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**Humans and Dragons; Coming in terms with  
inner and outer otherness**

Novembro 2004

## Humans and Dragons; Coming in terms with inner and outer otherness <sup>1</sup>

*The Way begot one,  
And the one, two;  
Then the two begot three  
And three, all else.*

The Earthsea cycle began with the short-stories “The Word of Unbinding” and “The Rule of Names”, published in *Fantastic* in 1964, and ended (?) with the novel *The Other Wind* (2001)<sup>2</sup>. Slowly, for 37 years, like the *moirae*, Ursula Le Guin wove the destiny of humans and dragons, inhabitants of a fantasy world made up by a multitude of small microcosms (islands, islets and rafts). However, the sum of all inhabited regions does not attain the totality of that universe whose West was never mapped, and where one can arrive only by flying the other wind. As moira, Le Guin incorporates both the three functions of Klotho, Lakheisis, and Atropos: to spin, to weave and to cut the thread of life, and the function of Nyx, goddess of night from whom descend, according to the *Orphic Hymn 3 to Nyx*, gods and men.

Earthsea is definitely a universe in expansion, becoming more complex with each new story. The initial structure is based on the monomyth of the hero, following the fundamental stages defined by Joseph Campbell. The reader accompanies Ged, the hero, from birth to adolescence and early adulthood (*A Wizard of Earthsea*, 1968); follows him in his decent to hell to recover a lost

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Conference Literary Beasts/Ecrire l'animal, London Metropolitan University, September 2004.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes are from the following editions of Le Guin's works: *The Earthsea Quartet, A Wizard of Earthsea, The Tombs of Atuan, The Farthest Shore, Tehanu*. London: Penguin Books, 1993; *Tales from Earthsea*. London, New York: Harcourt, 2001; *The Other Wind*, London, New York: Harcourt, 2001.

treasure (*The Tombs of Atuan*, 1971); accompanies him again in his final voyage to the underworld to restore the pretence equilibrium, returning as a wearied out mage and reborn man (*The Farthest Shore*, 1972).

However, between the early 70's and the early 90's Le Guin's mind, as well as that of her first readers, has changed, has evolved. The myth of the hero that was intended for a young adult audience, needed to be reshaped in order to continue to make sense to a new set of readers: the newcomers to her fiction, and the grown ups returning to a world they had known in their teens but that was much too simplistic for modern reality, and psychological needs. "Because of this change", says Warren Rochelle, "myths need to be retold, over and over, to be useful. [...] For each generation then 'the myths and tales we learned as children — fables, folktales, legends, hero-stories, god-stories' must be retold, rethought, revisioned"<sup>3</sup>.

The tapestry first woven by Le Guin in the first three books of Earthsea Cycle became larger, more deeply populated, and more complex. The story grew with the telling. This was mainly done by bringing into the centre a few elements that stood in the periphery of the first three novels. Ged unique achievement is not questioned, his courage remains a fact and it is even exalted by his stern refuse to occupy the first plan. Three apparently loose threads are woven into new ideas: dragons, women and death. The knowledge of their true nature was lost in human memory, and later, became buried in the collective unconscious under layers of consciousness laboriously built throughout centuries of human history in the fictional archipelago. In the first three novels dragons, women, and death remained in the periphery of the plot. They intervene, they act, but Ged, mages and society as a whole do not know them, do not understand their nature.

Dragons act in *a Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Farthest Shore*. However, the

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<sup>3</sup> Rochelle, Warren G., *Communities of the Heart; The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001, p. 33.

## Humans and Dragons

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image the reader forms of them is always mediated by the human characters in the novels. Therefore, they are pictured as strange winged beings that, though speaking the Language of Creation, are beyond comprehension: beings of power, but treacherous and unpredictable; bringers of destruction for no good reason, known to be more than animals but considered by some to be lesser than humans. Or, as Ged puts it:

The dragons are avaricious, insatiable, treacherous; without pity, without remorse. But are they evil? Who am I, to judge the acts of dragons?... They are wiser than men are. It is with them as with dreams, Arren. We men dream dreams, we work magic, we do good, we do evil. The dragons do not dream. They are dreams. They do not work magic: it is their substance, their being. They do not do; they are."<sup>4</sup>

“Dragons have no masters”, therefore a dragonlord is only "one whom the dragons will speak with"<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, men should never look into the dragon's eyes for they would be destroyed by the ancient knowledge. The eyes are the mirror of the soul. To look into the eyes of a dragon is to enter the realm of eternal knowledge forbidden to mortal man.

