The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright

Euan Monaghan
Ursula K. Le Guin on Racism, Anarchy, and Hearing Her Characters Speak
“Like Joan of Arc, I’m hearing voices!”
April 1, 2016

Retrieved on 9th September 2020 from https://lithub.com/ursula-k-le-guin-on-racism-anarchy-and-hearing-her-characters-speak/

This interview originally appeared in Issue 14 of Structo Magazine.

theanarchistlibrary.org

Ursula K. Le Guin on Racism, Anarchy, and Hearing Her Characters Speak

“Like Joan of Arc, I’m hearing voices!”

Euan Monaghan

April 1, 2016

It’s not hard to see why Ursula K. Le Guin is best known for her early novels. In the space of six years came *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) and *The Dispossessed* (1974). These books and many others—including *Lavinia* (2008), an astonishing take on Virgil’s Aeneid—have been a steady influence on authors of the imagination, notably Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, David Mitchell, Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith, who said that “Le Guin writes as well as any non-‘genre’ writer alive.” We talked at Le Guin’s home in Portland, Oregon.

Euan Monaghan: *Lavinia* was your most recent novel. It’s an interesting book to come at this point in your career. I’m interested to know how it came about.

Ursula Le Guin: I’m not sure how it came about. Okay: I’m reading the *Aeneid* in Latin very, very, very slowly, with my

high school Latin revived as best as I could; sort of chewing my way through. On about the third page of [*Lavinia*], Lavinia begins talking—"I don't know who I am. I know who I was," you know? That paragraph just came and I wrote it down. Like Joan of Arc, I'm hearing voices! I knew who it was, but not quite what was going on—she just went on telling me things, so, okay, I know I'm getting one of these dictated books. It has happened before, but not quite in this way. I was deeply engaged with Virgil, and, of course, Virgil himself is a character in the book. It was a very odd experience. I wasn't choosing the way as an author, I was taking dictation, as it were—finding the story as it happened. More and more I realize that in my writing I just find out what happens next. It's an exploration. I'm not following a mapped road; I'm following a road but I don't always know where it goes. Except that, of course, I tried not to deny anything that Virgil says—except the color of her hair. I just couldn't see a southern Italian girl being a blue eyed blonde. It just wouldn't wash!

EM: You said it's happened before.

UG: The first book I felt had been dictated was *Very Far Away from Anywhere Else*. Owen just began to talk in my ear. And of course it's first-person. It's a voice narrating to me in a speaking tone. And again, I found out what was going on in that book as it went on. [*Pause*] I don't want to seem totally irresponsible. [*Laughs*] I do exert some control, and there's re-writing and so on, but still. I feel that one either accepts a gift like this or not, and I accepted it, and I was very grateful for it, because I really didn't–it was the first time in my life that I felt that there wasn't another novel pending. And since *Lavinia* I do not feel like there is another novel pending, and I know that I don't have the energy, the stamina, to write a novel now. I wish I did, but I don't.

EM: Does there have to be a routine when it's a novel? An expenditure of energy over a given time?

fall in love with somebody and so you want to possess them in your language. And my translation of Angélica Gorodischer, the *Kalpa Imperial*, I knew very little Spanish then, but those are in very simple, pure Spanish, because they're storyteller's stories, and I could work through them with the dictionary. And I thought, "These are fun! I'm going to put them into English! I love this stuff!" They just grew out of teaching myself Spanish. So translation, to me, is just a gift. To be able to do it is lovely. After all, *Lavinia* in a sense is simply a translation, of a minor character and some major events, in the *Aeneid*. A translation, a transposition, an interpretation, but it started with translating the *Aeneid* into English. Getting it into some kind of English so I could understand it as best I could.

UG: It's a huge expenditure of energy, and it has to be more or less regular. Pretty much go up every morning and write some. Or you're thinking about it all the time… all the time, subliminally. If you look, it's up there going round and round. [*Laughs*] And it takes physical stamina to write a novel. A short story you can wear yourself out in a few hours and sometimes you can get it down, but a novel is a commitment of weeks and months of hard work. I love doing it, it's the best work in the world, but you've gotta have the stuff, and in my mid-80s I don't.

EM: I know people in their 20s who say the same.

UG: It's kind of scary to undertake.

EM: I read *Very Far Away from Anywhere Else* again on the train over. I hadn't read it in years, but it still felt very… true, I suppose. It was nice to read it again.

UG: That book is nearly 40 years old, so it might seem terribly old fashioned to kids now, but it seems to just wear along.

EM: I didn't know, when I first read it, when it had been written. I don't think there's anything in the book that tells you.

UG: I tried not to do models of cars and things like that.

EM: Right. I think the car cost three thousand dollars or something like that.

UG: [*Laughs*] That's it. What!?

EM: And that was the only thing that made me think–

UG: And there are no electronics. So many teenagers cannot imagine life without.

EM: That might be more of a problem now for writers trying to set something in an "any time." The lack of electronics.

UG: Well that's something that young people will just have to get over. They have to use *their* imagination to realize that this whole thing is all incredibly recent. Some people still don't [use a lot of technology]. There are just not so many cell phones in Mongolia, and people are not willing to imagine that. But of course in Mongolia they're probably yearning to have them…

EM: Lack of data coverage was one of my favorite things about the trip over. Have you done the Chicago to Portland train?

