

“Only in Dying Life”: Ursula K. Le Guin’s Dry Land and Its Cultural Contestations

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Abstract

In his seminal essay theorizing the concept of heterotopia, “Of Other Spaces”, Michel Foucault insists that his main focus is on external spaces. However, given the ability of certain spaces, especially those associated with trauma and torment, to simultaneously be inhabited and inhabit the psyches of their denizens, it stands to reason that some heterotopic spaces are internal as well. One such example is Ursula K. Le Guin’s Dry Land, an inner hellscape which appears throughout her Earthsea series. The Dry Land serves to mirror, invert, and contest not only the world of Earthsea, but also the pervasiveness of Western literary and cultural influences on the genre of fantasy itself. Inspired by classical and Renaissance sources (Homer and Dante) and modernist ones (Rainer Maria Rilke and T. S. Eliot), the Dry Land, a jarring spatial and literary aberration in the context of Earthsea’s Taoist framework, serves to confront both the resistance to the finality of death and the supremacy of the Western literary canon. In doing so, it demonstrates Le Guin’s desire to distance herself from Western canonical influences, while nevertheless highlighting the fact that, given the cyclicity of literary rebellion, she is, in fact, walking in Dante’s and T. S. Eliot’s shoes.

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In “Of Other Spaces”, Michel Foucault prefaces his classification of spaces with a note on the work of Gaston Bachelard and other phenomenologists, who, in Foucault’s words, “have taught us that we do not live in a homogeneous or empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps fantasmatic as well” (1986: 23). However, he concludes, while these analyses are “fundamental for reflection in our time, [they] primarily concern internal space” (23). By contrast, Foucault’s main focus in this essay is “external space” (23). The question rises, of course, whether the heterotopias he defines as real spaces which exist “outside of all places” and which are “absolutely different from

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all the sites they reflect and speak about” (24) can be considered unambiguously external. For example, external spaces like libraries and museums, which occupy physical spaces and house collections of physical artifacts, also function as loci of cultural preservation and memory, conserving not only the products of a particular era and/or location, but also, ideally, its spirit and worldview. Also, in cases where no physical relics of a culture exist to be placed in the external space of a museum, a culture can continue to exist within those who have experienced it, becoming, of course, more diluted with every generation, as experience is replaced with its reconstructions. Or, in the case of oral cultures which produce few physical artifacts of importance, the culture lives exclusively within its members, so that its museums are, in fact, housed in human minds. In a grimmer example, concentration camps begin as external spaces for their prisoners, but in time the relationship between inhabitant and inhabited space becomes ambiguous and even reversed: while at first the prisoners are the inhabitants and the concentration camp the inhabited space, after a while the concentration camp starts inhabiting the prisoners. Even after the physical, external space of a concentration camp is destroyed and perhaps replaced so that no trace is left, it continues to live in its former prisoners, a dark space of fear, torment, and hopelessness. It is thus possible that ‘other spaces’ exist internally as well – as psychological representations of physical worlds, as Hells or Heavens, or as mysterious spaces which are the exclusive domain of the imagination.

Among the darker heterotopias postulated by Foucault are the cemetery, which he considers a “highly heterotopic place” and an example of “the other city” (1986: 25), the prison, and, according to Elana Gomel, the concentration camp (2014: 21). Dehaene and De Cauter note that “[f]rom military camps via refugee camps and from labour camps to detention centres and secret prisons, the camp is the grimmest symptom of a postcivil urbanism, which follows the disintegration of the state” (2008: 5), yet argue that heterotopia “is the opposite of the camp” (5). It is difficult to see how this could be the case, considering that camps fit neatly within the description of Foucault’s heterotopia of deviation: they are ‘other spaces’ removed from the heart of the city, just like contemporary cemeteries, and inspire disgust and fear of illness and contamination. As argued above, although such heterotopias are external, they also insidiously occupy an internal space as well, becoming difficult or impossible to dislodge from the psyches and imaginations of those who experienced them.

