are passing through between the land of the living and the land of the dead, and through which all the life and energy and joy of the world is draining out, they go first into the decadent south to discover the way, and then northward and westward to Selidor, the westernmost island of the archipelago. In the west too, is where the dragons live. This might initially seem paradoxical, since being the longest-lived creatures of that world, the dragons might seem to be the farthest from death. Because of that enormous life span, however, they are symbols not only of the past but also of the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom gained from that long perspective, and therefore they have closer ties with all the dead they have outlived than with the short-lived people of the present.

Nowhere is her choice of material from northern myth more apparent than in the language itself. John Pfeiffer in his article "But Dragons Have Keen Ears" has discussed the linguistic elements in the novel that are drawn from the Old English poetic conventions, as typified by Beowulf. The most obvious is the preponderance of words, particularly key terms in the novel that are drawn from the Anglo-Saxon "word hoard." Pfeiffer focuses on the use of "bright"; but if one looks at the nouns, the naming words of a novel which is concerned with Naming as the key to a Wizard's power, a clear pattern emerges. Names for trees come from Old English roots as do the names of the birds – the raven and the hawk associated with the shamanistic

Loki-like shape-changing abilities of Nemmerle and Ged. The words to describe magic: spells, runes, binding, unbinding, making and unmaking, wizard, shadow, staff, deeds are all Teutonic or Celtic in origin. Then if one looks at the names of people and places, words which exist in obsolete or modern English like Ged, Cob, Yarrow, Minnow, Murre, Rood, Roke, the Reaches, are once again Anglo-Saxon or Celtic, and many of the invented names and place names have an Anglo-Saxon or Celtic ring to them: Gont, Morred, Iffish, Pendor, Perregal, Yevaud, Andrad, Kop and Koppish, Sneg and the Gontish Sea.

The style of the novel incorporates several features of Old English and bardic literature, such as the use of alliteration. Ged is described in the opening chapter when he summons up a fog to hide his village from the looting of the Kargish long ships as "wraithlike in that weird, dank mist" (WE, p. 21). After the warriors have fallen off the cliffs in the fog "screaming through fog and sudden sunlight a hundred feet sheer to the shallow pools below" (WE, p. 22), Ged is found unhurt, but "speechless and stupid like one stunned" (WE, p. 23). Such language choices quickly set up the tone of the novel. The other feature of early British verse that Le Guin uses is Kennings, the replacing of an ordinary noun by an oblique metaphor. Ged addresses the dragons as "windworms" (WE, p. 103), and after he has bound the dragons to Pendor, Ged is addressed as "dragonlord" (WE, p. 11). Villagers shot by the Kargish bowmen are described as "arrow-bitten" (WE, p. 22).

The narrative voice has a style reminiscent of a Celtic bard or an Anglo-Saxon Scop, introducing the novel as "a tale of the time before Ged's fame, before the songs were made" (WE, p. 11), and informing us that "this life is told of in the *Deed of Ged*. At the end of *The Wizard of Earthsea*, the narrative voice tells us that "if Estarriol of Iffish kept his promise and made a song of that first great deed of Ged's it has been lost.... So of the song of the Shadow there remains only a few scraps of legend, carried like driftwood from isle to isle over the long years" (WE, p. 205). Thus imbedded in the very language of the narrative itself is the importance of naming – and thus of remembering all the facts of the life of Ged, a life we as readers are told is now so far in the past that it is only a legendary memory.

The whole question of words and narrative and knowing or learning the true names of things is a recurrent part of the language of the telling as well as of the narrative itself. In *The Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged's apprenticeship as a wizard is focused on his learning of words, ancient and modern. This training of the wizards of Roke has much in common with what is known of the druids in Ancient Celtic times. The apprentices are like apprentice druids, an elite group, chosen because of innate ability, and put through a lengthy, rigorous, secret training, learning the lore of the past and the arts of making magic, and learning the ethics of practising their art. The apprentices learn runes and spells and charms, all depending on accurate repetition of the exact words; they learn the songs that retell the deeds of past heroes, thereby learning the tradi-

tions of the past, the tragic love stories, the heroic battles to the death, the song of the creation. They are expected to become bards or Makars,² to use the obsolete Scottish equivalent of the Old English scop, both of which terms come from roots meaning to shape or create. When they in their turn come to add to the stock of chants, in making songs to record worthy deeds, they will be adding to the sum of humanity. Their magic has a religious, shamanistic dimension; they are the intermediaries with the land of the dead, with the sacred responsibility of maintaining Balance and Pattern in the world. As I noted earlier, the wizards have a knowledge of shape-changing which connects them with the Norse Loki. Indeed the narrative voice says of Ged's delight in this aspect of his skill that "the mind of the magician takes delight in tricks; a mage is a trickster" (FS, p. 150).

