

THE WAY OF A WRITER : TAOISM IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS¹

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A man comes to a planet. His name is Genly Ai and he is the envoy of the Ekumen—a council of worlds seeking the enrichment of human harmony and the advancement of humans in the universe. Thus, Genly Ai carries with him an offer to join this union and to partake in all its benefits. He brings the opportunity to progress and change. He comes alone. One inhabitant of this world—Estraven, a powerful lord and the prime minister of one of this world's nations—will see the importance of Genly Ai's mission and will understand and help him. This is the story that sets in motion Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*.²

When I first started reading Ms. Le Guin's novel, I was struck by the presence in it of what I then recognized as elements from Eastern philosophy and thought, in particular Taoism. Long before mention is made of the *yin-yang* concept and symbol, in Chapter 19, I felt these elements formed an underlying, yet essential, basis for the understanding of the book.

It was much later that I also learned about this writer's interest in Taoism as an explanation, a resource, an answer, and a choice,³ and about her consequent knowledge of the *Tao Te Ching*.⁴

Ms. Le Guin has often and repeatedly stated that *The Left Hand of Darkness* involves aspects of sex and gender, as well as the themes of betrayal and fidelity, and the nature of truth. Yet, she has stressed the fact that her invention, her novel, is a "*heuristic device, a thought experiment*",⁵ yielding several results. One of these results is the conception of a world characterized by the absence of war, the absence of exploitation, and the absence of sexuality as an ever-present social factor.

¹ An earlier version of this work was presented as the end of term paper for the American Literature course taught in 1992 by Ana Monner Sans. I am most grateful to the late Ana for kindly and generously going through this work and for making several useful observations.

² Le Guin, Ursula K. (1969), *The Left Hand of Darkness*, New York, ACE Books. (Further references to this work will be indicated by parenthetical citation of chapter and page number in the text).

³ See 16.

⁴ A reference to the *Tao Te Ching* is made in the "Introduction" to Le Guin's novel *City of Illusions*, for example.

⁵ Le Guin, Ursula K. (1989), "Is Gender Necessary?", *The Language of The Night*, New York, Harper Perennial, p.158.

A careful reader of the novel may easily associate her experiment with the idea of balance that is central to Taoist thought. It may prove interesting and rewarding to identify the elements that express this idea of balance in the novel, and to try to understand the variables of this “*thought-experiment*” in the light of Taoism.

I am definitely not trying to imply that it is essential to know something about Taoism to read and enjoy this novel. To claim that *The Left Hand of Darkness* can only be read from this perspective or only be approached from this angle would be an unfair statement as well as an oversimplification. On the other hand, such an analysis —far from being a reduction of the whole novel to a single viewpoint— may enhance the reading and enjoyment of this book.

The Left Hand of Darkness is, I believe, largely based on principles found in Taoist thought —simple but fundamental notions like the *yin-yang* polarity; or the *wu-wei* idea of action through non-action seen as adaptability, fluidity, and flexibility; or the natural, organic order of *li*. An insight into these Taoist elements may then illuminate and help clarify certain aspects of the novel, thus enriching our understanding of it.

II. Light & Darkness & Gethen.

*The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful,
yet this is only the ugly;
the whole world recognizes the good as the good,
yet this is only the bad.
Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;
The difficult and the easy complement each other;
The long and the short off-set each other;
The high and the low incline towards each other;
Note and sound harmonize with each other;
Before and after follow each other.
(Tao Te Ching. Chapter 2.)⁶*

The concept of dualism —probably one of the most striking features of *The Left Hand of Darkness*— determines, conditions, and shapes Le Guin’s fictional world.

⁶ I have used D. C. Lau’s translation of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* (1963, London, Penguin).

The novel is set on a planet called Gethen (Winter) whose human inhabitants have a unique sexual physiology —they are ambisexual. Gethenians have an oestrus period called kemmer, which is a limited time of their complete monthly sexual cycle when they are sexually active and receptive. When Gethenians are not in *kemmer*, they are sexually inactive and remain latent androgynous, which determines the fact that a Gethenian is potentially both male and female.