From the depths of the imagination come the 'alternative worlds' of the fantasy genre (a term coined by Hunt and Lenz), which are, by dint of their fictional nature, "secondary worlds," as J.R.R. Tolkien explains: "What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter" (Tolkien 1964: 36, cited in Hunt 2001: 14). In other words, these fictional worlds are spaces of ideas¹, accessible only to the mind and only through the suspension of disbelief, and therefore not only 'secondary,' but also 'other'. Tolkien's Middle Earth, Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea and Western Shore, Terry Pratchett's Discworld, Terry Brooks' Shannara, or Philip Pullman's multiverse are examples of such secondary worlds. To further complicate matters, however, some of these worlds include alternative spaces of their own: tertiary worlds, perhaps, which are also spaces of ideas and which frequently function as a more evident representation of mental spaces than their shell worlds. Often, as is the case with Le Guin's Dry Land, Brooks' Forbidding, or Pullman's World of the Dead, they are dystopian spaces which fit the criteria of Foucault's dark heterotopias as listed above: concentration camps for tormented souls (the Dry Land and the World of the Dead) or Pandora's boxes containing (in both senses of the word) an infinite number of monstrous beings (the Forbidding).

Le Guin's Dry Land, an underworld/otherworld within the Earthsea universe where the souls of the dead, stripped of either joy or pain, languish in a state of eternal stagnation, is perhaps the most complex of the dark heterotopias enumerated above, given that it functions on two highly abstract levels. As a world-within-a-world, it is simultaneously a representation and an inversion of Earthsea itself (Foucault's mirror²), a spacetime anomaly, a disruption of the life-death-rebirth cycle, a perversion of magic, and a closed space which can only be accessed by those who meet special conditions (Foucault's heterotopia of deviation³). On the metaliterary and metacultural level, its otherness is even more evident, for the Dry Land as a notion is woven out of numerous Western literary strands, which places it in stark contrast with the Taoist architecture of the Earthsea world. As such, it functions as a covert critique of the Western (Classical and Christian) idea of an afterlife, and of the perceived supremacy of the Western literary and philosophical canon.

Although the Dry Land is introduced as early as the first book in the Earthsea series and features prominently in the third, an exact explanation of its origins does not come until the sixth and final book, *The Other Wind*,

in which it is revealed that human envy of the dragons' realm, which the latter were able to access in both body and soul, led human mages to create an artificial enclosure in "the west beyond the west" (Le Guin 2001: 227), protected by a stone wall which no one could cross – human or dragon – as the transgressors feared the wrath of the dragons. However, the endeavour has an unexpected effect: "But as the wall was built and the spell laid, the wind ceased to blow, within the wall. The sea withdrew. The springs ceased to run. [...] Those that died came to a dark land, a dry land" (227-228). The implication is that immortality is an indivisible part of the natural cycle of life and the condition of living on is to become part of everything else. Any attempt to preserve the self against the laws of nature leads to an anomalous admixing of states. The result is not eternal life, but a state of suspension between life and death, which Le Guin does not directly name, but which could be considered a form of undeath.

It is important to note here that the Dry Land does not occupy a physical space, but an inner one, which can only be crossed in the mind and from which only powerful mages or those under their protection may return. Although not every incursion into the Dry Land, of which there are many throughout the series, takes place in a dream, Le Guin makes it clear that the travellers' bodies remain outside of its boundaries, and that only their minds (or souls) can cross the low stone wall. Every journey undertaken by a living being into the Dry Land is a journey into a dark part of the mind in which the self is confronted with its fears of death and dissolution, but also with the tragic consequences of a culture's inability to accept the finality of the self as it joins, transformed, the cycle of rebirth.

As per Foucault's definition, the Dry Land functions as both a representation and an inversion of the living world throughout most of the series, before its second opposite, 'the other wind' (the dragons' mysterious and infinite chronotope) even comes into play. On the one hand, its landscapes are filled with villages and cities populated by the shadows of those who once lived, which creates the illusion of uninterrupted normalcy and community, of a recognizably human realm. Yet, at the same time, its very name is antithetical to that of the living world – the Dry Land versus Earthsea – and its features reflect both literal and metaphorical inversions: whereas Earthsea is an archipelago world, both surrounded and crossed by water, the Dry Land's streams and rivers are dust; while in Earthsea, journeys over water lead to great personal transformation, in the Dry Land there are no journeys, no actions, and no changes – only stagnation. The

road towards the light, which passes through the Mountains of Pain, is forbidden to the dead, who have no journeys left to undertake.

