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Rilke and Le Guin

Abstract

Seeks similarities in Rilke and Le Guin, especially in the power of naming and the view of death as a necessary part of life. Notes in particular parallels between Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *The Farthest Shore*.

Additional Keywords

Le Guin, Ursula K. Earthsea books—Sources; Names in fantasy; Rilke, Rainer Maria—Influence on Ursula K. Le Guin; Rilke, Rainer Maria. Duino Elegies—Influence on *The Farthest Shore*

Rilke and Le Guin

Barbara J. Bucknall

The Earthsea Trilogy, as everyone here knows, is easy to read but very difficult to write about. It seems to hark back to an age prior to literary criticism, when the thing to do with a text was not to explicate it but to quote it — if necessary, learn it by heart and recite it. Such texts have to be instantly comprehensible, at least at the conscious level, and win instant assent. The age of the Trilogy's intended readers only accounts in part for this. No wonder the Earthsea Trilogy is so difficult to comment on — you just end up saying, "How true!"

If one persists in explicating the unquestionable, the only possible approach, or so it seems to me, is to ask "Why does this text seem unquestionable to me? How does it command my assent?" The immediate answers seem to be of a psychological and cultural as much as of a literary nature. I expect readers of Le Guin are familiar with the way people supposed, when the Earthsea Trilogy first came out, that Le Guin had been reading Jung. And indeed the parallels are very close. First of all, a man has to come to terms with his shadow. Then he has to come to terms with women. Finally he has to come to terms with death. Both Jung and the Earthsea Trilogy in a nutshell. But the unfortunate flaw in this assumption of Jung's influence was that Le Guin hadn't been reading Jung.¹ She read him afterwards and found him rewarding, but the resemblance was coincidental. Still, it does show that Le Guin had given a great deal of thought to human psychology.

By another coincidence, the magic involved in the Earthsea Trilogy seems to be very closely connected with what Jung called the collective unconscious. We tend to forget that it is not so long ago that a belief in magic was so widespread as to be almost universal. There are pockets of it around even today, to be found among people who are not necessarily insane. I have relatives in the Outer Hebrides who believe in magic just as much as they believe in God. My brother Roddy, as a little boy, was staying on their island when he saw a rabbit rush madly across a field and up a wall. He went into the house and told our relatives, who declared that the rabbit was being ridden by a fairy and they would have to put out milk for the fairy or it would drain the cows. Magical activity had been identified, and there was a simple, practical, obvious solution. My Hebridean relatives were as matter-of-fact about it as a North American or Siberian shaman, even if they'd never heard of Malinowski.

Of course neither Rilke nor Le Guin believes in magic like a Hebridean or a shaman. But there is a magical intention in Rilke's poems, just as much as there is a deliberate use of the practical approach to magic in the Earthsea trilogy. His poems are incantations as much as invocations. It is even possible that he believed in his own

magic more literally than does Le Guin. But both speak to the subconscious through their magic, even though Le Guin is much less obscure. Both draw on the collective unconscious.

Speaking of the collective unconscious, it is rather unnerving to consider the very striking parallels between Le Guin and Rilke in the light of the equally striking parallels between Le Guin and Jung. But Le Guin has a long history of reading poetry and revering poets, and she has named Rilke as a great poet and a profound thinker on at least one occasion, in "Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction." (Ibid., pp. 77-78.) The specific poem to which she there alludes is in Rilke's *New Poems*, but it is hardly thinkable that someone with such an admiration for Rilke would have failed to read the *Duino Elegies*, which are his most famous work. Furthermore, there are such close parallels, in matters of precise detail, as opposed to vast general concepts, between the Tenth Duino Elegy and *The Farthest Shore*, that it is difficult for me to believe that she was not thinking of it.

I do not claim that Le Guin carried over Rilke's ideas wholesale or unaltered into the Earthsea Trilogy. What seems to have happened is that an image here, a line or an entire poem there, spoke to her in a very profound way, and became transformed as she worked on it. One of the chief differences is Le Guin's clarity as opposed to Rilke's obscurity. It takes a lot of mental work to arrive at this simplicity. There are certain elements in Rilke which Le Guin has apparently made so completely her own, just as she has made elements from the collective unconscious, that the Earthsea Trilogy forms a complete, coherent whole, with no trace of joins. This is possible because of Rilke's psychological depth.

