

BUILDING COHERENT FANTASY WORLDS:
TAOISM AND EARTHSEA

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Outside my window a Steller's jay jumps off a tan oak branch and flies, wing-flit, wing-flit, to a perch in a mossy rhododendron. He never sits still for too long. He jeers, "*Jeer, jeer, jeer.*" My cat and I look up to see a raven soaring overhead. The raven is black, the jay a darkly iridescent blue, the day foggy and gray.

I am sitting at my computer, writing a piece of literary criticism about balance and deep unity in worlds. The cat cleans herself and then notices, for a moment, the screen. The words march around like so many insects. She seems curious why I stare at them so much. But not that curious; the scene outside soon reclaims her attention.

I have written this paper for you, dear reader, because I wanted to deepen and share my understanding of how Ursula K. Le Guin writes fiction. Few writers have captured my imagination and admiration as much as she has. By her death in January 2018, Le Guin had published twenty-four novels, twelve short story collections, nine collections of poetry, four book-length poetry translations, and seven collections of criticism. Her life's work was largely devoted to creating fictions that were classified as fantasy or science fiction. She argued passionately for readers and critics to take these genres seriously, and by the end of her career, she cheered that the "walls between fictional genres that were constructed by critical prejudice and ignorance are going down fast, and I love to watch them go!" ("Four Questions") She spent decades fighting to bring those walls down.

When I was in high school I read Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. More than anything else, that book made me want to be a writer. A decade later, I am at work studying for a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing—and writing my own novel, which has a great deal in common with Le Guin's *Earthsea Cycle*. In the following seven sections I consider how Le

Guin builds the fantastical world of Earthsea, how its construction guides the plot of the third book in the series, and the ways that Le Guin uses an ancient Chinese philosophical text to give the series a rich coherence.

I. What Is the *Tao Te Ching*? What Is Fantasy?

The *Tao Te Ching* (道德经),¹ a collection of short poems that composed in China around the 6th-4th c. BCE and separated into 81 chapters, was purportedly written by the sage known as Lao Tzu (老子). Like many legendary figures from early history, it's uncertain if Lao Tzu even existed. His name means "Old Master," and the title *Tao Te Ching* means "The Classic [text] about the Way and its Power" (Lao Tzu 111-12). In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu lays out a philosophical system that forms the foundation for Taoism. The book is filled with contradictions, metaphors, advice on how to live and govern, and advocacy of nonviolence.

¹ Because Ursula K. Le Guin uses it in her version of the *Tao Te Ching*, in this paper I too am following the Wade-Giles system of transliterating Chinese into English, even though over the past forty years its scholarly use has been almost entirely superceded by the Pinyin system. (See discussion and pronunciation in Robson 67-68.) For reference, here is a chart showing, for each Chinese-language term or name used in this paper, its transliterations under each system as well as the simplified Chinese characters and English translation(s):

Wade-Giles	Pinyin	Chinese	Translation(s)
<i>Tao Te Ching</i>	Dàodéjīng	道德经	" <i>The Classic about the Way and Its Power</i> " (Le Guin) or " <i>The Scripture of the Way and Its Virtue</i> " (Robson)
<i>Lao Tzu</i>	Lǎozǐ	老子	Old Master
<i>Chuang Tzu</i>	Zhuāngzǐ	庄子	Master Zhuang
<i>Tao</i>	Dào	道	the Way
<i>Wu Wei Wu</i>	wú wéi wú	无为无	"Do not do. Doing not-doing." (Le Guin 6) or "Nondoing" (Fischer-Schreiber 210)
<i>Yin-yang</i>	yīnyáng	阴阳	"dark-bright" or "negative-positive"

Sometimes when I'm thinking about something entirely unconnected to Taoism, I will remember a few relevant lines from the *Tao Te Ching*. I take the book down from its shelf and search for a half-remembered line, sure that it will give me insight into the question at hand.

For instance, I have been thinking about the question of names, of classification, of separating *this* from *that*. I specifically worry about the way genre distinctions in prose writing—which Le Guin credits to “critical prejudice and ignorance”—can stifle great literature from being written and finding readers. Both bookstores and MFA programs often separate “Romance” from “Fantasy” and “YA” from “Literary Fiction.” Sometimes the classifying of books into narrow ghettos feels like a kind of violence.

Doesn't Lao Tzu speak to this question, warning against subdividing things too far and losing the sense of deeper unity? I find the lines I am looking for in Chapter 32:

To order, to govern,
is to begin naming;
when names proliferate
it's time to stop.
If you know when to stop
you're in no danger. (43)

Naming plays an important role in creating order and telling things apart, Lao Tzu acknowledges. It's how we get words in the first place. Without the intervention of language to differentiate, we can only perceive things in a chaotic, haphazard way. As Lao Tzu writes in Chapter 1, “name's the mother / of the ten thousand things” (3). But you have to know when to stop. Otherwise, danger. The taxonomic mania, an obsession with subdividing things into smaller and smaller categories, ends in forgetting the final unity of all things. As Ursula K. Le Guin writes in her commentary to Chapter 32 of the *Tao Te Ching*, “You have to make order, you have

to make distinctions, but you also have to know when to stop before you've lost the whole in the multiplicity of parts" (43).

