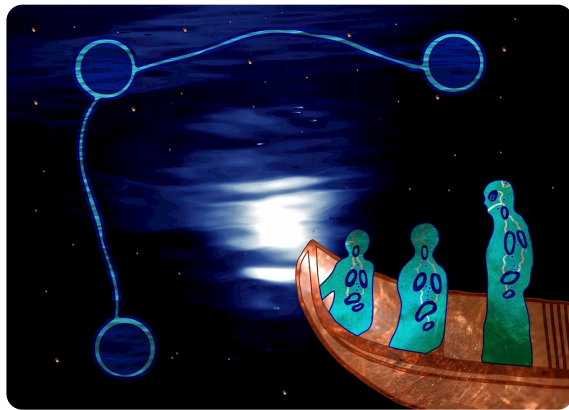


Progress in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin

Part of Degrowth and Progress

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Elizabeth LaPensée, *Along the River of Spacetime*,
2016.

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin sets her novels in fictional worlds where human and non-human things¹ interact in common stories, envisioning alternative political systems and divulging their author's ecological position and commitment to egalitarian society, pacifism and mysticism. Her novels shed light on different aspects of progress, proposing life without sharp distinctions between things in the world. She juxtaposes very different ideas of progress, those that come from categorical distinctions between things (human and nonhuman subjects, living and non-living nature), generating mythologies about usefulness, hierarchy, patriarchy, religions and other oppressive systems, and those derived from progress in physics and technology, aiming for an equitable distribution of knowledge and regard for all things in the world, so that they are equally able to enjoy the benefits of technology and knowledge. Through her characters, Le Guin reveals nonhuman mental processes, looking for words to clearly express the anarchist and feminist ethical positions marked with holistic and ambiguous processes.

1. The term *things* is deliberately used instead of *beings* to emphasise the importance of all that makes one world, and not just the living beings. The position is thus not only nonanthropocentric, but also nonbiocentric.



Elizabeth LaPensée, *Manoominike Mazina'anang*,
2017.

Despite fantastical plots and unrestrained use of fable, Ursula Le Guin's novels are expressly realistic. She uses her worlds to reflect on individual aspects of civilizational issues to which there must be an answer if we are to preserve life on Terra. Her stories are fictional but they are also literal reflections on reality in its crudest form, in all its complexity and with very little ideological bias. Even when she deliberates on these issues in her books, either through myth-telling, historical insertions or memories from a relevant planet, or when engaging her characters in the most sophisticated philosophical and mystical debates, she still maintains contact with reality. An important element of her writing are sustainable and as yet unknown technological possibilities, for they allow Le Guin to explore simultaneity and interworld travels, not to feed her fascination with technological progress, but to develop a philosophy of time in which everything that was, is and will be exists simultaneously in a concurrent point. The concept of time is one of the central categories through which to understand progress. If time is linear, the way it is understood in modern Western society, this omnipresent temporal perception of the world may lead towards the idea of growing accumulation. And as time is such a ubiquitous cultural category it is not easily understood or applied otherwise, so Le Guin in her novels offers different conceptions of time. In her short novel *The Beginning Place*, in which the protagonists try to escape from the problems in their daily lives through a twilight world, where time moves so slowly that an hour equals a day, she shows how time expands and contracts in mental space. Somewhat humorously she adds that an hour is to time what a toothpick or a match is to a spruce. (Le Guin, 1995b, p. 52) A mechanically measured hour is thus but an insignificant technological reject of the temporal dimension. Le Guin's understanding of space and time comes from her fascination with quantum physics, and it has been suggested by her biographers that her father's friend, Robert Oppenheimer one of the fathers of the atomic bomb and subsequently one of its loudest critics, was an influence on her views of technology. (Spivack, 1984, p. 2) However significant this acquaintance may have been for her work, Le Guin was a pacifist through and through, and this aspect of her personality is also seen in her novels. Inverting categories such as time, space, and matter inevitably implies unselective empathy with what is, was and will be.