Rilke's poems are beautiful but difficult, because they are very condensed and allusive. For an English speaking reader, they are somewhat reminiscent of T.S.Eliot, but they are actually more difficult because the metaphysical charge they carry is not an easily recognizable one. T.S.Eliot's Christianity is a generally available key to his poems, but Rilke, far from being Christian, seems to have made up his own religion, which you have to feel for through his poems. He attempted to explain his doctrine in a few letters to certain people who asked for explanations, but these letters are not very long, and it is obvious that he experienced great difficulty in separating his message from his poetry.

There are, however, certain themes that recur in the *Duino Elegies*. One is that death is the other side of life and that we deny life if we deny death. Another is that there is a transcendent element in life which he calls the Angel. It

is difficult to tell what exactly the Angel is, except that it is an essence which impinges on the visible world from time to time, and which, although it has no other relationship to humanity, perceives in a special way some of the works and deeds of humanity, that is to say, those that have entered the sphere of the invisible.

Rilke sees some kind of privilege attached to being invisible. It would be absurd to suppose that this has anything to do with the advantages of invisibility, as recounted in fairy tales. The invisibility on which he lays such stress is created by the poet naming so rightly that the names of things take on a spiritual dimension that lives on in our hearts. In other words, the spiritual aspect of things is the proper domain of poetry, which is in fact Rilke's religion. Poetry is religious because it is spiritual, and the spiritual is necessarily invisible.

However, things in the spiritual dimension are not always what we can bear or cope with. The Angel is almost beyond our power to bear. That is why, according to Rilke, what has to be transformed into the spiritual is the earth itself and all the homely, humanly made things we find upon it. It is a question of intensified being, for the poet and the things he names alike.

Intensified being is very important for Rilke, who feels that we are very far from attaining a state of essence. Unlike the Angel, the human being is not essence. Some human beings get closer to a state of essence than others, and these are the lovers, particularly women who continue to love after they have been abandoned. Their love consumes and possesses them in a way which is not possible for women whose love has been satisfied. They are pure essence of love.

Rilke is very much concerned with purity, not in the sense of chastity, but in the sense of that which is unalloyed. He feels so strongly that writing poetry is a religious and spiritual act, because he strives to his utmost to make his poetry pure — poetry and nothing else. The *Duino Elegies* are written from a point of view which celebrates what is pure and bewails what is diminished, tarnished or adulterated. A poem, for Rilke, is an act of will directed towards pure spirit. With all his gentleness, he has a Nietzschean will to power in his particular domain.

There is much more I could say about Rilke if I had chosen to concentrate exclusively on him. But I think I have said enough to give a general idea of what he is like, and so move on to the subject of Le Guin's connection with him. Naming and learning names is, as everyone here knows, the basic principle of the magic of Earthsea. It is delightful to see how Le Guin has combined the preoccupation with names of the so-called primitive peoples and the words of power of traditional wizardry with Rilke's assertion that our highest and most powerful task is to name.

There is so much about names in the Earthsea Trilogy that one hardly knows which aspect to begin with. Perhaps because proper names have a particular importance in the Trilogy, it might be as well to start with them. As in the case of the indigenous people of so many countries, the real name of an individual has to be kept secret from everyone except those in whom one has complete trust. One's innermost being is attached to the name, and those who know one's name have power over one. Only the immensely powerful can afford to be known by their real name. The whole of *A Wizard of Earthsea* is concerned with Ged's dawning realization that the evil shadow he has stirred up exists within himself, and he lays it to rest by calling it by his own name.

But not only people have a name on Earthsea. Every single creature or natural object has a name in the Speech of the Making. As in the case of people, to know that name is to have power over the thing. But it is not just a case of power. Naming something creates a bond between you and it, as in the case of the rabbit which Ged summons to show Tenar, towards the end of *The Tombs of Atuan*, but which he cannot kill for supper once he has called it by its name. This is magic in the old style, since any traditional magician uses special forms of words, but it is also the same thing that Rilke meant when he said that we are here to name things — quite ordinary things, a pitcher no less than a tower.² It is not a question of inventing new names for them, but of uttering the names that they already have with extraordinary power.