These lines speak to the opportunities and risks inherent in using genre boundaries to section off works of fiction that share certain characteristics. There is obvious utility. For instance, when I go to the bookstore I often beeline for the Science Fiction and Fantasy shelves. As Le Guin says, "[G]enre is a permanently useful idea when used rightly, to indicate actual difference in subject-matter, style, expectation" ("Four Questions"). But there is also obvious danger. Many adults refuse to read genre fiction out of ignorance and prejudice and fear of being perceived as weak-minded. Even worse, many creative writing teachers explicitly discourage their students from writing fiction that might be considered "genre" instead of "literary." This is attested in a panel on the podcast *Geek's Guide to the Galaxy*, where multiple current and recent college students recount their experiences of being discouraged by professors and sometimes shut out of limited-enrollment classes because of their interest in writing "genre fiction." As panelist Emma Clark says,

This was an issue I ran into, where professors who wanted to accept genre fiction would still try to turn it into literary fantasy fiction or something like magical realism. Even if it was a secondary world, there wouldn't be that focus on how do you do world-building, how do you create tension, how do you do a three-act structure. (Barr Kirtley)

For a student who wants to write a story with non-realist elements, this can be deeply frustrating. I have encountered this reluctance to engage with genre work in higher education at the very Antioch University Los Angeles (AULA) MFA program for which I am writing this paper. Every semester, students have to select which mentors they wish to work with in the following term. For this purpose the program holds a "Meet the Mentors Panel," at which, inevitably, a student asks which mentors are open to working with science fiction and fantasy. Most faculty

mentors answer that they are happy to work with this material, but a quarter or a third express reluctance or outright hostility towards such work.

In the above remark, Emma Clark strikes at one reason why teachers avoid working with student fantasy and science fiction writers: they themselves don't know how to teach "world-building" and other genre-specific craft elements. They are simply being honest with students about their own lacunae and lack of qualification in teaching this type of writing. This is, perhaps, an honorable reason to avoid teaching students writing genre fiction. But I think the opportunities presented by such fiction offer a space of difference in which one's writing and practices could grow. I think a great teacher would embrace the challenge.

The main way that fantasy writing differs from "realist" writing is that it does not pretend to take place in our consensus "reality." Realism makes the promise that even if the events described *didn't* happen, they at least hypothetically *could have*. Writers of fantasy have a harder job. They must convince the reader to believe—or at least engage with—a story that is transparently fabricated from no more than language and imagination. The 19th-century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously proposed that in order to accomplish this the writer of fantasy must provide "a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment..." (Coleridge Chapter XIV). Because fantasy is a type of fiction that does not disguise its fictiveness, students of fantasy writing must learn how to convince readers to forget or ignore the obvious unreality of the story and so engage in this "willing suspension of disbelief."

In an essay about how plausibility functions in fantasy writing, Le Guin revises Coleridge's classic formulation. She writes: "Imaginative authority and inner coherence are fantasy's chief means of obtaining its end, which is the reader's willing participation in an undisguised invention" (Plausibility Revisited). She agrees with Coleridge about the ultimate

objective—the “suspension of disbelief”—but emphasizes the role that the reader plays in choosing to embrace “an undisguised invention.” And in place of Coleridge’s “human interest and a semblance of truth,” Le Guin emphasizes that in fantasy the writer must use the means of “imaginative authority and inner coherence” to accomplish this end.

II. World-building

The central way that fantasy writers build this inner coherence and convince readers of their authority is through world-building. Fantasy writers have perfect freedom to change the laws of physics, chemistry, biology. We’re almost obligated to alter or replace whole sections of world history, politics, and physical anthropology. But we have to be consistent. Fantasy writers have devoted whole chapters in craft books to the ins and outs of world-building (Vandermeer “Chapter 6”). The writer N. K. Jemison—the first writer ever to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel for three consecutive years—gives one-day workshops on world-building and has done public demonstrations of building out worlds from scratch (Klein). It’s a key element of the fantasy writer’s craft.

J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, was among the first to define worldbuilding. In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien explains that the successful fantasy writer, who he calls a

‘sub-creator’...makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (Tolkien)

A single false detail can cause the reader to experience a moment of disbelief that is ruinous to what Tolkien here calls the “Secondary World.” Instead, all of the pieces have to “accord with the laws” of the invented world. And that is the work of worldbuilding: inventing the laws of an imagined world—and then being rigorously honest in following their logic. It is work almost like that of a creator god, which is why Tolkien calls the story maker a “sub-creator.”

After a session of world-building I do occasionally feel like I have “swept over the face of the waters[,] said, ‘Let there be light,’; and there was light” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible* Genesis 1.2-3). More often I feel less like God and more like a nervous baker opening the oven too often, at risk of spoiling the soufflé. Excess fussing can displace the spark of imagination. At the same time, exacting consistency is vitally important. The reader must trust my imaginary world, trust it so much that while reading they subconsciously know that one could buy a plane ticket, book a hotel, and come for a visit.²

Amazingly, readers of Jan Morris’s *Last Letters from Hav* did take action to try to visit. This example of extremely effective world-building takes the form of a travelogue in the imaginary Eastern-European city state of Hav. Morris does not reveal in the text that she made the place up from whole cloth. Instead she provides a map of the city-state and starts by

² My use of the word “they” as the generic third-person singular pronoun is intentional and partly inspired by Le Guin. Language is a convention that we, as the readers and writers and speakers of English, agree upon and continually re-create. By fighting for the widespread adoption of “they” as the generic third-person singular I hope to give valuable cover to my non-binary comrades, and to mold English into a slightly less patriarchal tongue. I think that Le Guin would approve, especially in light of this passage from her book *Steering the Craft*:

[H]ere’s an example of a deliberate violation of a Fake Rule:

Fake Rule: The generic pronoun in English is *he*.

Violation: “Each one in turn reads their piece aloud.”

This is wrong say the grammar bullies, because *each one*, *each person* is a singular noun and *their* is a plural pronoun. But Shakespeare uses *their* with words such as *everybody*, *anybody*, *a person*, and so we all do when we’re talking. (“It’s enough to drive anyone out of their senses,” said George Bernard Shaw.)

The grammarians started telling us it was incorrect along in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. That was when they also declared that the pronoun *he* includes both sexes, as in “If a person needs an abortion, he should be required to tell his parents.”