A clear indication of this inert state lies in the fact that the stars are also strange here – different, few, and fixed, marking the fact that time is frozen: “Unmoving they shone, unwinking. They were those stars that do not rise or set, nor are they ever hidden by any cloud, nor does any sunrise dim them” (Le Guin 2012: 220). This suggests that the Dry Land is a spacetime anomaly, for one, but also that it is part of another universe. After all, these are not unmoving versions of Earthsea’s stars, but different ones altogether, and it is implied that everything existing here suffers under an ill-boding star – a pronouncement of adversity and misfortune rather than an omen, since there is no future to foretell in this place.

As a result of the stillness of time, nothing happens anymore to those who enter it to stay. Even the mage Cob, whose irresponsible use of magic opens the door between the human world and the realm of undeath in *The Farthest Shore*, the third book in the series, despairs that the space “draws” him and “sucks at” him, and that inside it he is deprived of agency (Le Guin 2012: 231): “I must go through it and come back here, into the dust and cold and silence. [...] I cannot leave it. I cannot close it” (231). This is due to the fact that, in his pursuit of immortality, Cob (whose name suggests either a dry husk or a spider’s cobweb) has lost his place in the natural order of things and now exists “between the worlds”, where there is neither life nor death (229). As Ged explains during their last confrontation, “you sold the green earth and the sun and stars to save yourself. But you have no self. All that which you sold, that is yourself. You have given everything for nothing” (231). To put it another way, had he done nothing (in good Taoist spirit) and allowed himself to stay part of the cycle, he would have become one with the earth, the sun, and the stars upon his death instead of being stuck in this nightmare. Not coincidentally, Cob is physically blind, having gouged his eyes out, and, more importantly, metaphorically blind to what truly matters and to the consequences of his actions. The result of this foolish, Faustian bargain is a sense of devouring emptiness which not even the entirety of the living universe could possibly fill and satisfy. Although he appears to wield enormous power, he is, in fact, prisoner to the Dry Land; he cannot transcend his condition or gain control over it because he is part of a frozen timespace ‘bubble’ where becoming is inconceivable. Ironically, he who

imagined himself master of this heterotopia of deviation has become its impotent slave.

This is a place of negation and passivity for its dwellers, the opposite of the life-death-rebirth cycle, which is in permanent motion and allows for the existence of free will and action. Accordingly, the inhabitants of the Dry Land are devoid of desire, of song, of craft, of magic, and of the ability to recognize those they once knew and loved: they stand with “quiet faces and empty hands” (220); they are “healed from pain and life”, “freed from anger and desire” (221) and empty of hope; the markets are empty and still, as there is “no buying and selling here, no gaining and spending. Nothing was used, nothing was made” (220); “the potter’s wheel was still, the loom empty, the stove cold” (221); “no voice ever sang” (221); mothers and children, star-crossed lovers, all pass indifferently and silently by each other. This inversion of the living world clearly has a corrupting effect on language as well, inverting the established meanings of words and turning healing and freedom, respectively, into a disease of the soul and inescapable captivity.

In addition, deep in the Mountains of Pain, hides the abomination through which life and light and magic are being sucked into the Dry Land, the door between worlds which Cob has opened. This is a “dry, dark springhead, the mouth of dust, the place where a dead soul, crawling into earth and darkness, was born again dead” (234), a grotesque, obscene inversion of Earthsea’s origin story, in which life rises out of the waters, and of the process of human life itself: that which is born from the water of the womb stretches towards the light and away from the earth in which it will be buried. This inversion signals the fact that the Dry Land is a festering wound and a destabilizing fracture in the fabric of the universe, which, if not mended, will extinguish all life.

The closing of the door between the two worlds at the end of the third novel temporarily fixes an immediate problem but does not address the fundamental ‘wrongness’ of this aberrant slice of spacetime, which is situated ‘elsewhere’ and functions in frozen time. Its continued existence points to the fact that, even though various other conflicts and disruptions are resolved in the course of the series, the world of Earthsea is never free from its malignant influence. As a medical term, ‘heterotopia’ refers to the abnormal growth of tissue in atypical places, which therefore invites the comparison between the Dry Land and a metastasizing cancer which, in the final novel of the series, begins to spread to the world of the living.

Consequently, the destruction of the Dry Land in *The Other Wind* suggests that the mending of the world and the restoration of its natural processes and cycles can now begin in earnest.