When Arren and Ged are talking about Arren's illustrious background as descendant of the hero, Morred, the importance of a knowledge of the heroic past is discussed. The boy admits that for him such a lineage "is a responsibility that must be lived up to" (FS, p. 32). Ged replies in affirmation of Arren's statement; "That is what I meant. To deny the past is to deny the future. A man does not make his destiny: he accepts it or he denies it" (FE, p. 32), implying that without the past as model and spur, the possibility for heroic action is diminished. This could have been said by Beowulf whose deeds were done to uphold a tradition of right acts. The emphasis in Ged's teaching, however, would be on the present act, the being in the world and not on the future for the future's sake.

- As the action of *The Farthest Shore* makes explicit, life can only be fully lived if it is not hoarded. Becoming obsessed with one's own future and the consequent wish to expand that future eternally, drains the joy from living in the present moment. Ged's most impassioned outburst to Arren is when he tells the boy:

Look at this land... This is your kingdom, the kingdoms of life. This is your immortality. Look at the hills, the mortal hills. They do not endure forever. The hills with the living grass on them and the streams of water running.... In all the world, in all the worlds, in all the immensity of time, there is no other like each of those streams, rising cold out of the earth where no eye sees it, running through the sunlight and darkness to the sea. Deep are the springs of being, deeper than life, than death. (FS, p. 187).

The quest for immortality is depicted in the novel as a monstrous will to power over death, which results in the leaking away of life through a hole in the world. As Ged tries to convince the youthful Arren, seduced by the notion of living forever, the present moment always takes precedence over the hope of future greatness.

In discussing the notion of the importance of the past for present action in Germanic literature and culture, Paul Bauschatz in *The Well and the Tree* talks about the use of the

dragon as symbol of the importance of the past. He says:

... the dragon most obviously suggests not only the interrelationships of men's world with those tangential to it but also the reality and presence of the past.... All dragons coil and layer, and, as with Beowulf's adversary, fly up and out upon the present when the configuration of the past is to be rearranges. (p. 130)

If we apply the insights of this statement to Le Guin's use of the dragon motif, in *The Farthest Shore* in particular, we can see more clearly the complexity of the attitude to time revealed in her novel, an attitude that has much in common with that of Nordic culture. Her dragons, because of their immense age, are repositories of untold generations of human knowledge. Their wisdom and guile both are a result of their immense knowledge. But most interesting of all is their relation to the Pattern which is in the care of the Archmage of Earthsea. That Pattern is the compatible interrelationships between everything in that world, the Balance in constant harmonious motion.

When Ged and Arren come finally to the Dragon's Run they see in the morning, magnificent as Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Wind-hoven," the dragons circling and soaring on the morning air, the Pattern incarnate:

All the glory of mortality was in that flight... in the patterns of their flight there was a fierce, willed concord.... At times the patterns jarred, and the circles broke; and often in flight one dragon or another would jet from its nostrils a long streak of fire that curved and hung on the air a moment repeating the curve and brightness of the dragon's long, arching body. (FS, p. 166)

The perfect interlacing shape of their dance here has been distorted by the deathly influence of the Unmaker Cob, but the pattern itself is that same "binding, involving structure of Germanic interlace design with sometimes one, sometimes more serpents holding themselves fast within an apparently never-ending everchanging coiled pattern" (p. 130), which Bauschatz describes as emblematic of the Germanic view of world and time. That same design is also intrinsic to Celtic art. In Le Guin's narrative, to use Bauschatz's terminology, the dragons are flying up and out upon the present as the pattern of the past up to this point in the narrative is about to be restructured by Ged's final act of closing the hole in the world, and by Arren coming thereby into his inheritance as the first king of the united archipelago in over and prosperity to his kingdom.