My use of *their* is socially motivated and, if you like, politically correct: a deliberate response to the socially and politically significant banning of our genderless pronoun by language legislators enforcing the notion that the male sex is the only one that counts. I consistently break a rule I consider to be not only fake but pernicious. I know what I’m doing and why. (17)

describing how one takes train there. As a reader, you believe her entirely—maybe even too much. In an epilogue to a recent re-issue Morris writes of the novel's reception,

[F]ew readers apparently recognized it as fictional. They thought it described a real place, incomprehensibly little-known. They asked me how to get there. They wanted to know if one needed a visa. Even somebody at the Map Room of the Royal Geographical Society asked me to put him straight about Hav's location. (Morris 299)

The ready excuse that such gullible readers have is that the rest of Morris's oeuvre is comprised entirely of memoir and nonfiction travelogues. The less gracious—but I think more honest—explanation is that Morris imagines the place so wholly that while reading it the reader cannot help but believe in its existence. The reader is simply *there*. Of course Hav is a real place; it finds its shape and flinty truth in each reader's mind.

Less effective world-building can be disastrous to the writer's intention, though sometimes hilarious to the reader. The winner of the 2018 Philip K. Dick Award, Carrie Vaughn's novel *Bannerless*, is such a work. It regularly breaks the spell of its world, and examining just one miscued detail provides insight into how world-building can go wrong. *Bannerless* follows the adventures of an investigator named Enid as she and her partner try to solve a murder in a post-apocalyptic hamlet called Pasadan. In this new world, the right to reproduce is sharply regulated and people seem to drift from one apple cider and bluegrass party to the next. The problem with the book's world-building is that nothing seems contingent or inter-connected with anything else. The dystopian restriction of reproductive freedom doesn't stem from patriarchy, from authoritarianism, or from anything other than a gentle consensus that it would be better if they had a small population. Nor does it have any profoundly warping effects on the society itself. Characters talk incessantly about wanting banners (which permit one to get pregnant), but the characters we meet don't *do* anything to get them: no scheming, no black markets, no bribing the

authorities, no running away. I can imagine a world with the general characteristics of the one Vaughn describes, but I can't imagine that if I lived in it I would act remotely like any of the characters.

A small detail that helps make the book ridiculous is the uniform that the investigators wear. This uniform is supposed to be very important, distinctive, and imbued with cultural power. We first hear of it on the third page, when a character is described wearing "his investigator's uniform: plain belt and boots, simple tunic and trousers in a dark brown the color of earth, much deeper than any usual homespun or plain dyed brown" (Vaughn 3). And so the troubles begin. How exactly is this dark brown color distinctive? Doesn't the earth have many different shades? And wouldn't most fabric in a world without washing machines eventually turn dark brown? The reader never gets answers to these questions, though. (Nor do we ever see how the wash gets done.) Instead, for the rest of the novel the uniform simply has an unexplained, atavistic power to strike fear into others:

Investigators, moving through communities like brown-draped shadows of ill tidings.
(Vaughn 6)

Enid still wasn't used to seeing him in the brown uniform. He looked almost sinister wearing it; he didn't smile as much. He wore it now because the other investigators seemed to think they needed the authority. In a disaster, they needed people to follow orders, and the uniform increased the chances of that. (18)

[T]he brown uniform was a little less scary than it had been when he first started training, but it was still the brown uniform, transforming him into something larger and distant, and even after years she was still getting used to it. (56)

Enid next spoke with the town's lone medic, Tull. Used to dealing with procedure and questions, he was the only one not instantly put on guard by the uniform (74).

‘Something to hide, then?’ Tomas asked. ‘Or is it just the uniform?’

‘I always assume it's the uniform first. You've worn it so long, you take it for granted, the way a whole village freezes up when one of us comes along.’

‘But the effect is so very useful,’ he said, grinning. Indeed, she'd seen cases where a guilty party would throw themselves at an investigator, unburdening their souls of every slight they could think of, just at the sight of the uniform and the implications that their mistakes would inevitably be discovered so they should immediately confess and beg for mercy. (77)

‘What about you, Enid?’ [her ex-boyfriend] asked, when his own tale reached a suitable end. ‘You've been busy, I take it.’ He gestured at her, or rather at the uniform she wore. (117)

Enough. By most measures this is bad writing. But it is specifically bad because of the number of unanswered questions the reader has, just about the uniforms—questions for which the novel does not have answers. Where are the physical uniforms produced? Who designed them? Why specifically is the color of authority dark brown? What dye is used to make that color? How are they really distinctive from other clothes? Why are people awed by the presence of investigators who otherwise seem both powerless and inept? And on and on. As published, unfortunately, the main characters seem like a pair of bungling private eyes garbed in homemade UPS uniforms. This provides unintended humor—a risk of shoddy world-building.

So long as the reader is unconvinced that these repeatedly emphasized uniforms are truly integral with the world of the book, it is almost impossible for the reader to participate in the invention. This extends far beyond the uniforms, naturally. A carelessness and half-baked sloppiness permeate countless other details in *Bannerless*. They don't cohere into something greater than the sum of their parts. Instead, they test the reader's patience.

A diagnosis might conclude that *Bannerless* suffers for lack of a guiding idea at its core. Vaughn could have written a reproductive dystopia or a population-controlled utopia, but this book avoids committing to either track. And Vaughn is disappointingly vague about the systems of power and control in this world. In lieu of a concrete relationship between the characters and the state, readers get a discursus on brown tunics. Because of the lack of coherent and fully-imagined world-building, *Bannerless* fails to deliver on its interesting premise and is finally not about much of anything at all.

III. Earthsea and the Tao

There is more to be learned from closely examining a work that succeeds and looking out for what its writer did differently in creating it. Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea series is made up of works that typify the assured creation of successful world-building. The Earthsea series starts with 1968's *A Wizard of Earthsea* and continues over five decades, comprising five more books and many stories, including one published in the Summer 2018 issue of the *Paris Review*, fifty years after the initial publication and postdating Le Guin's death. The Earthsea stories are all set in an archipelago world that Le Guin imagined and wrote into existence—a whole new world, with its own physics (words from the Old Speech can temporarily manipulate the fabric of existence), history (the creation myth is called the *Legend of Éa*), and politics (slavery is still

practiced on some islands). The characters go about their lives in this world that they call Earthsea. When the reader is engrossed in the work, Earthsea feels equally real to them.