Segoy, the creator of Earthsea, created it by naming everything in it, and it sprang into being as he named it. But he named it in the Speech of the Making, which the wizards of Earthsea know only in part, although in it all spells must be spoken. One of the tasks of the apprentice wizards on Roke is to learn as much of the Speech of the Making as remains. Not that they are learning the language of God. Segoy seems to have been the first wizard, and, by the same token, the first poet, rather than a god. Wizardry is poetry. Poetry is wizardry. This Le Guin states in "Dreams Must Explain Themselves," when she says, "Wizardry is artistry. The trilogy is then, in this sense, about art, the creative experience, the creative process."³

This holds true even when the wizard poet makes things visible and concrete, rather than in visible and spiritual. But because of the importance of the name, there is a spiritual essence within matter which can be spoken to and summoned forth. This is true even in the case of a stone, which can be commanded to take on the form of a diamond, but which remains in its essence what it truly is, and which will revert to what it truly is when it hears its true name spoken. Taking names away is a destruction of identity, the nearest thing on Earthsea to real blasphemy.

Given this power of the word, the wizard lives at such a pitch of intensity that the emotional feasts of Rilke's lovers are quite unnecessary to him. Ged is wedded to all creation, for he can join birds in the air or delve into deep, dark places and hold off the evil powers that dwell there. When he chooses, he can speak to anyone he meets as a lifelong companion, making permanent bonds with such young people as Tenar and Arren, and then leave again for other tasks, without forgetting. It is absurd to think of him having a love affair. Too much demands his attention. The poet Rilke had an almost similar attitude. He did start love affairs, but it was a matter of principle with him to break them off in order to return to his poetry.

But it is not only a question of loving and naming. You have to be a born wizard as you have to be born a poet. The power has to be there from the start — a certain affinity with what Rilke calls the Angel. Where are Le Guin's Angels? I hope I am not letting a wish to find systematic parallels run away with me when I say that Le Guin's dragons bear a certain resemblance to Rilke's angels. They are transcendent beasts, made of fire, very dangerous, just as Rilke's Angels would be for anyone who attempted to embrace one. But one cannot call them evil, as one can Tolkien's dragons, because they are simply following their own nature.

They are magical in themselves, not because they have learned magic. They will speak to certain men, but they think

in a different way from human beings. They see things differently from human beings, like Rilke's Angels, and the Speech of the Making, the speech of the purest creative poetry, is their native tongue. In *The Farthest Shore*, Ged says to Arren that they are dreams. Just possibly Rilke might agree that his Angels are dreams too. Certainly they are symbols. But at the end of the Trilogy, with all his magic gone, Ged rides on a dragon, a feat greater than Rilke would have supposed possible.

No longer a wizard, having used up all his power in subduing his worst enemy, Ged still knows the Speech of the Making and is a total human being at peace with himself and all around him, wanting only solitude and communion with nature.

I have left to the end the closest parallel between Le Guin and Rilke, and that is the importance of death in the *Duino Elegies* and the Earthsea Trilogy alike. One of the most striking features of the Earthsea Trilogy is the stress laid on death, from many points of view. This is quite an exceptional feature in American books for young people, or indeed in American books for adults, except in the case of a horror or crime story. The typical North American view is that to think about death or old age is morbid. People do not die; they pass on. The corpses in funeral parlours are made up to look alive and attractive as possible. Old people are called "Senior Citizens" or "Seniors", and my eye doctor asks me "How many years young are you?" Yet no one seems to object to the presence of death in Earthsea, even when Le Guin makes a direct frontal attack on current attitudes.

Let us consider what Le Guin has to say about death, volume after volume. Her presentation of it changes and takes on new aspects as the wizard Ged grows older. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged, a brash, short-tempered youth, is tempted by a young witch to raise up a spirit from the dead. He attempts it, and raises up a black, evil spirit of destruction, which his master, Ogion, banishes. In this, Le Guin is not making use of Rilke, but of the traditional Christian horror of necromancy, even though she is not in the least Christian herself. But she can sympathize with this horror, because such an act is contrary to the natural order of things. Ged is upsetting the balance, and will do so again on Roke, where he summons the spirit of a lady of legend. The shadow beast accompanies her, wounding Ged almost mortally.

When Ged leaves Roke to be the wizard of a remote little island which is in danger from dragons, he curbs the dragons as he was sent to do, but is unable to save the dying child of his friend Pechvarry. He has been taught to let the dying spirit go, but he is so desperate to save the child that he runs after him into the land of the dead, where he encounters the shadow beast again, and again nearly loses his life. It seems that friendship, compassion and good intentions generally are not enough. Not when you are dealing with a law of nature rather than a law of God.

The further adventures of Ged in this volume have nothing to do directly with death or the land of the dead. But they do have a great deal to do with the death of the spirit, which is the worst kind of destruction. The same thing applies to *The Tombs of Atuan*, where a wholesome young woman who is full of the instincts of life, is forced to live underground, in the dark, in the service of nameless powers of destruction. Ged rescues her, but before he can do this, he has to teach her how to rescue him. He has to free her spirit before he can free her body. There is no mention of the land of the dead in this

volume, for the tombs of Atuan are death enough.