To see this pattern is to understand how Le Guin's choice of elements from early European myth are congruent with the central theme of the work. They embody a cultural view of the priorities between present, past, and future that were obliterated by the Christian world view that superseded the pagan Nordic one. With the advent of Christianity, the future took precedence over the present and past. Bede likened human life in pagan times to a sparrow's flight out of the dark for a brief moment into the light and warmth of the mead-hall before flying back out

into the dark. For him, Christian faith in a life after death extended that brief moment of warmth and security into the future. The price for such a shift in value was, however, that the pleasure of the present was made dim by the anticipated glory to come.

But Le Guin's central thesis is that the lived moment is the ultimate reality, and the accrued knowledge of the past deepens and enriches the joy of that moment. For Ged, death is an ineluctable fact but not therefore a hopeless doom. And this is the wisdom that Arren has to learn. In the words of the Creation hymn of Ea: "Only in dark the light, only in dying life" (WE, p. 203). Life is not the preamble to future bliss; it is the word that is spoken, it is the light, it is the hawk's flight. The keenest joy of living is in its very brevity. And the past for Le Guin, as for pre-Christian European cultures, is what gives resonance to that life.

Endnotes

- ¹ e.g. James Bittner, *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (UMI Research Press: Ann Arbor, 1984) pp. 67-69 and p. 138 n. 25, C.N. Manlove, "Conservatism in the Fantasy of Ursula K. Le Guin," *Extrapolations* 21.3 (1980) pp. 287-297, John Pfeiffer "But Dragons Have Keen Ears," *Ursula K. Le Guin Voyager to Inner Lands and to Outer Space*, ed. Joe de Bolt (Kennikat Press: Port Washington, N.Y. 1979) pp. 115-127.
- ² George Wickes and Louise Westling, "Interview With Ursula K. Le Guin," *Northwest Review* 20.2-3 (1982) p. 148.

The Laborer-Asthete: Tengwar on the Title Page

Paul Nolan Hyde

This is the end of the column Quenti Lambadilion that was inadvertently omitted in the last issue. It begins with the last paragraph found on page 42 of *Mythlore* 54.

There is at least one other problem with some of the inscriptions, however, that is really frustrating to "ad nauseum". Sometimes in the process of collating the gatherings, and the binding itself, hides portions of the inscriptions on the Title Pages. Fortunately, the opposing page replicates the inscription, so that that which cannot be read because it is tucked into the binding or covered with glue can usually be found on the edge of the page. My copy of *Lays of Beleriand*, however, suffered at the hands (or blades) of the cropper when the pages were separated after binding so that the "et" of "set" and the "f" of "forth" were nipped almost completely from the edge and the interior portions were so tightly bound I could not read them without tearing the book apart. What to do? I did what every good linguist does when he reaches this point: I guessed at what it must have said and will wait until someone else rips their book apart trying to find out if I am wrong.

This tour de force has been tedious, grueling, and perhaps of dubious value. What does it matter, after all, to know what has been done in the Title Page inscriptions or

³ Le Guin has said that there were four distinct languages on Earthsea, which she consciously tried to distinguish for herself in choosing names. "I tried to have fairly clearly in my mind the pools of sounds [they] used" (Wickes and Westling, p. 158). Atuan then would be a distinct culture from Ged's homeland of Gont, accounting for the difference of ambience in the second novel.

⁴ Jeff Levin, "Ursula K. Le Guin: A Select Bibliography," *Science Fiction Studies: Selected Articles on Science Fiction 1973-75*, ed. R.D. Mullen and Darko Suvin (Gregg Press: Boston, 1976) pp. 236-237.

⁵ See the well known poem of the Scottish Chaucerian, William Dunbar, "The Lament for the Makaris."

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any other transcription? I believe that there are people, fans of J.R.R. Tolkien, who have such high regard for the works of Middle-earth and for the mind that created them, that they are hesitant to do what their first inclination is: to learn to write like the Elves. To them I say, it is no "game" nor a "desecration" to write in Elvish script or to learn to speak Quenya or Sindarin among friends who feel as you do. It is a kind of art, a most beautiful art at that, and one too that brings great aesthetic pleasure to those who learn to appreciate and approximate the Artist. I hope that the detail taken here demonstrates that you are free to take some liberties with the system, just as Christopher as done and his father before him. The most important thing is, once you learn how the Artist did it, you should paint your own: wide, high, and deep.

Note

- ¹ Capitalization and spelling consistency for this inscription and those following are mine

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