The process of creating this world was long and gradual. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the first book in the series, Le Guin includes a reference on page 168 to events to come in the protagonist's life. About speculation about two cast-aways whom one character, Sparrowhawk, has found, Le Guin writes "But the truth of this guess he did not learn until, years later, the quest of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe led him to the Kargad Lands, and to the Tombs of Atuan." The unidentified narrator of the story is a story-teller in the future—and it follows that they know the protagonist's future exploits even as they describe his humble beginnings. But Le Guin has said that she herself did not know what the Tombs of Atuan were, nor what the described quest would be. She had to write the second book in the series, *The Tombs of Atuan*, to find out. In this, Le Guin is what the fantasy writer George R. R. Martin calls a "gardener," in contrast to an "architect." In a 2011 interview he explains the difference:

The architects do blueprints before they drive the first nail, they design the entire house, where the pipes are running, and how many rooms there are going to be, how high the roof will be. But the gardeners just dig a hole and plant the seed and see what comes up. I think all writers are partly architects and partly gardeners, but they tend to one side or another ... I am definitely more of a gardener.

Instead of writing out in advance a long encyclopedia or history of the imaginary world, world-builders of the "gardener" variety find out what they're writing as they write it. Their worlds reveal themselves to the writer as they do to the reader: sentence by sentence.

In order to world-build as you write, to work as Martin's "gardener," the writer needs to have an under-girding idea of the world's thing-ness. The writer needs a guide or two. One of Le Guin's guides in all of her writing and specifically in writing the Earthsea books are the core

texts of Taoism: the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu*. (The *Chuang Tzu* is a collection of stories attributed to Master Chuang.) Because Le Guin prepared her own version of the *Tao Te Ching*, this paper will focus on that text.

Le Guin refers to this edition as a “version” or a “rendition” rather than a “translation” of the *Tao Te Ching*, because she does not speak Chinese. She prepared it by using dictionaries, glossaries, other versions, and textual commentaries. She also had the assistance and guidance of “a true and genuine scholar of ancient Chinese and of Lao Tzu, Dr. J. P. Seaton of the University of North Carolina” (107). This saves her from the harshest criticisms Paul R. Goldin levies against popular Western translations in his acid review, “Those Who Don’t Know Speak: Translations of Laozi by People Who Do Not Know Chinese.” Goldin notes, “Only Le Guin was aided by a genuine authority ... and her book, as might be expected, is by far the best of the lot, although it too has major weaknesses” (120). Goldin’s estimation of Stephen Mitchell’s bestselling version is much lower. He writes of one point of translation:

Where Miles and Le Guin struggle with *neng wu li*, Mitchell simply ignores the phrase.

Then he proceeds to rob the passage of its most distinctive image—playing the part of the female in the opening and closing of the gates of Heaven—replacing it with the New Age cliché ‘letting events take their course.’ In the final line, Mitchell employs another vapid locution, ‘step back from your own mind,’ and defuses all the tension in the original between understanding and not acting. (125)

Some academics spend whole careers sharpening their knives for such a cutting and righteous passage, to pierce so plump a balloon. Happily for Le Guin, her version is held in higher esteem by academics. An excerpt is even included in the 2015 *Norton Anthology of World Religions* volume on Daoism, albeit with the caveat that “like poets and thinkers before her, Le Guin came up with a version for a specific time—in her case, highlighting ecological responsibility, social

justice, and gender equality” (Robson 741). Because we are here concerned with the relation between Taoist ideas and Le Guin’s own work—as mediated by her own understanding of Taoism—questions about how closely her version aligns with the text’s original meaning shouldn’t dissuade us from following it.

In the introduction to her version, Le Guin describes being a child and finding in her house a beautiful copy of the *Tao Te Ching*, one “bound in yellow cloth stamped with blue and red Chinese designs and characters.” This book looked so magic from the outside that it was “a venerable object of mystery, which [she] soon investigated, and found more fascinating inside than out.” It was her father’s copy of the *Tao Te Ching* as translated by Paul Carus in 1898. The ideas she found inside at such a formative age changed her life. By the time Le Guin published her own rendition of the book, this copy was “ninety-eight years old and further ornamented with red binding-tape to hold the back on” (ix).

Le Guin herself in a 2003 interview said, “All of my writing has been deeply influenced by the *Tao Te Ching*” (Le Guin, interview). Scholars have examined this aspect of her writing in many different ways. One scholar studies “the importance of myth and myth-making for Le Guin [as informed by] her ‘personal understanding of Taoism’...” (Ransom 146). A wide study of Le Guin’s work when introducing *Earthsea* starts by saying that Taoism “is something really essential to Le Guin’s view of life...” (Bucknall 36). A scholar of anarchism notices Le Guin’s “strong Taoist element” on his way to asserting that “the premodern anarchism of the Taoist tradition thus serves as a starting point for Le Guin’s postmodern anarchism” (Call 92). When a writer has an abiding interest that blows through their work, a dozen scholars may trim their sails to catch the breeze.³

³ See Vladimir Nabokov & butterflies, Emily Dickinson & punctuation, James Joyce & Dublin, Zora Neale Hurston & dialect, C.S. Lewis & God, David Foster Wallace & grammar, James Baldwin & jazz, Edgar Allen Poe & racial fear, Philip Roth & onanism, T. S. Eliot & anti-semitism, Lady Murasaki and “the sorrow of human existence,”

As we look at Le Guin’s world-building, the Earthsea books’ frequent echoes of the *Tao Te Ching* offer us, too, a point of entry into the construction of the work—and clearly show us that Le Guin built Earthsea with help from Taoist concepts about how important balance is, how one should not try to change the world, and how one should not fear death.

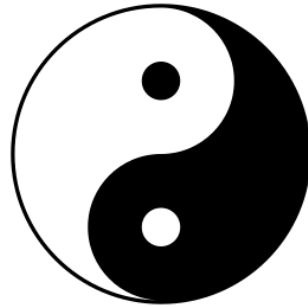


Figure 1 - the classic drawing of the yin-yang, showing how the light contains within it a little seed of darkness—and the dark contains a seed of light.