The extent to which this physiological characteristic affects and dominates Gethenians and their world is explained by an observer in the book:

The structure of their societies, the management of their industry, agriculture, commerce, the size of their settlements, the subjects of their stories, everything is shaped to fit the somer-kemmer cycle.

(Chapter 7. p.93)

Thus every aspect of Gethenian culture is conditioned by sexuality, everything is centered around this particular sexual cycle. As this observer —a woman, the reader learns by the end of the chapter she narrates— goes on to say:

There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/ submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact, the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed on Winter.

(Chapter 7. p. 94)

While our human thinking is permeated with dualism, and human social systems are in general deeply affected by and to a great extent imbued with dual thought, Gethenians and their culture are not ruled by it. Gethenian sexuality then gives their thinking quite a distinct turn, as dualism is not a determining and ruling feature of Gethenian thought.

Since dualism does in fact imply a separation into two halves, I will call this characteristic of the novel polarity, rather than dualism. The concept of polarity is based on the principle that the positive and the negative are different aspects of the same system: an electric current or a magnet will have a positive as well as a negative pole.

In the novel, the sexual character of Gethenians and their consequent thinking and culture is not what is usually understood as dualism. It is truly a polarity in the sense that it is not an opposition or conflict—it foregrounds an intrinsic balance, a built-in equilibrium.

Interestingly enough, polarity forms the basis of the Taoist principle of *yin-yang*. In the Chinese language, the two poles of cosmic energy are *yang* (positive) and *yin* (negative), a polarity which is—in Alan Watt’s words— “*an explicit duality expressing an implicit unity*”.⁷ For Taoist thought, the concept of polarity is essential: there is no struggle or conflict between the positive and the negative, between good and bad, between life and death, between light and darkness—neither element in each pair can exist without the other.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Estraven quotes what he calls “Tormer’s Lay” to Genly Ai when they are on the Gobrín Ice:

*Light is the left hand of darkness
and darkness the right hand of light.
Two are one, life and death, lying
together like lovers in kemmer,
like hands joined together,
like the end and the way.*
(Chapter 16. pp.233/4)

This poem, which illustrates the Gethenian balance and polarity so well and so beautifully, contains the essence of the *yin-yang* Taoist principle. The sexual physiology of these imaginary people is at the heart of the lay (“*lying / together like lovers in kemmer*”), and life and death, light and darkness, the end and the way⁸ are shown as what they are—not opposites, but different aspects of the same thing (“*two are one*”).

The idea of the actual and necessary polarity of life is inherent to a Gethenian view of the world, to a Gethenian frame of mind. This is clearly seen in Estraven’s comment regarding daylight and shadows. Estraven and Genly Ai have been hauling their sledge in white weather—what Estraven calls the “*Unshadow*.” Due to the absence of shadows, hauling is now extremely dangerous as they cannot see the crevasses on the icy waste and constantly face the peril of falling into the abyss. Estraven and Genly Ai are not aware

⁷ Watts, Alan (1975), *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, New York, Pantheon Books, p.26.

⁸ Notice that one of the translations for the Chinese word Tao is “way.”

of this danger until Estraven, who is pulling the sledge, falls down and is left hanging in harness. With great effort and to his personal peril, Genly Ai drags him to the surface and saves his life. Genly Ai is later so tense with the effort and so afraid of falling that he cannot go any further. Estraven says, "*Fear's very useful. Like darkness; like shadows*" and "*It's queer that daylight's not enough. We need the shadows, in order to walk.*" (Chapter 19. p.267). It is at this point that Genly Ai draws the *yin-yang* symbol for Estraven to see:

*It's found on Earth, and on Hain-Davenant, and on
Chiffewar. It is yin and yang. Light is the left hand of
darkness... How did it go? Light, dark. Fear, courage.
Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Them.
Both and one. A shadow on snow.*

(Chapter 19. p.267)

In this respect, Lao Tzu's words quoted at the beginning of this section are very relevant —"*Something/Nothing,*" "*the difficult/the easy,*" etc., represent different but indivisible aspects or phases of the same notion. The fact that shadows are a necessary condition for us to see is something that may strike a Western mind as odd. It's only after some reflection and pondering that we come to understand this. However, this notion is natural to the Eastern way of thinking —as well as to the Gethenian. The notion that every system has different poles that conform it, and the concept of polarity as expressed in the *yin-yang* principle are at the core of Taoism; after all, how could Being be defined without the presence of non-Being, and viceversa? As the *Tao Te Ching* tells us:

*Thirty spokes share one hub.
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand,
And you will have the use of the cart.
Knead clay in order to make a vessel.
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand
And you will have the use of the vessel.
Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room.
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand,
And you will have the use of the room.*

*Thus what we gain is Something,
yet it is by virtue of Nothing
that this can be put to use.
(Tao Te Ching. Chapter 11.)*

Regarding the sex and gender issues in the novel, it is interesting to notice how Ms. Le Guin has solved any possible opposition between the feminine and the masculine (or, rather, has *enriched* the difference between the feminine and the masculine) by cleverly and skillfully creating a world whose inhabitants share the characteristics and potential features of the two sexes. Again, the *Tao Te Ching* explains :

*Know the male
But keep to the role of the female
And be a ravine to the world.
If you are a ravine to the world,
Then the constant virtue will not desert you
And you will again return to being a babe.
(Tao Te Ching. Chapter 28.)*

As the *yin-yang* principle implies a balance, so Gethenians *embody* this balance —they are not *either* male or female (not even when in oestrus or when pregnant), but are both male and female. In a similar way, in Taoism even when the *yin* is thought of as the passive and feminine, and the *yang* as the active and masculine, the two of them are seen as interdependent and co-existent. “*The yang and the yin are principles, not men and women*”, says Alan Watts ⁹, and Ms. Le Guin’s Gethenians appear to incarnate this notion.

But the concept of polarity is not only reflected in the question of sexuality. I have observed before how the text makes the Gethenian sexual physiology shape the Gethenian culture and condition the Gethenian thinking. Thus, the *yin-yang* notion is also present in the society and culture of this imaginary world, and in the thought and philosophy of its inhabitants. How Estraven evaluates the *Unshadow* inside the blizzard is but one example of many in the novel that may serve to show this.

An interesting instance of the importance and meaning of the concept of polarity is given in the novel by Gethenian religion.

⁹ Op.cit, p.22.

Two Gethenian religions are described in *The Left Hand of Darkness* — The Yomesh Cult and the Handdara. Of the two, it is the Handdara that can be best identified and compared with Taoism —not so much a religion as a philosophy and a way of living. Genly Ai describes the little he knows about the Handdara before visiting Otherhord Fastness:

The Handdara is a religion without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed; I am still unable to say whether it has a God or not. It is elusive. It is always somewhere else. Its only fixed manifestation is in the Fastnesses, retreats to which people may retire and spend the night or a lifetime.
(Chapter 5. p.55)

There are certain aspects of the Handdara that seem to be modeled on the Taoist idea of polarity ¹⁰ —all of these aspects being related to the Handdara use of negative or apparently opposite words to define a given notion.

Thus, the mystical discipline of “*Presence*” —stillness “*tending towards the experience of Immanence*”— that is practised by the adepts of the Handdara is called an “*untrance*” (p. 57); “*ignorance*” and “*unlearning*” are the source of thought and knowledge (pp. 56/7, 69); and what is known, feasible, and real is defined by what is “*unknown*” (p. 71). Accordingly, “*the only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next,*” Faxe the Weaver (a Handaratta “priest” at Otherhord) tells Genly Ai (p. 71). And in Mishnory, Estraven will later echo these words: “*The unexpected is what makes life possible,*” he will say (p. 122). How the Handdara regards this question is best seen in Faxe’s words:

The unknown, the unfortold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action. If it were proven that there is no God there would be no religion. No Handdara, no Yomesh, no earthgods, nothing. But

¹⁰ I will later explore further connections between the Handdara and Taoism; it is now my intention to try to determine the presence of similarities with regard to the *yin-yang* principle.

also if it were proven that there is a God, there would be no religion... (Chapter 5. p.71)

Notice that the use of the prefix un- is used to suggest an opposite quality rather than something negative (compare with the prefix non-, which is usually just negative). A word like “*unlearning*” consequently denotes something defined by its opposite, “learning,” and not by a negative value of the opposite word. None of these words appear then to be marked as negative, opposing a supposedly positive notion. Likewise, the *yin* is defined as feminine only in relation to the *yang* defined as masculine, it is called the passive in relation to the active, and it is never termed negative because of an intrinsic value. *Yin* is only negative insofar as *yang* is positive, and this does definitely not mean a negative or a positive connotation by essence. Any analysis trying to view either element or phase as separate and in opposition is useless and fruitless, and so the elements or phases in the polarity can only be understood in their mutual relation.