Summing up, until the forth novel, *Tehanu*, the knowledge humans have of dragons is based in stories half-remembered, loose ideas and taboos. Besides, this seems to be the main feature of human knowledge in Earthsea: always partial, half-recalled, full of taboos and preconceptions that have their origin in the fear of the unknown. Dragons, women and death are themes that are dreaded, misunderstood and better left unquestioned. According to humans, no one can understand dragons any better than one understands women (and their magic), or death.

The myth of creation, retold annually throughout Earthsea, cannot wholly

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<sup>4</sup> *The Farthest Shore*, p. 334.

<sup>5</sup> *The Tombs of Atuan*, p. 248.

## Humans and Dragons

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perform its function of uniting people and giving sense to their lives. It shares the same features of all knowledge taught in the dominant culture of the archipelago, that of the Inner Lands: it is only partially retold, adapted to men's present cultural conditions. However, in the process of adaptation, man forgot part of the story, and retained only what still made sense to the conscious mind: Segoy, the Eldest, created the world out of the water by naming every bit of matter; then he created dragons. No connection is made explicit in *The Creation of Éa* between dragons and humans though some reminiscence of ancient knowledge persists in the common idea that dragons are older than humankind is.

As to the peripheral position of women in Earthsea, much of what has been said about dragons also applies to them. A role is allotted to Women, and in it is based the respect the community has for them: they should comply with the following eight tasks: "bed, breed, bake, cook, clean, spin, sew, serve"<sup>6</sup>. If they can do these properly, they deserve respect. But, if they have the power of magic, or if they act outside their restrict role, they are feared and rejected, they become outcasts. There is an unquestionable relationship between women and the Old Powers of Earth. Both share a common origin with the magic that man perform, but while magic is studied, revered, and stands as one of the pillars of culture, the Old Powers are considered dangerous forces, uncontrollable, unpredictable, like the dragons. Women of power, that is, women who do not act solely in accordance with the eight tasks mentioned above, or that in someway are sensed to be odd or different according to the standards of normality, constitute a threat. Tenar, in Atuan, is a dangerous woman because she is the priestess of the Old Powers. In the Inner Land, the fact that she brought the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, with the Rune of Peace, is not a token that can assure the respect of common people: her skin is of a different colour, she

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<sup>6</sup> *Tehanu*, p. 509.

speaks a different language, she mingled with mages, she was a priestess — therefore she is strange, and is sent to the periphery of the story. In the third novel, Tenar is mentioned only three times, as someone who took part in past adventures<sup>7</sup>.

Considering now the third peripheral theme, death, it remains on the threshold of the first two novels. Ged goes to the world of the dead following a dead child, and summons the shadow that will pursue him throughout *A Wizard of Earthsea*, but the theme is not developed. In *The Tombs of Atuan*, Tenar serves the Old Powers, but these have to do with life and death, they are a manifestation of the powers of the Great Mother and should not be interpreted as having only a negative meaning. In the whole cycle, Ged is one of the few characters who acknowledge the ambivalence of these Powers.

In what concerns the third novel, though death is one of the major themes, it is not its central issue: Ged and Lebannen's quest is to stop a mage who is meddling with death to gain power over the living. It is with the living and the harmony in Earthsea, in the world, that they are concerned. If they do not stop Cob, the future King will not have a kingdom at all. *The Farthest Shore* is a *bildung roman* in the sense that one of Ged's intentions is to build the character of the future king and teach him that death is a natural consequence of living. Nevertheless, when reading the novel some years ago, I felt that death was a senseless waste. The dead inhabited a world built exactly as the real, living world, but without any use, or purpose. The dead wandered about with nothing to see, to do, or to feel. Mothers ignored their children, lovers forgot their loved ones, and heroes wandered senselessly the dusty land. Death was only the doorway to limbo for the sake of equilibrium. Somehow, it did not make sense. In a world built upon the idea of balance between yin and yang, death had to be

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<sup>7</sup> She is mentioned in passing in the first chapter of *The Farthest Shore* (p. 309) and then two times more by Ged in p. 441.

## Humans and Dragons

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more than that or, at least, different. It was no longer a dreadful world, dominated by pain and punishment. There was no reason to fear it, except for its meaninglessness.

The equilibrium of Earthsea cannot be attained if these three peripheral issues are not brought to the centre of the plot, and dealt with thoroughly. Society cannot be in equilibrium if the relationship between man and women is not balanced. If they do not understand where they stand in the great scheme of creation, conscious species cannot live harmoniously in the world. If death is meaningless, Life cannot be fully experienced. When Ged concludes his quest, Earthsea had not experienced the full benefits of having a King in the throne because much else was still unbalanced in the mind of each inhabitant of the Inner Lands as well as in the social, political and cultural structures.

The end of *The Farthest Shore* is not a successful conclusion. The novel turns out to be just one more painful experience of humbleness.