IV. Earthsea’s “the Balance of the Whole” and Taoism’s “the Way”

The very first Earthsea book, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, begins with an epigraph from an imagined religious text that closely parallels the *Tao Te Ching*. After the title page, these are the very first words in the book:

Only in silence the word,
 only in dark the light,
 only in dying life:
 bright the hawk’s flight
 on the empty sky.

Henry David Thoreau & who actually did his laundry, Haruki Murakami & pasta, William S. Burroughs & gay male junkie utopias, etc.

—*The Creation of Éa (A Wizard of Earthsea iii.)*

This beautiful little poem is full of paradoxes. It speaks of broadly abstract ideas—“silence,” “the word,” “dark,” “light,” “dying,” “life”—and says that seeming polar opposites actually contain each other. This is the same technique as used by Lao Tzu throughout the *Tao Te Ching*, often to the confusion of readers. As a scholarly introduction to the text explains, it “is notoriously difficult to understand, in part because of its self-conscious use of negation” (Robson 85). There is even a passage in Chapter 41 of the *Tao Te Ching* that closely mirrors the above lines:

The Way’s brightness looks like darkness;
 advancing on the Way feels like retreating;
 ...
 Perfect whiteness looks dirty.

The pure and simple looks chaotic. (Lao Tzu 56)

In paralleling the text of the *Tao Te Ching*, Le Guin is stating clearly that the concerns of Taoism will undergird the books—and will help determine how the world works. Specifically of interest is the idea raised here that polar opposites actually contain each other. This suggests the classic Taoist symbol of the yin-yang. (See Figure 1.) Within Taoism, the yin-yang symbolizes “two polar energies that, by their fluctuation and interaction, are the cause of the universe” (Fischer-Schreiber 216). Yin and yang are

the complementary forces that unite to form the Dao: yin, a term that originally referred to the shady side of a valley, by extension came to be associated with the dark, earth, dampness, and passivity—the female principle; yang, a term that originally referred to the sunny side of a valley, by extension came to be associated with the light, heaven, dryness, and activity—the male principle. (Robson 477)

This unity of opposites is integral to the entire idea of the Way, so much that the uniting of yin and yang actually *forms* the Way. (As Le Guin translates “the Tao” as “the Way” in her translation, I will follow that convention here.) There is no way without the dark and the light forming a complementary union, without the male principle and the female principle doing so, without earth and heaven uniting in difference.

A passage from Chapter 2 of the *Tao Te Ching* emphasizes the importance of balance between opposing forces:

hard and easy

complete each other;

long and short

shape each other;

high and low

depend on each other

...

before and after

follow each other. (4)

Opposites here are seen as co-dependent and even co-penetrating, as when Lao Tzu writes that “long and short / shape each other.” All states have an opposite, which can also be seen as a complement. In Le Guin’s commentary, she writes that in this chapter she sees Lao Tzu as saying “that values and beliefs are ... part of the interplay of yin and yang, the great reversals that maintain the living balance of the world” (4-5).

This “living balance of the world” that Le Guin describes in her commentary on the *Tao Te Ching* is of great importance to the composition of the Earthsea books. The main difference is

that in the Earthsea books it is known under a slightly different name: “the Balance of the Whole.”

The hero of the first three novels, a wizard known as Sparrowhawk although his true name is Ged, explains the Balance of the Whole as being the natural way of things—and something that can be endangered only by humans:

On every act the balance of the whole depends. The winds and seas, the powers of water and earth and light, all that these do, and all that the beasts and green things do, is well done, and rightly done. All these act within the Equilibrium. From the hurricane and the great whale’s sounding to the fall of a dry leaf and the gnat’s flight, all they do is done within the balance of the whole. But we, insofar as we have power over the world and over one another, we must *learn* to do what the leaf and the whale and the wind do of their own nature. We must learn to keep the balance. (*The Farthest Shore* 66)

This is a beautiful explanation of the Way, and the notion of the Equilibrium calls directly back to the concepts embodied by the yin-yang symbol. As far as world-building, it is useful that the wizard-hero can speak eloquently about his philosophical system.

Even more important, though, is that the Taoistic idea of the Balance of the Whole deeply informs and even determines the shape of the plot of the third novel in the series, *The Farthest Shore*. The problem in Earthsea that the heroes of *The Farthest Shore* have to contend with is the threat that “one man’s life might wreck the Balance of the Whole” (136). A wizard named Cob is trying to achieve immortality—to defeat death and live forever—and in so doing he is sapping the magical and artistic energies of everyone on earth. This manifests as a mysterious blight spreading across the archipelago, sapping energy, causing wizards and chanters and craftsmen alike to lose their arts. When someone is preventing what Le Guin above calls “the great reversals that maintain the living balance of the world,” the consequences can be profound—and

Le Guin chooses to explore them in this book intended for the children. Despite prominently featuring wizards and dragons, *The Farthest Shore* is in no small part a Taoistic meditation on balance, not trying to change the world, and accepting death.

The explicit inspiration of the *Tao Te Ching* on the composition of this novel become clear after the story's heroes, Ged and the young Prince Lebannen, decide to try to find the cause of the mysterious blight that is destroying magic and craftsmanship. They start by exploring one of these blighted lands. On the island of Lorbanery, they find that the wizards seem lunatic, the workers have lost the ability to join their voices together in song, and the secrets of fabric dyeing, for which the island is famous, are forgotten. There is certainly a disruption in "the Balance." Ged describes the symptoms: "This is evil, evil, what passes on this island: this loss of craft and pride, this joylessness, this waste. This is the work of an evil will" (87). The heroes learn that Cob is seeping into people's dreams at night, taking on a disembodied form, holding a lamp, and leading the dreamers to hunger so devoutly for immortality that they give their powers over to him.