Elizabeth LaPensée, *Thunderbird Strike*, 2017.

At this point, another part of her biography is perhaps even more relevant. Le Guin's father was a prominent anthropologist and her mother a psychologist and author of a biography *Ishi in Two Worlds* (1961) of the last living member of the Native American Yahi people who was a friend of her family. (Spivack, 1984, p. 18) Colonialism and its exploitative, extractivist issues pervade all her worlds and underpin any analysis of her ecology, feminism or idea of progress. In her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin reveals the most mature decolonial perspective on civilisation through the rule of non-interference, which is to be obeyed in establishing initial communication with a new planet. Here, the protagonist's mission is to obtain the voluntary consent of the native people to communication with the unknown League of the Worlds under the precept of non-interference, even if this requires extreme physical effort from the protagonist and may even cause his/her death. Genly Ai, the envoy of the Ekumen, is subject to the law that obliges him to respect a quarantine on cultural goods until the native humanoids are consciously willing to embrace them. Genly breaches the requirement for the quarantine of cultural goods only once, when his friend asks him, in the most intimate moment of their subtle, latent erotic relationship, to teach them² how to mindspeak. This breach occurs the moment Genly Ai accepts his friend, unconditionally and completely, not as an alien hermaphrodite, but as a polymorph, accepts them in all their entirety, not as something other, in between, but as something complete, even more complete than himself. It is a moment of complete respect and understanding. Had the envoy obeyed the rule of non-interference at any cost, the result, despite the good faith, would be empty bureaucracy – he would have trampled his sublime feelings of solidarity and love for Estraven, something that eventually happened over two hundred years in the anarchist society on the moon of Anarres in the novel *The Dispossessed*, resembling late communist reality or in Orgoreyn (*The Left Hand of Darkness*), for that matter, which already verges on Nazism with proto-cells of concentration camps. I find Genly's breach important, because I recognise in it the necessary ambivalence that Le Guin demands from herself and her readers. It is in such details, with which she so abundantly populates her novels, that I recognise her commitment to a non-ideological and undogmatic perspective on things. None of her worlds therefore come without contradictions, no society is without flaws, no character unselfish and there is no position without

2. Them as a non-binary singular noun.

counter-position, which is important in terms of technological advancements or the ecological and feminist issues she addresses.

Le Guin's ambivalence has been interpreted in different ways. In his analysis of political theory, science fiction and utopian literature in the case of the novel *The Dispossessed*, Tony Burns lists numerous critics who challenged her feminist perspective as inadequate, with many feminists reproaching her for a humanism that fails to recognise the privileges of a male speaker in society. (Burns, 2010, p. 224) I was initially a bit uncomfortable myself about the fact that she so frequently, or almost always, speaks through male protagonists. It is a problematic position, because to speak about scientific, technological, political and mystical things from a female point of view is quite bold in itself, and as such already overcomes certain segregations and prejudices. Octavia E. Butler succeeded in bridging these differences, putting the spotlight on a black female protagonist (Butler, 2005) and going even much further in giving agency not only to non-human intelligent beings, but also to other transformative powers. Perhaps her novel *Cray's Ark* is most resonant of the current pandemic situation, with its invasion of an alien microorganism. (Butler, 1996) Butler takes a huge step away from anthropocentrism, unlike Le Guin, who remains deeply committed to humanism, although the intent of her novels is anything but anthropocentric. Still, her ecological and feminist vision is clearly recognisable in her works. For example, her novella *The Word for World is Forest* is set in a green, tropical paradise on the planet Athshe, which was occupied by cruel, racist, exploitative, sadistic colonists from Terra. Their commander, an abominable, chauvinistic, and militant creature, seems like one of half-crazed colonels from the Vietnam War. The colonial superiority complex in the novella is manifested as ecological disdain (for the forest, land, wildlife), and is just as strong as the abuse and objectification of women, regardless of whether they are native or Terran.