*Tehanu* is the novel where taboos regarding women and dragons begin to be dismantled. Tenar, in spite of her inability for magic, is a woman of power for she can question prejudices, she seeks the hidden meaning under the cloak of convention, and she challenges the pride and arrogance of power and ignorance. She experienced different ways of living as a woman in Earthsea: she was a priestess, a companion to, and prentice of, mages, a wife, a mother, a farm-keeper. In the beginning of *Tehanu*, she is a widow raising an abused and crippled child. But she is also a woman of knowledge that does not forget easily. Her quest is to find where the power of women lies. Although she does not fully realize the extension of her knowledge, acquired in different parts of the archipelago and in a variety of experiences, the reader, through her recollections, can view the whole scheme of creation and start filling the gaps of the incomplete information provided in the first three novels. The power of a woman lies in her ability to be different things at the same time, and the roots of that power are deeply plunged in the beginning of creation. Or, as Mossy says:

## Humans and Dragons

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Oh, well, dearie, a woman's a different thing entirely. Who knows where a woman begins and ends? Listen, mistress, I have roots, I have roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands. I go back into the dark. [...] I go back into the dark! Before the moon I was. No one knows, no one knows, no one can say what I am, what a woman is, a woman of power, a woman's power, deeper than the roots of trees, deeper than the roots of islands, older than the Making, older than the moon. Who dares ask questions of the dark? Who'll ask the dark its name?" [...] "I will" [Tenar] said.<sup>8</sup>

It is through Tenar that the lost knowledge of the dragons is recovered and brought to the first plan. Remembering a tale the old mage Ogion had told to her, she teaches her adopted child not only the Creation of Éa as it is taught in the Inner Lands, but also the lost knowledge kept by a dragon-woman: the story of the Woman of Kemay that states definitely that, *In the beginning, dragon and human were all one. They were all one people, one race, winged, and speaking the True Language*<sup>9</sup>

These first dragons are a symbol of the primordial unity, previous to any differentiation. Len Hatfield says that for these dragons there is no dichotomy between mind and body, subject and object<sup>10</sup>. The first dragons created by Segoy are the expression of the primordial unity. However, since Earthsea is defined as a universe in balance between two opposites, the one had to give place to the two. All creation exists in time and, as Tenar says, *In time nothing can be without becoming*<sup>11</sup>. Dragons became two different races with different interest and ways of life. With the differentiation came hate and distrust that

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<sup>8</sup> *Tehanu*, p. 528-29.

<sup>9</sup> The story is told in *Tehanu*, pp. 490-493, the quote is from p. 492.

<sup>10</sup> Len Hatfield, "From Master to Brother: Shifting the Balance of Authority in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Farthest Shore* and *Tehanu*", in *Children's Literature, Annual of the Modern Language Association Division on Children's Literature and The Children's Literature Association*, 21 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) 58.

<sup>11</sup> *Tehanu*, p. 492.

## Humans and Dragons

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lead to conflict, and further differentiation. In *The Other Wind*, we learn that, in fact, four races evolved from the initial dragons: Kalessin/Segoy states that:

Once we were one people. And in sign of that, in every generation of men, one or two are born who are dragons also. And in every generation of our people, longer than the quick lives of men, one of us is born who is also human. Of these one is now living in the Inner Isles. And there is one of them living there now who is a dragon. These two are the messengers, the bringers of choice. There will be no more such born to us or to them. For the balance changes."

The special beings that are born in every generation of men and dragon form two additional entities that are not quite human nor dragon, a third and fourth alternatives that help balance the race. The two specific beings mentioned by Kalessin as living in the Inner lands are Tenar and Tehanu. Tehanu is one of the dragons born to humans, as was the Woman of Kemay. Tenar is one of the humans born to dragons. She was the priestess of the Old Power, the one that is perpetually reborn: *All human beings were forever reborn, but only she, Arha, was reborn forever as herself*<sup>12</sup>. That is why she would dare ask the dark its name. That is also, why she can look Kalessin in the eye and talk to him. Being human she cannot fly, being dragon she is free, untameable, larger than the role allotted to her as a woman. Tenar and Tehanu are the result of the *conjunction Oppositorum*, two different balanced beings sharing two natures.

Tenar's ability to remember things is oriented to the nature of human and dragons. She never forgot the images drawn on the walls of the Painted Room<sup>13</sup> and it is to her that the weaver of Re Albi reveals the images of dragons with human eyes weaved on the backside of the fan<sup>14</sup>. The basic

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<sup>12</sup> *The Tombs of Atuan*, p. 214.

<sup>13</sup> *The Tombs of Atuan*, p. 224.

<sup>14</sup> *Tehanu*, pp. 576-77.