This relation between *yin* and *yang* lies in what in Taoism is called *hsiang sheng* — mutual arising or inseparability. In Estraven’s words: “*To oppose something is to maintain something.*” and

To be an atheist is to maintain God. His existence or his nonexistence, it amounts to much the same, on the plane of proof. Thus proof is a word not often used among the Handdarata, who have chosen not to treat God as a fact, subject either to proof or to belief: and they have broken the circle, and go free. (Chapter 11. p.153)

Taoism considers life and its processes a balance between the *yang* and the *yin*, in that the two are but different aspects of the same system. Light and darkness, darkness and light —we invariably need the one to know and define the other.

III. Nusuth Means Wu-Wei

It was an introverted life, self sufficient, stagnant, steeped in that singular “ignorance” prized by the Handdarata and obedient to their rule of inactivity or non-interference. That rule (expressed in the word nusuth, which I have to translate as “no matter”) is the heart of the cult, and I don’t pretend to understand it. But I began to understand Karhide better, after a halfmonth in Otherhord. (Chapter 5. p.60)

Life at Otherhord Fastness is in this manner described by Genly Ai. The Handdara concept of “*ignorance*” takes here a shade of meaning which is slightly different from the significance it has had so far, it has now become perhaps richer and even clearer than before. It appears together with and closely connected to the precept of “*inactivity*” or “*non-interference*” that adepts of the Handdara follow. Thus, *nusuth*, the expression of the precept of non-interference meaning “*no matter*”, redefines what the Handdara understands by “*ignorance*” and explains why this peculiar “*ignorance*” is said to be the ground of thought and learning.

That both “*ignorance*” and “*non-interference*” appear together as cornerstones of the Handdara philosophy is something that runs parallel to another idea expressed later in the same chapter. Genly Ai offers to communicate with Faxe in mindspeech (a kind of telepathy) to which Faxe politely refuses. His business, Faxe says, is “*unlearning, not learning*”. He prefers not to yet learn an ability that would definitely change his world. Genly Ai then tells him, “*By your own foretelling this world will change, and within five years;*” and Faxe answers, “*And I’ll change with it, Genry. But I have no wish to change it.*” (p.69)

Faxe is ready to accept a change, he is flexible enough to be capable of facing a new situation and of changing accordingly. He, though, has no intention of *instrumenting* the change, he does not want to speed up something that will occur in due time. Here, “*ignorance*” and “*unlearning*” do not oppose change since they are not incompatible. “*Ignorance*” springs from “*unlearning*”, the two accompany “*non-intervention*”, the latter enables one to follow the natural course that will lead to change.

Again, another concept —the concept of non-intervention or non-interference, the concept expressed by the recurrent word *nusuth*— is central to *The Left Hand of*

Darkness. And again, a concept upon which the novel seems to have been created finds a parallel in Taoism —the Taoist principle of *wu-wei*.

Wu-wei is the Taoist principle of non-action, non-intervention, or non-interference. It should not be confused with an idea of passivity; *wu-wei* reflects flexibility and adaptability rather than a passive attitude. Alan Watts defines and explains the concept very clearly: ¹¹

The principle of non-action (wu-wei) is not to be considered inertia, laziness, laissez-faire, or mere passivity. Among the several meanings of wei are “to be,” “to do,” “to make,” “to practise,” “to act out,” (...), “false,” “simulated,” “counterfeit.” But in the contexts of Taoist writings it quite clearly means “forcing,” “meddling,” and “artifice” —in other words, trying to act against the grain of li. Thus wu-wei as “not forcing” is what we mean by going with the grain, rolling with the punch, swimming with the current, trimming sails to the winds, taking the tide at its flood, and stooping to conquer.