If, on one level, the concept of heterotopia is used to explore anxieties surrounding death and the dissolution of the self, on another it serves as an opportunity to question the supremacy of Western literary and philosophical influences, as they apply to the understanding of death and to the construction of the fantasy genre. In order to grasp why the Dry Land is 'other' from this point of view, we must understand Earthsea's default framework first. According to Nora Gallagher (cited in Lindow 2012: 41), Le Guin has defined herself as "an inconsistent Taoist and a consistent unchristian". Lindow notes that "[a]s a Taoist, she does not recognize a conventional God, but mythology and deity are everywhere" in her work⁴, "revealing her own attempts to make symbolic sense of the world" (41). Accordingly, the universe of Earthsea is built on a foundation of Taoist thought. It has no gods, with the exception of the Kargish pantheon, part of which is harshly contested in the second novel, *The Tombs of Atuan* (the Old Ones), and the rest largely irrelevant (the younger gods). Its governing principle is the Equilibrium, a delicate balance which is evident in the name of the realm itself (earth and sea), which implies a "balance of the powers of the physical landscape" (Cummins 1990: 25), and which is invoked in *The Creation of Éa*: "Only in silence the word, / Only in dark the light, / Only in dying life: Bright the hawk's flight / On the empty sky". Fertile silence and fertilizing word, darkness and light, death and life, movement and stillness, although opposites, are sides of the same coin, inextricably bound to each other in "a cosmic balance" (Cummins 1990: 25). Beyond this, there is an understanding that magic must be used wisely, in accordance with the fact that for every action, there is a reaction. This is why Ged's summoning of the Shadow in the first novel or Cob's attempt to control the realm of undeath in the third have disastrous consequences not only for themselves, but for the entire world of Earthsea. As Elizabeth Cummins points out, the "principle of balanced powers, the recognition that every act affects self, society, world, and cosmos, is both a physical and a moral principle of Le Guin's fantasy world" (26).

Although the concept of Equilibrium is introduced in the first book of the series, it is the third book which provides a clarification of the natural relationship between life and death in the context of the Earthsea universe – the same book which documents Ged and Arren's journey across the Dry

Land. As the Archmage Ged explains to young prince Arren prior to their descent into the otherworld, “[d]eath and life are the same thing – the two like the two sides of my hand, the palm and the back. And still the palm and the back are not the same ... They can be neither separated, nor mixed” (Le Guin 2012: 95). The creation of the Dry Land enforces this unnatural separation, segregating the living and the dead, and preventing the latter from accessing the natural cycle of existence. At the same time, the opening of a hole in the world through which the sea and the light are leaking out (197) and which allows the magic of Earthsea to be siphoned into the Dry Land, represents the forbidden mixing, which, if left unattended, will turn the entirety of the world into a husk. “There are two, Arren, two which make one: the world and the shadow, the light and the dark” (174), the Archmage continues, adding:

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? (174).

Arren’s follow-up question points to an erroneous, hierarchical understanding of the world: “Who allows? Who forbids?” (174), and while Ged admits that he does not know, the correct answer is ‘no one’ – there is no supreme being ruling over Earthsea. The Equilibrium creates a state in which the cycle takes place naturally in the absence of tampering. It is precisely this human interference, in its arrogance and irresponsibility, which led to the creation of the Dry Land following the divergence of man and dragon, eons ago, and which the mage Cob exploits in his quest for immortality. Eventually, though, perhaps working through humans and dragons, the Equilibrium restores Earthsea to its naturally harmonious state in the final book.

Against this framework of Taoist thought, the fact that the Dry Land is woven out of various Western influences is unsettling. Among these influences are the ancient Greek concept of Hades, Dante’s *Inferno*, Rilke’s ‘Land of Pain’ described in his tenth Duino elegy, and T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” and “The Hollow Men”. This is not a matter of interpretation, as Le Guin herself, in a February 9, 2004 interview with *The Guardian*, writes:

The dark, dry, changeless world after death of Earthsea comes (in so far as I am conscious of its sources) from the Greco-Roman idea of Hades' realm, from certain images in Dante, and from one of Rilke's Elegies. A realm of shadow, dust, where nothing changes and "lovers pass each other in silence" - it seems a fairly common way of thinking about what personal existence after death would be, not a specifically modern one.