Ged sums up this state of affairs when he asks one of the residents of the island, "Your sheds are empty, the orchards are untended, the silk in your warehouses was all woven years ago. What do you do, here in Lorbanery?" (91). Look at how closely this parallels the *Tao Te Ching's* Chapter 30:

Where the army marched
grow thorns and thistles.
After the war
come the bad harvests. (41)

Both use the same imagery of bad harvests and untended fields. The work is not being done; people are spending their energy on matters unrelated to everyday life. Of course, Lao Tzu is

writing largely through metaphor while in *The Farthest Shore* the images are understood first as literal. But in both situations people have disrupted the Way or the Balance of the Whole. When one wastes one's energies on conflict, when one turns from the Way, one forgets the true work of being alive.

Le Guin grows the details of the conflict from ideas in the *Tao Te Ching* and also specific details. Cob wreaks the damage figuratively implied by Lao Tzu ("this joylessness") and the literal damage, too: crops really are failing. Because the imagined philosophy/religion of Earthsea is uncannily similar Taoism, Le Guin is able to make plot points and details closely track other lines from the *Tao Te Ching*. The Taoist text is of a unified message and meaning—and Le Guin studied it for decades before using it in the construction of this book. This means that the details that find their way into the plot feel entirely natural and coherent within the spirit of this world. They feel true to the reader in part because of the philosophical coherence and unity of Lao Tzu's text.

V. Don't Try to Change the World

Part of what makes the world of Earthsea so interesting is that the reader gets to experience a writer grappling with big ideas and with quandaries of ethics—and can watch her work through them using a different ethical model than the Judeo-Christian one that many Western writers continue to use. This is one of the advantages that comes from exploring a pre-existing tradition—especially one somewhat outside of the mainstream—as a cornerstone to one's world-building.

A major question within both Taoism and *The Farthest Shore* is the question of action, of when it is right to act, when it's better not to, and how to know the difference. There is an idea

called *wei wu wei* (无为无) that speaks to this. In the notes to Le Guin's version of the *Tao Te Ching* she glosses *wei wu wei* as "Do not do. Doing not-doing. To act without acting. Action by inaction. You do nothing yet it gets done..." (6). Water is the epitome of *wei wu wei*. The rivers don't intend to drain into the sea. They are not acting. Without doing anything they do precisely what they must. Lao Tzu is advocating *wei wu wei* when in Chapter 2 he advises that "the wise soul / does without doing, / teaches without talking" (5). Simple people working in traditional ways also embody this trait of the Way. Lao Tzu says in Chapter 17, "When the work's done right, / with no fuss or boasting, / ordinary people say, / Oh, we did it" (24). The *Tao Te Ching* advocates acceptance, non-violence, and a yielding way—rather than struggle, opposition, imbalance.

It can be a frustrating operating philosophy for someone wanting to get things done. As such, the reader has much empathy for the character in *The Farthest Shore*, Lebannen, when he asks, "[I]s the balance to be kept by doing nothing? Surely a man must act, even not knowing all the consequences of his act, if anything is to be done at all?" (67). Ged has just freed Lebannen from a brief period of enslavement, and Lebannen can't understand why Ged as a powerful wizard did not just kill the slavers. Ged explains:

Never fear. It is much easier for men to act than to refrain from acting.... But if there were a king over us all again and he sought counsel of a mage, as in the days of old, and I were that mage, I would say to him: My lord, do nothing because it is righteous or praiseworthy or noble to do so; do nothing because it seems good to do so; do only that which you must do and which you cannot do in any other way. (67)

Ged believes not just that one should not act rashly but also that one should not act at all if one can help it. This is an allied idea to that expressed by the phrase *wei wu wei*. Ged seems to be describing the ideal Taoist king, who does not interfere unnecessarily in the affairs of his

kingdom. Again and again in the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu asserts that good leadership is quiet, receding, easily forgotten. Ged agrees, and through his actions he shows his devotion to not-doing, to *wei wu wei*.

Lao Tzu also describes the results of the opposite, how poor leadership, rash action, and failure to follow the Way is ruinous to the spirit and the earth. In Chapter 29 he writes:

Those who think to win the world
 by doing something to it,
 I see them come to grief.
 For the world is a sacred object.
 Nothing is to be done to it.
 To do anything to it is to damage it.
 To seize it is to lose it. (40)

As in the lines about “Where the army marched,” Lao Tzu here uses the language of armies and empires (“to win the world”) to communicate a point that, metaphorically, applies even to the smallest of things: a stream, an old elm tree, one’s imagination. In her commentary on the *Tao Te Ching*, Le Guin points towards this figurative meaning when she paraphrases Lao Tzu’s meaning as, “To lose the sense of the sacredness of the world is a mortal loss. To injure our world by excesses of greed and ingenuity is to endanger our own sacredness” (40).

With an eye towards history, however, we can imagine a less figurative interpretation. Individuals like Genghis Khan and bureaucracies like the British Empire have used violence to more literally “seize” the world. In *The Farthest Shore*, Cob’s attempt to defeat death by stealing the power and artistry and *joie de vivre* of all the people of Earthsea is similarly grandiose and close to the literal meaning of this passage—he literally “think[s] to win the world / by doing something to it.”

Again, the consequences of Cob's actions result in a literal acting out of the "damage" of which Lao Tzu warns. Lao Tzu writes that "To do anything to [the world] is to damage it. / To seize it is to lose it," and this is precisely the outcome that would befall Earthsea, should Lebannen and Ged fail in their quest to stop Cob. In a passage that strongly mirrors this chapter from the *Tao Te Ching*, Ged explains to Lebannen the potential consequences of choosing to change the world:

"Why should you not desire immortality? How should you not? Every soul desires it, and its health is in the strength of its desire.—But be careful; you are one who might achieve your desire."

"And then?"

"And then this: a false king ruling, the arts of man forgotten, the singer tongueless, the eye blind. This!—this blight and plague on the lands, this sore we seek to heal." (136)

Ged describes the consequences of trying to change the world: "blight and plague on the lands, this sore." Cob's greed is an attempt to upend the laws of the world, the Balance of the Whole. It is an attempt, as Lao Tzu says, "to win the world / by doing something to it." In doing something to the natural order of the world—the Balance of the Whole—Cob truly is damaging it.