But there is a great deal in *The Farthest Shore* about physical as well as spiritual death. The horror and waste and destruction that come over Earthsea when its inhabitants attempt to refuse death validate death and show it to be a law of nature which cannot be resisted without great damage to the human psyche. In addition to that, nature itself goes awry. Crops fail, misshapen animals are born, singers forget their songs, and wizards forget their spells or the spells lose their power. A failed creation matches failed creativity. Merchandise is shoddy, crafts and skills are forgotten or neglected, drug addicts lie about in the streets, and even dragons are struck dumb. All this has come about because Ged once made a sorcerer so afraid of death that he refuses to die, and is dragging almost everyone of Earthsea after him in his refusal. Ged and the young prince Arren have to follow him through the dry land of the dead as far as the dry river, where they catch up with him and reconcile him to death. At the same time, they seal up the opening he has made between the two worlds. After that, they have to cross the mountains of Pain to win back to the living world.

The Farthest Shore is the most Rilkean of Le Guin's books, and I would like to discuss exactly how Rilke's view of death, the dead, and the land of the dead are similar to Le Guin's. To begin with, the people in Le Guin's land of the dead are completely at peace, completely indifferent and completely lacking in emotion. She says, for instance, that the mother and child who died together have no further interest in one another. T.A. Shippey pointed out some time ago that there is a very close parallel here to a poem in *The Shropshire Lad* by A.E. Housman.¹ But there is no reason why what one poet says should not be supported by another. Rilke certainly says, in the Fourth Elegy, that the dead have "countless realms of equanimity."² When Ged persuades his enemy, the sorcerer Cob, to accept death, it is a merciful release, to use the old cliché quite literally. Cob is finally freed from all his struggle and striving.

But there are other features of the land of the dead which owe much more to Rilke than to Housman. For both Rilke and Le Guin, there is no sun or moon over the land of the dead, but only stars, and they form constellations which are not seen over the land of the living. Rilke names these constellations, in the Tenth Elegy.

And higher, the stars. The new stars of the land of grief. Slowly the Lament names them: — Look, there: the *Rider*, the *Staff*, and the larger constellation called *Garland of Fruit*. Then, farther up towards the Pole: *Cradle*; *Path*; *The Burning Book*; *Puppet*; *Window*. But there, in the southern sky, pure as the lines on the palm of a blessed hand, the clear sparkling M that stands for Mothers.....— (Ibid., p.209)

Le Guin also names some of the constellations over the land of the dead, the first time that Ged sets foot there. He knew them because he had learned about them. "The stars above the hill were no stars his eyes had ever seen. Yet he knew the constellations by name: the Sheaf, the Door, the One Who Turns, the Tree. They were the stars that do not set, that are not paled by the coming of any day."³ She does not repeat these names in *The Farthest Shore*, but she does name a new constellation which appears more and more completely over the land of the living, the farther Ged and Arren go. That is the constellation which has the form of the rune of Ending. They know from this that they are heading towards death, in

one form or another, since death is the definitive end.

Le Guin's dead live in cities, but there is no work or trading there, for the dead have no needs. Rilke evokes no cities of the dead, but in the Tenth Elegy he describes, in very derogatory terms, a city of the living. He calls it the "Leidstadt" or city of suffering, and the dead leave it for something cleaner, purer and stronger. Rilke has a very low opinion of cities. In the Fifth Elegy he expresses his horror of the city of Paris, where the hatmaker, Madame Lamort, makes the cheap winter hats of Fate. If one compares this to the descriptions of Paris in Rilke's only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, it appears that he considers the inhabitants of big cities to lead such stunted lives that, as he puts it in the Sixth Elegy, they cannot ripen into their deaths, and even their deaths are incomplete. Le Guin has nothing to say about winter hats, but her description, in *The Farthest Shore*, of the degradation of Hort Town is very close to Rilke's description of the Leidstadt in the Tenth Elegy and not too far from his condemnation of Paris in the Fifth.