The Greco-Roman source that Le Guin refers to is Homer's *Odyssey*, and, in particular, Book XI, which documents Odysseus' journey into the underworld and his encounters with several souls. Undoubtedly, the image of Odysseus' ship reaching "the limits of the world" (Homer XI.2), repeated in *The Farthest Shore* as "the end of earth" (Le Guin 2012: 214) and "the last shore of the world" (216), is what inspired the title of the novel. The "certain images in Dante" come from the *Inferno*, and particularly Cantos I, III and XXXIV: the landscape, the descriptions of the torments endured by the souls of the damned, and the descent and re-emergence of Dante and Vergil, figures mirrored and inverted by Ged and Arren. While at the conclusion of the *Inferno* Vergil carries Dante out of Hell, in Le Guin's novel, prince Arren carries the Archmage, now drained of his powers, out of the Dry Land. Rather than reaffirming the strength of tradition, signified by the master, this episode marks the beginning of a transition of power: as the magic star of the Archmage sets, the secular one of the future King in Havnor rises. The specific Duino Elegy is most likely the tenth and final one, which provides a close equivalent to the Mountains of Pain, including the name, as it documents a young man's incursion into the land of the Keening/Lament people, and also supplies inspiration for the pebble which Arren finds in his pocket at the end of his journey through Hell and which serves as a reminder of the terrible weight of this place upon the world. Finally, the one source which Le Guin does not mention, but whose influence is evident, is T. S. Eliot, via two of his poems of the 1920s, namely "The Wasteland" and "The Hollow Men"; the latter, in particular, has most likely provided inspiration for the emptiness and paralysis of the souls trapped in the Dry Land.

The detached figures which "pass each other in silence", devoid of any human emotion or connection, are an important thread which passes through Homer, Dante and Eliot. The beginning of this thread can be traced to Odysseus' encounter with Achilles, who asks why the son of Laertes has descended among "the senseless dead, the phantoms of men outworn"

(Homer: XI.44), implying that the dead are now but shadows of themselves, perhaps remembered by others, but lacking any agency and will of their own. Although he has not been reduced to a gibbering apparition, Achilles admits that he no longer is a “champion under the sun, so mighty a man as once I was” (XI.47).

The thread continues through the *Inferno*, to a place where “sighs, with lamentations and loud moans, / Resounded through the air pierced by no star” (Dante: III.21-22). Of particular interest is the starless air, an image reminiscent of the Dry Land’s few immobile stars or of the direct reference to “this starless space” (Le Guin 2012: 223). Here we encounter “the wretched souls of those, who lived / Without or praise or blame, with that ill band / Of angels mix’d, who nor rebellious proved, / Nor yet were true to God, but for themselves / Were only” (III.34-38) – that is, those who passed through life indifferently, neither faithful nor resistant to Dante’s God, barren of passion and conviction. This is the state Le Guin chooses for all the denizens of the Dry Land, as a sign that she considers the absence of will and desire a worse fate than eternal torment.

Lastly, the thread passes through T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”, perhaps the most evident (and strangely unacknowledged) influence, reflected in the construction of both landscape and shades – symptomatic for the twentieth century. As far as the setting is concerned, Le Guin’s barren, desiccated, cold space echoes Eliot’s “death’s dream kingdom” (20), “twilight kingdom” (38), “dead land” (39) – perhaps the most overt reference, “cactus land” (40), “hollow valley” (55), and “broken jaw of our lost kingdoms” (56), lit only by “the twinkle of a fading star” (44). The name of the Dry Land appears to be a combination of “the dead land” and “the cactus land”, both in terms of meaning (cactus – dry) and sound (dead – dry). There is, of course, the insistence on “dried voices” (5) and “wind in dry grass” (8), and, once again, a reference to a pallid star – perhaps Eliot’s own allusion to Dante’s *Inferno*, given the similarities between the figures populating their respective Hells. Eliot expands Dante’s description of the inert souls via “hollow men” (1), “stuffed men” (2) with “quiet and meaningless” (7) voices who “avoid speech” (59) because they are incapable of mustering any passion for or any opposition to anything. After all, they are not “lost / Violent souls” (15-16), but “[s]hape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion” (11-12), incarnations of emptiness and inertia. As a nod to Homer, perhaps, Eliot’s hollow men are “[g]athered on this beach of the tumid river” (60), like the

senseless dead deposited by Charon at the end of the earth. Similarly, Le Guin's dead have "quiet faces and empty hands" (2012: 220) and "there was in their shadowed eyes no hope" (221), suggesting both the absence of thought and emotion, and the abandonment, in Dantesque fashion, of all faith. More devastating than the disillusionment which both Dante and Eliot expressed towards their respective ages and towards indifference and indecisiveness is Le Guin's depiction of broken connections, and especially of those which are meant to endure the vagaries of time:

the mother and the child who died together, and they were in the dark land together; but the child did not run, nor did it cry, and the mother did not hold it or ever look at it. And those who had died for love passed each other in the streets (221).