Progress and advancement of human condition

It seems that by insisting on ambivalence Le Guin aimed to subvert the established categorial apparatus. She traces the destinies of her characters in light of their transformation rather than progression, and she draws heavily from Taoist philosophy, especially from Lao Tzu and his concept of wu wei – action by inaction. Taoist influence is well translated in the Gathen concept of *nusuth*, or 'no matter' in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *untrance*, a special form of meditation, a kind of trance involving the loss of self through extreme sensual awareness expressed through negation rather than designation.

The central theme in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the otherness of transsexuality on a planet populated by polymorphous humanoids who assume their sexual role for only one sixth of their lives, and spend the rest of the time as neuters. These polymorphs understand permanent sexual identity, such as femininity or masculinity, as extremely perverse, and initially perceive other worlds merely as a culture of sexual deviants. Although the novel's fabric revolves around otherness, sexual identity and race, it only mentions the protagonist's race in passing. The

author underlines the ambition that this is how race should be understood – as a triviality. The author achieves the same with gender, which by the end of the novel becomes as insignificant and trivial as race. This is how she addresses the question of feminism and the choice of her protagonists' gender. Le Guin does attempt to abandon any kind of essentialism.

Another less-known novel with an interpretation as elusive as its master species is *City of Illusions*. The one and only law enforced on all the species on Terra by its (presumed) colonists (Shing) as simple as it is alluring, is that of reverence for life enforced by mind control. Through the novel one wonders how could protection of life be a malicious thing. And yet again we are faced with the author's uncompromising ambivalence. It is not by coincidence that the only extra-terrestrial besides (presumably) the colonists is the main protagonist Falk, signified by specific physical characteristics (race), ripped out of his cultural environment and completely deprived of his memory, with total amnesia forced on him (presumably) by the colonists. It was only when comparing this future re-forested North American continent to the abducted Native American and Australian children of the 20th century that the deeper meaning of the novel is revealed; moreover, it also shows why the author keeps the reader in the dark about the true origin of the Shing. Even with the best of intentions like reverence for life, the desire to subordinate and rule is a violent and unforgivable deed.

Each of Le Guin's novels offers examples of how a desire for a utopian world born from a revolution, a legal system, or an attempt to do something good, turns sour. In *Tales from Earthsea* the protagonist, who wants to stop his parents from worrying about whether he is dead or alive, causes their persecution. The urge for order and control in Orgoreyn society gradually turns into bureaucratic despotism. Le Guin consistently demonstrates how firm convictions breed their opposites with the best intentions. In *The Lathe of Heaven*, for example, the revolutionary scientist and psychiatrist Dr. Haber is challenged by his patient: '[Y]ou're handling something outside reason. You are trying to reach progressive, humanitarian goals with a tool that isn't suited to the job.' (Le Guin, 1999, p. 103.)

Progress and climate

The climates on Le Guin's planets or worlds are caught in a 'civilisation-climate' feedback loop, with civilisation being what it is because of the climate, and the climate being what it is (destroyed, looted, cruel or mild) because of the civilisation. The political system in the worlds which we enter through her novels (capitalism, autocracy, anarchy, despotism, colonialism) develops based on the climatic conditions, which in turn are but symptoms of these very conditions. Le Guin's novels are ecopolitical. Helen Hester and her xenofeminist manifesto brilliantly matches Le Guin's interaction between content and form. Hester rebuts the generally accepted perception that 'information and materiality are conceptually distinct, and that information is in some sense more essential, more important and more fundamental than materiality. [... Xenofeminism] does not reject technology (or science, or rationalism – ideas often understood as patriarchal constructs), but positions it both as part of the warp and weft of our everyday lives and as one potential sphere of activist intervention.' (Hester, 2018, pp. 7–8) The most close-