Cob's chief villainy in the book, the action he takes that marks him as antagonist, is his disregarding of the Balance and failure to follow the philosophy of *wei wu wei*. He is attempting to control the machinery of mortality, and his hubris has planet-wide consequences. Lao Tzu and Le Guin agree: don't change the world. The natural cycle of life and death ought not be resisted or tampered with.

VI. Don't Fear Death

This emphasis on death—and on the temptations of immortality—is a striking feature of *The Farthest Shore*. The Earthsea series was written for and marketed to children, an audience that some writers treat with kid gloves by avoiding weighty and existential topics or treating them through metaphor. However, in an essay published in 1975 (the same year that *The Farthest Shore* was released) Le Guin, comparing the novel with the two bildungsromans that came before it in the series, explains that her subject

seemed an absolutely suitable [one] to me for young readers, since in a way one can say that the hour when a child realizes, not that death exists—children are intensely aware of death—but that he/she, personally, is mortal, will die, is the hour when childhood ends, and the new life begins. Coming of age again, but in a larger context. (*Dreams Must Explain Themselves* 13)

To realize one's own mortality is a profound insight; by knowing its bounds we understand more clearly what life really is. Put another way: without a drop of death in everyday life, life does not have its full weight, its full nature. This brings us back to the complementary nature of *yin* and *yang*—and the cyclical nature of the Way.

In his speech about the perils of trying to change the world, quoted above, Ged goes on to argue that one should not fear death. The reasons he gives are strikingly Taoistic:

There are two ... two that make one: the world and the shadow, the light and the dark. The two poles of the Balance. Life rises out of death, death rises out of life; in being opposite they yearn to each other, they give birth to each other and are forever reborn. And with them all is reborn, the flower of the apple tree, the light of the stars. In life is death. In death is rebirth. What then is life without death? Life unchanging, everlasting, eternal?—What is it but death—death without rebirth? (136)

Again, Ged explains the interpenetration of opposites and their reliance on each other—the Earthsea-specific idea of the Balance of the Whole, which closely mirrors the yin-yang. This idea that death and life “give birth to each other and are forever reborn” is a neat restatement of these lines from Chapter 52 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

The beginning of everything
is the mother of everything.
Truly to know the mother
is to know her children,
and truly to know the children
is to turn back to the mother.
The body comes to its ending
but there is nothing to fear. (67)

In discussing death, that ultimate ending, Lao Tzu emphasizes the mystery of beginning through the metaphor of a mother and her children.⁴ In place of the void stretching out to infinity, Lao Tzu finds continuity, a story that continues, a cycle. It’s a misunderstanding of the nature of time to see a mother and her children as discrete and independent units. “Truly to know the mother / is to know her children, / and truly to know the children / is to turn back to the mother.” Ged expresses a similar idea: “In life is death. In death is rebirth.”

Le Guin’s work in building the world of Earthsea is deeply guided by this Taoistic understanding of death, of its importance within life, and of their interpenetrating cycles. So she makes the character of Cob be not just a bad leader, not just a fearer of death, but worst of all a man who attempts to break the cycle of life and death and life. Ged sounds like a Taoist priest

⁴ A welcome change from the cloudy-bearded, omnisciently male creator of my childhood. Creation without giving birth? Now *that’s* fiction.

when he explains the dangers of immortality: “Life unchanging, everlasting, eternal?—What is it but death—death without rebirth?” (136).

The central theme of *The Farthest Shore* might be summarized as “Peace: to accept what must be, / to know what endures. / In that knowledge is wisdom. / Without it, ruin, disorder.” This is from Chapter 16 of the *Tao Te Ching* (22). But these lines, like much of Lao Tzu’s classic, are pithy, confidently assertive, and straight to the point. These are the *Tao Te Ching*’s strengths—and at the same moment its weaknesses. A text made of 81 short, gnomic poems does not necessarily appeal to wide swathes of young readers or of the 21st-century public at large. In *The Farthest Shore*, Le Guin transforms these questions and ideas into bold quests with world-important consequences—epic moral dilemmas acted out in grand settings—serious problems confronted by sympathetic characters.

As readers we extend our sympathy when the young prince Lebannen first grapples with the realization that he will die—and that he doesn’t want to. We understand why he flirts with joining Cob’s quest for immortality, asking Ged, “If I love life, shall I not hate the end of it? Why should I not desire immortality?” (136). Lebannen is not yet ready “to accept what must be,” and he is on the brink of making a very bad choice. But we feel his pain, in part because Le Guin has already let us see how much Lebannen does “love life.” We don’t want him to die.

We read closely when, by way of answering Lebannen’s question, Ged explains why he himself is not tempted by Cob:

I, who am old, who have done what I must do, who stand in the daylight facing my own death, the end of all possibility, I know that there is only one power that is real and worth the having. And that is the power, not to take, but to accept. (138)

The experience of reading this speech—a retold Taoist homily—is transformed by the dramatic situation. Two men, one older and one younger, are alone on a small boat. They float on the open sea, looking across the sea at a distant island with scorched fields and burned towns. They are far indeed from solving their quest and saving the world, though the experienced reader of fantasy novels knows they will probably succeed. At the moment, the younger character, a child really, is plagued by fear of death. He is tempted to turn against the Balance of the Whole and try to live forever. So they talk.

By dramatizing questions from the *Tao Te Ching*, Le Guin ends up telling an exciting story. She holistically incorporates this ancient, philosophical interrogation of the fear of death and the desire to change the world into a fantastical story meant foremost to be read by older children. And it works. Many fantasy elements of the story—magic losing its potency, the speeches of Ged, a quest for immortality that threatens the whole world—spring from specific lines from the *Tao Te Ching*. While Lao Tzu’s poems are often koan-like and difficult to understand, they become more tangible in *The Farthest Shore*. Cob not only “think[s] to win the world,” he’s near victory. The fields that “grow thorns and thistles” when the people have strayed from the Way are real—they’re untended pear orchards in Lorbanery. Because readers spend so much time with Ged, it has an elevated meaning when he says that his power is “to accept.”