Now, if we analyze every single act by Estraven later on up on the Gobrin Ice, we recognize it is performed in accordance with this principle. Estraven becomes one with the world, and his acts do not go against the natural course of events. And the fact that Estraven does not ever force things gives him a concrete and definite awareness of his world; this awareness allows him to exercise a particular alertness and enables him to adapt himself to his environment; his ability to adapt himself eventually leads both him and Genly Ai to conquer.

Thus, Estraven himself gives expression to the principle of *wu-wei* as he “*takes the tide at its flood*” in everything he does. In one of the chapters in which he is the narrator, we hear him say, “*I never had a gift but one, to know when the great wheel gives to a touch, to know and act.*” (Chapter 14. p.189). Estraven’s concept of “*the great wheel*” and his idea of how to accompany this flowing power evidently echo the concept of Tao itself: the certainty of being one with the natural flow and with one’s own natural surroundings.

¹¹ Op.cit, pp.75/76.

Indeed, Estraven clearly has a flexibility and a fluidity that can explain and account for his acts and behavior. Genly Ai recognizes this characteristic when he says,

I never knew a person who reacted so wholly and rapidly to a changed situation as Estraven. (...) He was never rash or hurried, but he was always ready.
(Chapter 15. p.203)

And Estraven's capacity to react in this way and to be prepared to face any given new situation is a direct consequence of both his recognizing and acknowledging his world and his circumstances for what they are, and of his never forcing matters and events — something the reader learns is typical of the Handdara discipline.

This capacity present in Estraven and in adepts of the Handdara is very significantly expressed in the way questions —and the *need* for questions— are regarded. Answers should not be forced, questions should be worded carefully, the need to ask any questions at all in the first place should be challenged. This is —the Handdara would claim— because some questions simply cannot be answered. Notice what Estraven says in Chapter 11: “*To know which questions are unanswerable, and not to answer them: This skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness.*” (pp.153/ 154).¹²This can be said to be the essence of the wisdom found in non-action —*nusuth* in the novel, *wu-wei* in Taoism.

The word *nusuth* can be undoubtedly interpreted in the light of the Taoist principle of *wu-wei*; it can be said to be Ms. Le Guin's own, personal version of *wu-wei*. Flexibility, fluidity, adaptability —these are the results of behaving according to what is conveyed by the concept *nusuth* in the novel, these are the results of behaving according to *wu-wei* for the Taoist mind.

Let us explore what this concept entails a little further.

¹² The idea is indeed particularly profound and decidedly clever and sound. Compare this with what Genly Ai believes about foretelling before posing his question to the foretellers of Otherword Fastness. He thinks foretelling can be placed “(...) *on the chance of pure divination, along with yarrow stalks and flipped coins.*” (Chapter 5. p.61). Certainly, using yarrow stalks or flipping coins are two ways to ask your question to the *I Ching*, the Chinese Book of Changes, which can be used as a divination method. Similarly to what happens with the foretellers' experience of divination, the secret with the *I Ching* also lies in asking the right kind of question —a question which is not ambiguous, chance, or “*unanswerable.*” But Genly Ai does not seem to know this at this point in the novel.

An image often used in Taoist writings to describe the principle of *wu-wei*, its essence, and the reasons for its inherent strength is that of water. Precisely, the nature of water distinctly manifests and represents no action, yet water can never be viewed as something passive. Again, Lao Tzu expresses the metaphor gracefully:

Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way.

(Tao Te Ching. Chapter 8)

and also:

In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it. This is because there is nothing that can take its place. That the weak overcomes the strong, And the submissive overcomes the hard, Everyone in the world knows yet no one can put this knowledge into practice.

(Tao Te Ching. Chapter 78)

Here I find that *wu-wei* also implies the idea that the submissive goes together with the hard, the weak with the strong, for—in the flow—both forces are one. Certainly, *wu-wei* is linked with and closely connected to the principle of *yin-yang* and the idea of *hsiang-sheng*.¹³ If one lets things be and does nothing against the grain, a natural order develops as a result.