Given both the unmistakable presence of these sources of inspiration, which pass from the Classical Antiquity through the Renaissance, Romanticism, and Modernism, as well as Le Guin's acknowledgment of her deliberate choices in this matter, the Dry Land becomes striking in its "wrongness" within the philosophical context of the Earthsea universe. As Mike Cadden correctly points out, the Dry Land, having been shaped by Western literary influences, stands in stark contrast to Earthsea's concept of Equilibrium, which casts life and death as sides of the same coin and which is Taoist in nature and congruous with Le Guin's own philosophical leanings. Cadden goes as far as to qualify the Western model of the Dry Land as "another trap or influence of tradition" (2005: 181). The implication of this assertion is that Le Guin, a voracious reader of Western literature and a scholar of medieval French poetry, may have walked unwittingly into the trap of familiar tropes.

Considering the lucidity with which she analyses the ways in which the first novel of the series, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, published in 1968, walks a fine line between fitting into the canonical framework of the fantasy genre, largely defined by Tolkien at that point in time, and subtly subverting the genre's assumptions about the age and race of wizards, gender stereotypes, and the nature of the conflicts a fantasy novel should depict, it is very difficult to believe that Le Guin blindly walked into an influence trap. She admits to ensuring that her novel was "conventional enough not to frighten reviewers" (2018: 128) while being a new and original kind of work. Thus, the imagery of the Dry Land is more likely to have been designed to function as a double-edged sword, meant to simultaneously induce a sense

of familiarity in her readers, many of whom would have undoubtedly been able to recognize classical allusions, and to very subtly question the undisputed supremacy of Western literary influences upon the fantasy genre. While some of today's most celebrated fantasy writers, like Andrzej Sapkowski or Nnedi Okorafor, draw freely on culturally marginalized traditions, this was certainly not the case in 1967, when Le Guin began writing *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and thus her decision to create a space which is 'other' due to its familiar Western-ness, rather than due to its exoticism, comes across as an audaciously defiant gesture. The re-emergence of the Dry Land in the sixth book, *The Other Wind*, published in 2001, and its consequent destruction, could also be interpreted as a message to her Western readers: by this point in time, Le Guin had acquired considerable clout as a highly literary science fiction and fantasy writer, and she may have decided, in her usual irreverent, no-nonsense manner, that she was done catering to old-fashioned expectations.

A third and somewhat bold possible interpretation of the Dry Land as a heterotopic space comes from the realm of geopolitics. While Le Guin used the Afterwords to her novels to engage extensively with her texts and their literary and theoretical politics⁵, she did not provide, to my knowledge, a political interpretation of the low stone wall. After all, the separation of otherworldly realms from human ones is an established literary trope which facilitates the undertaking of inner journeys; the mind, with its personal Heavens and Hells, is an impenetrable bastion. However, taking into account Le Guin's deep understanding of Eastern-European history and politics, as evidenced by her *Orsinian* series (*Orsinian Tales*, *Malafrena*, and "Unlocking the Air"), there is perhaps an unacknowledged political dimension of the Dry Land, focusing on its function as a heterotopia of deviance. The stone wall could be an oblique reference to the Berlin Wall, while the isolation and stagnation of the entire realm may be an allusion to the cultural and socio-economic stasis which the region endured for five decades, separated from the rest of Europe. The destruction of the wall, which comes to pass only after the various Earthsea factions agree to work together, involves a physical dislodging of the stones rather than a magical dissolution, and is strongly reminiscent of the way Berliners chipped away at their own wall with hammers and chisels on the night of November 9, 1989. In the absence of more evidence, this interpretation remains purely speculative, although it is relevant that *The Other Wind* was published in 2001, long after the initial trilogy, and