Part of the power of these books is Le Guin’s transformation of Lao Tzu’s teaching through story and character. Reading these books, children and adults alike find themselves engaging with Taoist principles of non-violence, of resisting greed and over-ambition, of accepting cycles, and of choosing not to worry too much about death. This use of story to explore moral and ethical problems is one reason why writers write and readers read. Often we can more powerfully speak to such questions by weaving a world and story around it.

It runs the other way, too. If we have something powerful to say, that can guide us as writers while we undertake to weave the world and plot itself. By tackling questions of mortality through the lens of Taoism, Le Guin had a strong guide as she set about building the world and the plot of *The Farthest Shore*.

I don't want to over-emphasize the Taoistic elements of *The Farthest Shore*. It is not a book-length parable; there are other influences.⁵ And Le Guin even makes room for some gentle criticism of Lao Tzu when she has Lebannen complain in his head about Ged, "Always his answers were grudging, hard to understand. There ... lay the very heart of wizardry: to hint at mighty meanings while saying nothing at all, and to make doing nothing at all seem the very crown of wisdom" (99). This is a necessary bit of humor for a book full of long conversations that border on lectures from Ged. It also acknowledges a more universal truth: what one does not understand often seems ridiculous. This recalls how in Chapter 41 Lao Tzu says, "It wouldn't be the Way / if there weren't jokes about it" (56).

It also wouldn't be the Way if one understood it the same way for one's whole life—if one's understanding didn't shift and deepen over time. Times change, people grow, and what had hitherto been a writer's greatest accomplishment, a great fantasy story inspired in part by the *Tao Te Ching*, can come to seem filled with its own flaws. Interviewed forty years after the publication of the initial trilogy of Earthsea books, Le Guin says,

I had been writing like a man. I was writing adventure fantasy in a grand old tradition, and it was all about men and what men did. I just needed to write like a woman, write *as* a woman. I was learning how to write as a woman in *Tehanu*, and it was very important

⁵ Another strand, for instance, comes in echoes of the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. This finds stirring culmination in Lebannen's final challenge, when he has to carry Ged's lifeless back across the "Mountains of Pain" that form the boundary of the dead lands (176). This seems a direct echo of the tenth and last of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: "He climbs the mountains of primal pain alone. / And not once does his step ring from that mute fate" (77).

to me to do so, to me personally, and for moral justice. I had been unjust to women in the books. (“The Story’s Where I Go”)

Seeking in part to remedy this bias, Le Guin returned to the Earthsea series after eighteen years’ hiatus with *Tehanu*, which is told entirely from the point of view of a middle-aged woman and her young adopted daughter as they navigate the misogynistic world of Earthsea. It’s probably the best novel in the series, and it is markedly less dogmatically Taoist than the first three books. So long as it served her, Le Guin used the *Tao Te Ching* to assist her in making the world and plots of these books. When the plot of *Tehanu* concerns a question conspicuously un-addressed in the *Tao Te Ching*—how does a wise and independent woman get by in a world that is designed at many turns to oppress and ignore women—she turns to other sources. The great writer only steals what is worth stealing.

Perhaps the most important thing to observe here is that in these books Le Guin deeply engages with wider philosophical questions and traditions. Over decades, her wide reading and sustained inquiry into Taoism influenced the creation of these books and helped to make their world feel more cohesive. We can say confidently that if Ursula K. Le Guin had never read Lao Tzu’s book, she would never have created this world the way that she did. It provided a key scaffold for the religion in the books and even for parts of the early books’ plots. In the later books Le Guin even criticized aspects of Taoism.

The novella “The Finder,” first published in 2001, even contains a mad wizard named Gelluk who is trying to achieve immortality by mining and ingesting mercury, conspicuously mirroring several ancient Taoist traditions of alchemy—and not in a good way. Gelluk tells Otter, the story’s poor enslaved protagonist,

‘Watch what I do.’ Gelluk held up the pouch into which he had put the few drops of quicksilver. His eye always on Otter’s eye, he unsealed the pouch, lifted it to his lips, and

drank its contents. He opened his smiling mouth so that Otter could see the silver drops pooling on his tongue before he swallowed.

‘Now the King is in my body, the noble guest of my house. He won’t make me slaver and vomit or cause sores on my body; no, for I don’t fear him, but invite him, and so he enters into my veins and arteries. No harm comes to me. My blood runs silver. I see things unknown to other men. I share the secrets of the King. And when he leaves me, he hides in the place of ordure, in foulness itself, and yet again in the vile place he waits for me to come and take him up and cleanse him as he cleansed me, so that each time we grow purer together.’ The wizard took Otter’s arm and walked along with him. He said, smiling and confidential, ‘I am one who shits moonlight. You will not know another such. And more than that, the King enters into my see. He is my semen. I am Turre and he is me...’ (*Tales From Earthsea* 24-25)

Gelluk, with his talk of shit and semen, is a wild character in a story intended at least in some way to be read by young adults. But he also is specifically Taoist—based on the Great Clarity movement in Taoism that flourished in southern China starting in the 3rd century C.E. This practice focused centrally “on attaining transcendence through external alchemy”:

In external alchemy, which practitioners claimed to be superior to the self-cultivation practices of other groups, ingredients were combined in an alchemical furnace and refined to produce a pill guaranteeing transcendence. Over time, however, it became clear that the combination of ingredients (including mercury) was often lethal: many who ingested the so-called elixir of immortality actually died of elixir poisoning. (Robson 58)

Thirty-three years after beginning the Earthsea series, Le Guin still deeply engages with Taoism to generate a new novella.

Le Guin does not create propaganda for Lao Tzu; for her, his writings are not a “pill guaranteeing transcendence,” artistic or otherwise. Instead, it’s a tradition in which Le Guin finds much to admire, some to criticize—and quite a lot to steal.

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