Although in *The Left Hand of Darkness* it is Estraven who clearly and undoubtedly incarnates the spirit of non-intervention, it can be said that this principle is something inherent to the Gethenian conception of life, to the Gethenian way of thinking, and consequently something shared by most Gethenians. It is present, for instance, in what the physician looking after Genly Ai tells him: “*You have spent yourself. There’s nothing*

¹³ The concept of *hsiang-sheng* has been previously mentioned here. See section II, where we discuss the close, interdependent relation between *yin* and *yang*.

more to spend. Lie down, rest. Lie down like the rivers frozen in the valleys in winter. Lie still. Wait." (Chapter 20. p 286)

This principle of non-intervention also finds expression in the Ekumen, the union and council of worlds of which Genly Ai is the envoy on Gethen: "*As they say in Ekumenical School, when action grows unprofitable, gather information; when information grows unprofitable, sleep.*" (Chapter 3. p.42). Something that Genly Ai himself will have learned by the end of his winter journey.

Together with Genly Ai, we readers reach the end of the novel to find that there is a time for action and a time for waiting. In terms of Taoism, it is clear then that *wu-wei* as non-action is not passivity; it only involves knowing when it is time for *yin* and when for *yang*. The *Tao Te Ching* says, "*The way never acts yet nothing is left undone.*" And after all:

*The most submissive thing in the world
can ride roughshod over the hardest in the world
—that which is without substance
entering that which has no crevices.
That is why I know the benefit of resorting to no action.
The teaching that uses no words,
the benefit of resorting to no action,
these are beyond the understanding of all
but a very few in the world.
(Tao Te Ching. Chapter 63)*

IV. *Li* Is The Rationale of The World

Indeed the "*benefit of resorting to non-action*" —the deed that consists in non-action— results in a harmonious balance of things, an order that is never in conflict with the flow of nature, that is in accord with all natural processes. Consequently, and paraphrasing Alan Watts when he defines *wu-wei*, this balance never acts "*against the grain of li.*" All Gethen as a fictional world, and the Handdara in particular, seem to accompany the "*grain of li,*" and in fact Le Guin's world seems to be the very expression of *li*. How can the concept of *li* be defined?

Li is the manifestation of a natural and organic, as opposed to an artificial and mechanical, order; it is the asymmetrical, as opposed to the linear, order. *Li* is, in short, the principle of order of *Tao* —the order of the flowing course of nature and the Universe. When talking about *Tao*, Alan Watts mentions the concept of *li* ¹⁴:

Although Tao is wu-tse (no law), it has an order or pattern that can be clearly recognized, but that cannot be defined as law, since it has too many dimensions and too many variables. This kind of order is the principle of li.

“Li,” he says, “is the rationale of the world.”

In my opinion, the principle of *li* can serve to show and explain certain aspects of Gethen as a harmonious world.

The two most important nations of Gethen are Karhide and Orgoreyn. While the former keeps an ancient system of government and organization, the latter shows a highly modern standardization, structure, and government. Orgoreyn has a powerful central government which controls and supervises everything in the country —roads are properly signalled and posted; the state finds employment for all citizens; its capital city is clean, standardized and orderly; the state here is a strong central head. Unlike Orgoreyn, Karhide holds a system of extended family-clans, which retain autonomy while responding to one king, and whose Hearths and Domains are not organized on a national scale or in a uniform standard way.

But even though Karhide is not organized as a nation the way Orgoreyn is, it has a solid structure and it is characterized by a kind of order that is not to be found in highly civilized Orgoreyn. Karhide keeps more to the old ways and customs of Gethen —it has an inherent order and it is balanced. Its organization may seem chaotic. It is not: Karhide’s balance and order are very clearly based on the principle of *li*. When everything follows its own *li*, harmony is the result of natural interdependence (and not the consequence of a linear order stated by a hierarchical head imposing norms and rules). There is a lot of petty politics going on in Karhide, true; and this nation is not to be idealized. However, in Karhide there is a social order that naturally stems from a communal respect for the

¹⁴ Op.cit, pp.45 and 54, respectively.

individual, from a national acknowledgment of the autonomous cells of family-clans, and from *wu-wei* as exercised by the head of a country.