knit tie between climate and human action is weaved in *Earthsea*, where some of the wizards practice weatherworking, and their intentions can bring either greater ease or even more catastrophic earthquakes, droughts, storms or diseases. Another element that stands out in this world is the ability to feel and sympathise with all things. I especially admire her descriptions of feeling, sensing rocks, the lithosphere, penetration into the interior of the earth, which is not a static being, but a being moving very slowly through eons. In this sense, Le Guin's Terra resembles James Lovelock's Gaia (1995), or Bruno Latour's Earth (2018) in that it is almost personified, or as personified as anything else in the world (a tree, fox, the sea, wind, rock, fortune teller), but not in the sense of personification we know from mythology. In the first place it reveals a perspective that gives each thing its reality, which in this case doesn't originate in the etymological meaning of creation, but from a thing, or objectness³. Which brings me to Timothy Morton's object-oriented ontology. I can call each thing only a thing, in order to avoid delimiting it. A resistance to define, classify, name, comes to some extent from Morton's theory. As soon as I call a thing a being, I already differentiate it from a non-being, and so forth. Similarly to Le Guin, Morton proposes that there is a close link between the logic of a civilisation and the environment, claiming the agricultural society is closely connected to patriarchy and multiple forms of exploitative relationships born from agriculture, which is not just a certain kind of logic but literally logistics, like moving things around or terraforming. (Morton, 2016, p. 21). And in this agrilogistics we may also find the root of the idea of progress: 'agrilogistics suppresses archaic[[imp-footnote-id4]] shuddering, the anxiety of not knowing everything, not knowing the future: the openness of futurity is obscured by planning.' (Morton, 2016, p. 82).

3. In Slovenian the word for a thing is stvar. It is the root of stvarnost meaning reality. The same root is also in the word stvarjenje meaning creation, related to the origin of all things.

Le Guin is well aware that everything we utter we utter as people (her protagonists are humanoids and her interest is in analysing contemporary human society), but on the other hand she constantly explores the possibilities of moving beyond the category of humans, especially in *Earthsea*. At the same time I cannot help but notice how methodically she avoids offering answers, and instead asks questions and thinks about them, as profoundly and complexly as possible, from the perspectives of anthropology, political theory, and religiology, as well as physics, climatology, geology and geography.

Le Guin pays a lot of attention to the accuracy and non-metaphorical use of language. All things in *Earthsea* have a use name and a true name. The true name reflects the mystical essence of a being, and a wizard can wield total power over something or someone whose name they know, and may even heal an unwell being through their true name. Anarres mythology is inspired by Odo, a kind of antagonist to the biblical Noah, who took away the names from all beings, denaming them, so to speak. On anarchistic Anarres people speak an artificial language called Pravic[[imp-footnote-id5]], which was created to eradicate possession and people's ownership of things or each other. In Pravic, the word for a spouse or wife, for example, contains no elements of possession. This is revealed through very careful utterances. When meeting her father, Shevek's daughter says: 'You can share the handkerchief I use [...]' rather than 'You can have my handkerchief.' (Le Guin, 2001, p. 178), implying that the handkerchief is not really hers, but only something that is being used by her for the time being.

Le Guin proposes a non-metaphorical and very accurate use of language. The world overgrown with Forest is called Forest. The world covered with ice is called Winter, the world of sea and islands is called Earthsea, the world we are on right now is called Terra. So what is this world called Terra, I ask. Etymology offers multiple meanings:

- 1) land,
- 2) soil, earth, dirt,
- 3) land that separates seas against the third element – the sky,
- 4) the world, globe, earth as a planet,
- 5) land or region.

In this sense I find that civilisation on Terra is defined by the fertile soil that provided conditions for agriculture and settlement, something that Morton also identifies as the main protagonist in transforming the Earth, terraforming, extractivism, and exploitation of its resources that we are witnessing today. (Morton, 2016, pp. 4–5) In this sense, colonialism, the difference between urban and rural, the idea of natural and unnatural, even patriarchy of the agricultural age and presumably preceding matriarchy, and in turn also the linear and cyclic understanding of time, are ideas derived from agriculture. Time is different on Winter, a planet embraced by eternal ice. 'The people of Winter, who always live in Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence', and the less progress there is, the less the need for war.