following “Unlocking the Air” (first published in 1990), Le Guin’s last Orsinian tale, in which she explores the Orsinian version of a 1989 velvet revolution. Le Guin never returned to Orsinia to delve into its transition period, but it is possible that the matter continued to preoccupy her.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Le Guin was certainly not the only writer who drew on canonical Western sources when constructing a land of the (un)dead, although her ability to design a heterotopic space which operates on multiple levels remains unmatched. Philip Pullman’s version is remarkably similar, although nowhere near as jarring in its context given that his *His Dark Materials* trilogy is a subversive retelling of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. According to Richard Butler, who interviewed Pullman at length, *His Dark Materials* “has its origins in the writings of Milton, Blake and Kleist” (2007), although Pullman taught Homer extensively in the past and is unlikely to not have been influenced by the ancient poet’s depiction of the afterworld. Considering that Pullman’s trilogy was published between 1995-2000, two decades after the first *Earthsea* trilogy, it is also possible that he drew some inspiration from Le Guin’s work, despite his avowed disinterest in fantasy (Fried).

Beyond the similarities between the Dry Land and the World of the Dead, both *Earthsea* and *His Dark Materials* contest the classical and Christian frameworks which traditionally have informed the fantasy genre, opting instead for non-Western philosophical influences (Le Guin’s Taoist universe), or for a radical, jubilantly ‘heretical’, revision of Judeo-Christian thought (Pullman’s republic of Heaven). In recent years, other fantasy and speculative fiction writers, like Nnedi Okorafor, have been envisioning futuristic and post-apocalyptic worlds which take their inspiration from African cosmology, mythology, and folklore in a manner which mostly bypasses Western templates. While Tolkien’s writings, drawing on the trauma of the two world wars and the anxieties surrounding rapid modernization, echo and embrace the Anglo-Saxon nostalgia over the inexorable passing of an age, the works of these late 20th/early 21st century fantasy writers mirror the disillusionment of now-canonical authors like Dante Alighieri and T. S. Eliot with the failings of their respective ages and demonstrate a desire to leave behind the ‘wastelands’ of a depleted past. As they engage critically with the genre, questioning and subverting its canonical literary, religious, philosophical, and cultural underpinnings, they look ahead with joy, rather than wistfulness, to a future shaped by a more diverse set of influences. The irony, of course, is that the act of

distancing oneself from a particular tradition is not new in itself, but rather part of the cyclicity of literature and art in general.

Notes

1. Hunt proposes a different definition for “places of ideas” (2001: 13), by distinguishing between mappable worlds, which can exist in and of themselves, and whose existence can be presumed to both precede and outlast the events of a particular narrative, and worlds which “spring up, as it were, when they are needed by the action” (12), “spaces for action and allegory” (12) which do not have “a separate existence” (13). It is the latter which he describes as “places of ideas”, although perhaps a more precise designation would be ‘dynamic’ spaces. After all, both types of spaces belong firmly to the realm of the mind due to their fictionality, regardless of their ability to come across as three-dimensional.
2. Foucault defines heterotopias as spaces “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (1986: 24). As far as the mirror is concerned, he notes that although it is a real site, “it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy” (24) which serves to substantiate presence in the physical world by means of the illusion of presence (“shadow”) created in the virtual space of the mirror. Paradoxically, one can only see oneself by examining one’s ethereal, intangible double produced in the depths of the mirror, and, following its gaze, return to oneself. This is highly reminiscent of the four verses from *The Creation of Éa*, Earthsea’s oldest song, which preface the first and fourth of the *Earthsea* novels: “Only in silence the word, / Only in dark the light, / Only in dying life: Bright the hawk’s flight / On the empty sky”. As Darko Suvin notes, the poem encapsulates the Taoist duality of the world of Earthsea. However, he also argues for “an order of preference in each verse which one suspects may harbour a hierarchy” (2006|: 489). This interpretation contradicts Le Guin’s own disavowal of a hierarchical universe and relies on an understanding of “in” as “from”, which the text does not justify. On the contrary, the preposition “in” serves to highlight the contrast between the elements of each pair and to imply that absence enhances presence, just like the act of dying amplifies the intensity of living.
3. Foucault explains that “[h]eterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place” (1986: 26). In the case of heterotopias of deviation, exit is also tightly regulated.
4. Lindow refers here to Le Guin’s poetry specifically, but the assertion can be fairly applied to her science fiction and fantasy as well.
5. Also see Le Guin’s 1992 lecture “Children, Women, Men, Dragons,” later printed as “*Earthsea Revisited*”.

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