At this point —again— the *Tao Te Ching* can certainly illuminate *The Left Hand of Darkness* when it says:

*Govern the state by being straightforward;
wage war by being crafty;
but win the empire by not being meddlesome.
How do I know that it is like that? By means of this.
The more taboos there are in the empire.
The poorer the people;
The more sharpened tools the people have
The more benighted the state;
The more skills the people have
The further novelties multiply;
The better known the laws and edicts
The more thieves and robbers there are.
Hence the sage says,
I take no action and the people are transformed of
themselves;
I prefer stillness and the people are rectified of
themselves;
I am not meddlesome and the people prosper of
themselves;
I am free from desire and the people of themselves
become simple like the uncarved block.
(Tao Te Ching. Chapter 57)*

and:

*Reduce the size and population of the state.
Ensure that even though the people have tools of war for a troop
or a batallion they will not use them; and also
that they will be reluctant to move to distant places*

*because they look on death as no light matter.
Even when they have ships and carts,
they will have no use for them; and even when they have
armour and weapons, they will have no occasion to make a
show of them.
Bring it about that the people will return to the use
of the knotted rope,
Will find relish in their food
And beauty in their clothes,
Will be content in their abode
And happy in the way they live.
Though adjoining states are within sight of one another, and
the sound of dogs barking and cocks crowing in one state
can be heard in another,
yet the people of one state will grow old and die
without having had any dealings
with those of another.
(Tao Te Ching. Chapter 80)*

Li is also present in the Gethenian calendar, whose most perfect image of Taoist balance lies in the fact that Gethen always lives in the Year One:

In Karhide/Orgoreyn years are not numbered consecutively from a base year forward to the present; the base year is the current year. Every New Year's Day (Getheny Thern) the year just past becomes the year "one-ago," and every past date is increased by one. The future is similarly counted, next year being the year "one-to-come," until it in turn becomes the Year One. (p.302)

The principle of *li* is found in many more expressions of Gethenian culture:

Gethenians could make their vehicles go faster, but t

hey do not. If asked why not, they answer "Why?" Like asking Terrans why all our vehicles must go so fast; we answer "Why not?" No disputing tastes. Terrans tend to feel they've got to get ahead, make progress. The people of Winter, who always live in the Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence.
(Chapter 5. p.50)

Does this mean that Gethen is a primitive world, a world in which no "progress" is ever made? Not quite so. Genly Ai observes, when talking about Gethen and its inhabitants, that

...they have gone very slowly. At any one point in their history, a hasty observer would say that all technological progress and diffusion had ceased. Yet it never has. Compare the torrent and the glacier. Both get where they are going.
(Chapter 8. p.99)

Advancement does not always imply making progress in the sense that our modern world understands it, as is true that making progress does not always entail advancing. As Taoism shows, our usual concepts of opposing forces or the idea of a linear order cannot account for natural interdependent polarities and natural organic balances. Up to what extent can we explain away our world and its inherent order without becoming blind and losing our way?

V. Writing & Tao & Le Guin's "Thought-Experiment."

(By Way of Conclusion)

"Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth."

Ursula K. Le Guin (in her "Introduction" to *The Left Hand...*)

At this point, I believe it is relevant to pose a question with regard to the very creation of *The Left Hand of Darkness*: why has Ms. Le Guin chosen to shape her fictional world by means of the use of Taoist metaphors and images? Why—in the creation of this “*thought experiment*”—has she clearly used elements of Taoism? Let us try to attempt an answer by taking as an example the androgyny of the characters.

Susan Wood writes in the “Introduction” to Section 3 of *The Language of The Night* (a collection of essays on fantasy and science fiction written by Ms. Le Guin):

*In Science Fiction Studies 6 (July 1975), Le Guin defined the two ruling myths of The Left Hand of Darkness as “the myth of winter” and the “archetypal figure of the Androgynne,” which, she feels, is one of the archetypes/potentialities of the human psyche which is of real importance now, which is alive now and full of creative-destructive energy; and so it is urgent that it be brought into consciousness.*¹⁵

To bring it into consciousness, Ms. Le Guin resorts to a beautiful metaphor—the business of the writer.