## Humans and Dragons

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difference between these two paintings lies in the eyes of the figures: in the fan, the dragons have human lively eyes, and in the Painted Room, the winged figures have blind sad eyes. Tenar feels that those sad eyes have to do with the inability to die experienced by the inhabitants of the Inner Land. The fact remains that these two artistic objects confirm the story of the Woman of Kemay, the hidden truth about the nature of humans and dragons.

The change that is experienced in Earthsea is a profound one and its outcome unpredictable. The unbalance felt is the result of mistakes made throughout the centuries by people acting out of ignorance or pride. The caution taught by the wizards of Roke is, most of the times, a mere rhetoric stance, because the knowledge they possess is too partial and biased. Theirs is the knowledge of consciousness, and that knowledge is always one-sided. Further more, their prejudice towards different kinds of magic, as the one performed by women, prevent them from attaining a wholly balanced picture of the outcome of any action. The prophecy regarding the new king was fulfilled, and changes begin to be felt on the political level. However, for these changes to be effective, other must occur. Magic must find its new reformer because the old set of Rules no longer functions and Roke does not have a leader. *A woman on Gont* must also fulfil the prophecy of Master Patterner, though that seems utterly impossible to a group of men that grew stern in their prejudice against women and dragons, and whose knowledge evolved to a predetermined set of dogmas that lost their ancient connection to reality.

*The Other Wind* apparently closes the Earthsea cycle. The structure of the novel does not have a main character, as the previous narratives, but a set of characters, each one responsible for part of the action. The transformation of Earthsea no longer depends on the heroic acts of one male character. This adjustment of perspective, the shared responsibility, is one more change that Le Guin introduces in the traditional monomyth. Eight characters, four male and

## Humans and Dragons

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four female, play each their part: Tenar, Tehanu, Irian and Sesarakh lead the group having the task of questioning old biased truths and bringing forth the knowledge hidden in the collective unconscious; Lebannen is the king who assumes his responsibility to protect the people and assure that what has to be done will be done. He has also to set an example for the relationship between man and woman, based on respect and the acceptance of differences. Adler is the one called forth by chance to act when the educated ones are paralyzed by fear and prejudice. Master Patterner is the link that binds the prophecy and the future, a true Taoist, while Master Summoner has the task of redeeming past actions.

The final equation: dragon, women and death is solved. Lead by women, people begin to look for what has been forgotten, reconstructing the puzzle of memory. The true relationship between dragon and humans is confirmed, as is confirmed the conflict that lead them apart. But now dragons claim that humans broke an ancient oath, and are invading dragon territory in the West, an occupation that occurs, not on the surface of the archipelago, but in another dimension, beyond Selidor.

The forgotten oath was celebrated to put an end to the war between the first dragons: dragons would remain free, flying over the western region and feeding on air and fire, while humans lost their wings and took possession of the land in the eastern regions, free to build and grow and prosper. While dragons gave up the land, humans gave up the language of creation; dragons would live forever in another dimension and humans would live and die, and through death be reborn.

This ancient oath was broken when, through magic, some men decided that they would not die, but live forever in the land of dragons, having the better of the two worlds. Eternal life. The same desire that drove Gilgamesh in his quest, the same sin of hybris. Gilgamesh lost the newfound flower of eternity to a

## Humans and Dragons

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serpent, and the humans of Earthsea found a never-ending limbo instead of eternity. The meaninglessness experienced in the land of the dead was, in fact, a hard punishment: the complete lack of sense that drained its beauty out of life. Everything that humans achieved in life, through hard work and action, lost its meaning in the utter eternal apathy.

Tehanu and Adler are the first to start dismantling the wall circumscribing the world of the dead, allowing them to dissolve freely in matter. Dragons regain the control of the western region and can be fed again on the reactivated volcano, the Mountain of Pain that Ged and Lebannen climbed up.

Human origins are acknowledged, women have their rights re-evaluated in a more balanced relationship with men and society. Their power, that once stood in the foundations of magic, and that later was banned, is recognized as equal. True death is restored, completing the natural cycle of life. Now, the world is in equilibrium. Tehanu finds her true nature and flies whole, a golden dragon on the other wind.

The ancient race of dragons is now definitely two different races that share one power: both can create through words and deeds. Humans no longer fly — they gave up eternity — but they still share the original fire, the creative drive, and they won the powers of water and earth. To accept the ambivalence of these powers and to keep them balanced will be the fundamental task that awaits humans — creatures of light and shade. Change occurred and a new equilibrium emerged or, as one can read in chapter 42 of the Tao Te Ching:

*The Way begot one,*

*And the one, two;*

*Then the two begot three*

*And three, all else.*

*All things bear the shade on their backs*

*And the sun in their arms;*

## Humans and Dragons

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*By the blending of breath  
From the sun and the shade,  
Equilibrium comes to the world.*