The thing we call Terra also entails the aspect of separating lands and regions to nations and peoples, which ultimately leads to wars, which is something that could never happen in a society like Karhidish, with its specific climatic and biological conditions (Le Guin, 2000). Melina Pereira Savi in her analysis of three novels emphasises that progress, as we understand it on Earth, is inseparably connected to the notions of borders that effectively cause not only the separation of land to regions and nations but also to the epistemological dualism^{[[imp-footnote-id6]]} and they are also closely connected to the desire for possession (Pereira Savi, 2018, p. 60). In this respect Le Guin emphasises real circumstances, which may not be essential, but allow for a wide range of bioengineering, technological and even magical processes that people are obliged to use and be inspired by in order to refine and raise the cultural awareness of all living things, which stands as a kind of ethical imperative. She infers, for instance, that polymorphous humanoids on Winter are a result of bioengineering experiments of Hainish colonisers, as well as the only technologically and culturally developed world that has no need for war. Previously, this lead me to the conclusion that genetic manipulation which nullifies gender differentiation is justified in so far as it prevents war or self-destruction in terms of damaging the environmental balance, until I read *City of Illusions*, in which, yet again as I noted above, one can never be so sure not to doubt one's own benevolence. Despite her mysticism and deep contemplation on the living environment, Le Guin does not depict nature as something essential that serves as the basis for ecology, but as a technologised space that shapes life experience. Hers is a techno-scientific position in which nothing is so sacred that it couldn't be adapted to boost the desire for the freedom of gender, humanity and environment. Moreover, this doesn't imply that she gives prominence to the techno-scientific

position, but simply that she frequently contemplates the tension between natural conditions on the one hand, and determinism and potentially emancipatory processes on the other. In the words of Helen Hester: 'Biology is not a synonym for determinism and sociality is not a synonym for transformation' (Wilson, 2015, as cited in Hester, 2018, p. 21), and 'every fact of nature that is understood can be used to alter it' (Firestone, 1979, as cited in Hester, 2018, pp. 21–22).

Anarres in *The Dispossessed* and Karhide in *The Left Hand of Darkness* both have extremely inhospitable and harsh climatic conditions which, however, as Le Guin demonstrates, do not generate adversarial human relationships, but promote collectivity, solidarity with human and non-human beings, respect for the environment, hospitality, and mysticism. When Shevek says: 'It's not our society that frustrates individual creativity. It's the poverty of Anarres. This planet wasn't meant to support civilization. If we let one another down, if we don't give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us. Human solidarity is our only resource (Le Guin, 2001, p. 152).' At the same time, in these two novels the people on Urras and Orgoreyn live far more comfortably than those on the harsher planets, but are also isolated from each other. Giving up abundance and possessions is one of the ways to nurture human solidarity as well as sensitivity to the living environment and all things in the world. This solidarity is also the source of Le Guin's inexhaustible optimism for the destiny of humankind, something she could be reproached for, because she ignores the possibility of total destruction, genocide, as demonstrated again with the optimistic outcome of Athshean fight against militarists in *The Word for World is Forest*. Without this optimism Athsheans would end up on the edge of a devastated desert continent, like Australian aborigines. If anything, rather than for a lack of semblance to reality, Le Guin's humanist optimism could be reproached for its inability to offer a resolutely pessimistic scenario, something that Stanisław Lem noted about American speculative fiction when he stressed that 'we cannot afford to be spared from reality, no matter how cruel, if we are to remain in the categories of the real world.' (Swirski, 1997, p. 25). And yet another optimistic answer from Le Guin may be found in the hope spread through *City of Illusions*: 'In a good season one trusts life; in a bad season one only hopes. But they are of the same essence: they are the mind's indispensable relationship with other minds, with the world, and with time. Without trust, a man lives, but not a human life; without hope, he dies (Le Guin, 1995a, p. 678).' At the end of the day, reality is also about the perspective of our gaze.

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