The idea here—when portraying a planet whose inhabitants are male as well as female, female as well as male—is that of the necessity of creating a descriptive metaphor. In her “Introduction” to *The Left Hand Of Darkness*, Ms. Le Guin says:

Yes, indeed the people in [the book] are androgynous, but that doesn’t mean that I’m predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I’m merely observing, in the peculiar, devious and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in

¹⁵ Wood, Susan, “Introduction” to Section 3 of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Language of The Night*. p.126.

the novelist's way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies.

Gethenians, as a major and important part of this writer's "*thought-experiment*," are wonderful instances of how it is possible for the writer to integrate and balance otherwise apparently opposing forces, and to solve the problems and conflicts caused by dualisms. True: Gethenians are a good description, but yet they still are only metaphors. But then, to base the new fictional metaphor on already existing elements from Taoism gives the metaphor a distinct clarity and force. And to place a Gethenian-metaphor like Estraven with a feasible human-being-as-we-know-it like Genly Ai on the icy waste of an imaginary possibility like Gethen goes on to prove that the balance proposed by the experimental creation is within the human scope. The writer in her "Introduction" tells us that "*The only truth I can understand or express is, logically defined, a lie. Psychologically defined, a symbol. Aesthetically defined, a metaphor.*" The novelist's "*lie*" is here a whole, substantial, and well-constructed truth.

Almost echoing the writer's words we hear Genly Ai very wisely observing that "*Truth is a matter of the imagination*" (Chapter 1. p.1). In a mood similar to that of Ms. Le Guin and her character, we might speculate that fiction can be a sound source of truth. After all, we have already seen how light and darkness, darkness and light, are only a matter of perception.

The fact that Taoism views apparently antagonistic (and sometimes even conflicting) concepts of perception as only different facets of the same substance makes the use of Taoist metaphors and images a perfect device. Taoism is "logically," "psychologically," and —above all— "aesthetically" appropriate for the writer when she is presenting an alternative perspective. A "lie," a "symbol," a "metaphor." The result?: "*The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight,*" as the Ekumen would put it (Chapter 3. p.34). Taoism proves to be an excellent means for presenting this alternative perspective and for achieving this result. And —in this ancient Chinese philosophy— Ms. Le Guin has found a proper frame, and a way, for her work.¹⁶

¹⁶ *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not the only instance of Ms. Le Guin's using Taoist principles. In the "Introduction" to yet another of her novels, *Planet of Exile*, she discusses the characters in this book and argues that, while the male character is the "*central mover of all events*," the female character "*is the one who chooses.*" She explains that *Taoism got to me earlier than modern feminism did. Where some see only a dominant Hero and a passive Little Woman, I saw, and still see, the essential wastefulness and futility of aggression and*

Tao is natural flow as it is balance and equilibrium —the ideal ground for a writer to create a descriptive metaphor, to present an alternative perspective. Making use of Taoist principles, Ms. Le Guin has created a thought-provoking paradigm, has “*broken the circle*” —as Estraven would say of the Handaratta— and goes free. In the writer’s own words:

All [The Left Hand of Darkness] tries to do is open up an alternative viewpoint, to widen the imagination, without making any very definite suggestions as to what might be seen from that new viewpoint. The most it says is, I think, something like this: If we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem, then society would be a very different thing. What our problems might be, God knows; I only know we would have them. But it seems likely that our central problem would not be the one it is now: the problem of exploitation —exploitation of the woman, of the weak, of the earth. Our curse is alienation, the separation of yang from yin (and the moralization of yang as good, of yin as bad). Instead of a search for balance and integration, there is a struggle for dominance. Divisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied. The dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used, might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity.¹⁷

the profound effectiveness of wu-wei, “action through stillness.”

Later in the same “Introduction” she observes that “*Yin does not occur without yang, nor yang without yin.*”

¹⁷ In Le Guin, Ursula K. (1989), “Is Gender Necessary?”, pp.171/172.

Has Ursula Le Guin aroused in the readers of *The Left Hand of Darkness* any awareness, any consciousness of the need to create this new “*modality of integration and integrity*”? Well, I personally believe *The Left Hand of Darkness* does precisely that, but this may be different for others.

Nusuth.

As we have already learned, some questions are unanswerable.

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