In fact, the basic premise of *The Farthest Shore* seems to come from Rilke, for he speaks, in the Tenth Elegy, of

...the last of the billboards, plastered with signs for
"Deathless,"

that bitter beer which seems so sweet to its drinkers
as long as they chew fresh distractions between sips....⁷

An Earthsea which has refused to accept natural death is populated with drug addicts chewing on their hazzia and with other people miserably seeking distraction in the carnival atmosphere of the market, just as the constant carnival of the Leidstadt is described by Rilke. The Leidstadt also has a shut up church, for real religion is as far from it as magic is from a failed Earthsea. But if one leaves the Leidstadt, one comes into a world which is real, where personified Lamentations roam. In spite of its name, the Leidstadt is a city which denies suffering and refuses lament. It insists on the pursuit of happiness and of the money that promises to buy happiness, in what Rilke considers an obscene way. Just as death is the other side of life, so, for Rilke, suffering is the other side of joy. Neither can be denied without sacrificing the other. So it is that the Lamentations live outside the town and are welcome only to the youthful dead, whom the Lamentations lead away from it.

The dead go into a land of grief and suffering which is also a land of joy. There is no dust there, as there is in Le Guin's land of the dead, and neither does Rilke speak of a perpetual dusk, any more than he speaks of the downward slope leading from a low wall into the land of the dead. These form part of Le Guin's own mythology. But it is possible that she had developed her idea of the dry river, which is found far into the land of the dead, from the fountainhead of joy which a Lamentation shows to one of the newly dead, in the Tenth Elegy. If she did, Le Guin has reversed the image, in that her dry river becomes a fountainhead of joy only when it is sealed up to prevent promiscuous passage between the lands of the living and the dead. But *The Farthest Shore* is based on the concept that the land of the dead has been sucked up into the land of the living by the desire of the living to become immortal. However there is no doubt in my mind that Le Guin borrowed from the Tenth Elegy the Mountains of Pain which Ged and Arren traverse in order to get back to the land of the living. Particularly Rilkean is the "nugget of primal grief," (ibid. p. 207.) to quote Rilke, which Arren brings with him from the Mountains of Pain.

Le Guin says, in "Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction", Nothing is more personal, more unshareable than pain; the worst thing about suffering is that you suffer alone. Yet those who have not suffered, or will not admit that they suffer, are those who are cut off in the cold isolation from their fellow men. Pain, the loneliest experience, gives rise to sympathy, to love: the bridge between self and other, the means of communion.⁸

It is because Arren has crossed the land of the dead and the mountains of pain that he will become a great ruler, the one Earthsea needs. And it is also because of this that Gad renounces what set him above other men.

I can think of no better way to conclude than by quoting the opening lines of Rilke's Tenth Elegy:

Someday, emerging at last from the violent insight,
Let me sing out jubilation and praise to assenting angels.
Let me not even one of the clearly-struck hammers of my
heart
fail to sound because of a slack, a doubtful,
or a broken string. Let my joyfully streaming face
make me more radiant; let my hidden weeping arise
and blossom.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night*, ed. and introd. Susan Wood. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979, p. 34.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Vintage Books, 1984, pp. 198-201.

Members Involved with Society Awards

The Mythopoeic Fantasy Award and Scholarship Award Committees Chairperson would like to invite members to think about nominations for the 1989 Awards — and to volunteer to serve on the selection committees. Eligibility requirements for nominations of books for the Fantasy Award and the Scholarship Award and for serving on either Selection Committee are the same: you must be a member of the Society (your subscription to *Mythlore* includes membership); no more than five books can be nominated; to serve on either committee you must state your willingness to read or reread all the finalists. You may nominate books for both awards, and may serve on both committees if you wish.

Criteria for book nomination: for the Fantasy Award, a fantasy work published during 1989 that best exemplifies "the Spirit of the Inklings." A work reissued in paperback during 1989 that was published earlier may be nominated whether or not it has previously been nominated, as long as it did not make a previous year's finalists' list. At the nomination level, and at the finalist level, a majority of "no award" votes (if the committee members feel none of the choices should receive the award) will require we make no award for the year. The Scholarship Award is given for a book on Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams that makes a significant contribution to Inklings scholarship. Books published during 1987 to 1989 are eligible for the award; a book may be renominated.

The Deadline is February 20, 1990 for nominations for both Awards and for volunteering to serve on either or both of the committees. Write to: Christine Lowentroun, 1017 Seal Way, Seal Beach CA 90740. Please state your willingness to read all the finalists, and whether or not you are willing to have your name and address included on a list to be distributed only among members of your committee for purposes of intercommunication. There will be a preliminary vote due May 1, and the final vote is due July 15. The Award will be announced at the 1990 Mythopoeic Conference. Be involved. Let your voice be heard!