UG: I have. I have been over this country by train so often. I commuted to college from the west coast to the east coast. Chicago was just where you *changed* trains, and then it went on and on after that.

EM: You said you don't really have the energy to write novels. Are you writing anything at the moment?

UG: Stories have been coming very very seldom. Poetry is pretty steady. And I write blogs. Things come up. I get asked to write this or that or the other, and some of those are pretty entertaining. I got asked just today to write something for–do you know this anthology *Poems That Make Grown Men Cry*? Well of course they're doing women, and so I've been invited. It's a nice idea, and it's for Amnesty International.

EM: Going back to the beginning: I believe you wrote five novels between '51 and '61 that were all rejected?

UG: They were all submitted at least once. And the first one, which was an extremely amateurish and very strange book, covering centuries of a family in Central Europe, that went to Alfred Knopf, who said, "a few years ago I could have published this, just on a dare," [*Laughs*] "But I can't afford to any more." It was a nice letter, a wonderful letter, for a 21-year-old to get from Knopf. So that kept me going.

EM: But you were published first as a poet.

UG: Yeah.

EM: In little magazines?

UG: Yes. One of the novels that I wrote during that period was the one which was published as *Malafrena* [*A non-SF/F story set in the imaginary Central European country of Orsinia—Ed*]. The first two stories I had published, one was an Orsinian story, "An die Musik," and the other was a fantasy, "April in Paris," in a fantasy magazine. And the fantasy magazine paid. Thirty dollars. And I thought, "all right!", because we were liv-

EM: You've done a, you didn't call it a translation, but a version of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*.

UG: Yeah, because I don't read Chinese I can't call it a translation. In other words, it is a sort of compendium of everybody else's translations looked at, and then I had the Chinese text with a word-to-word [translation], which is of course possible only to a limited extent. And then I had J.P. Seaton, a Chinese scholar and poet, to talk about it with; to tell me, "yeah, you can say that means that, but you can't say this means this." He could encourage me and stop me. I tried to give him more credit with that book, but he wouldn't take it.

EM: How did you discover Daoism?

UG: As a teenager, because the book was in the living room bookcase in my house and I saw my father reading it quite often. He loved it. It's a beautiful old edition, with the Chinese text, and the transliteration and translation and a free translation as well. The translation's very bad actually, but the book is wonderful, and I just fell for it. A kid of 14 or 15 is in a good place to start reading Lao Tzu because he is very anarchistic. "Rule a large country the way you cook a small fish." Very lightly. And he was very anti-war because he lived in a terrible period. That comes through strongly.

EM: But you've done translations. You studied French and Italian?

UG: I was in French and Italian Renaissance Lit at Colombia. That was my graduate field. I was training to be a professor of Romance languages. They're not teaching those things much anymore.

EM: The translations you've done are in those languages?

UG: I'm fairly shameless. It's funny, French is the language I know much the best, or did know, but there wasn't very much I wanted to translate out of it, and French into English is very difficult. I started learning Spanish just because I was ashamed that I didn't know it, and then I fell in love with this poet [Gabriela] Mistral, and that's what translating is to me: you

a landscape and then, “Oh! I’ve got to be here for a while.” But I suppose mostly the landscapes I’ve seen simply contribute to the ones I’ve made up.

EM: You’ve read a lot of the polar explorers.

UG: The pre-machinery ones, up through Scott and Shackleton. As a child in the 30s, I had a book about Admiral Byrd. He had a base down there called Little America. He did a really crazy thing: he went off from base and went south alone by himself for six months. He wrote a book called *Alone*. He was a strange person. I didn’t realize how strange when I read about him when I was a kid, but anyway I think that might have tipped me onto it, and then when I found out that Scott and Shackleton were both such splendid writers… Then Cherry-Garrard’s *The Worst Journey in the World*, that’s a marvelous book. I read all I could find of that stuff. I don’t know why. As a Californian child I didn’t even see snow until I was 17 and went to Massachusetts to college.

EM: What did you think?

UG: [*Laughs*] It came down out of the sky! It was wonderful! It was an extremely heavy winter too, a bit like this last winter, so Boston and Cambridge were completely snowed in for months. I thought that was going to happen every year, but of course it never happened again until this year.

EM: I saw *On the Nature of Things* on your Strand bookshelf [*The Strand Bookstore in New York asks authors for 50 of their favorite books, and the bookshop does its best to get copies of them all to feature on a table in the shop—Ed*]. How did you come to Lucretius?

UG: Philosophy 1a1b at Harvard. We read Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius the first semester, and it was the poetry—and what he was saying too.

EM: The Epicureanism reported through Lucretius is something which seems to stand very well with anarchism, with pacifism—

UG: It stands with Daoism also.

ing rather tight. [*Laughs*] “How about some more fantasy or science fiction or something! They not only accept, but they pay!” [*Laughs*] Mercenary. It was really interesting also to feel that I had found a market that really understood what I was doing, instead of saying, “You write very well, but we don’t know what you’re doing”. Because [what I was writing] tended to be somewhat unrealistic.

EM: So had the other journal paid, we might not have seen–

UG: I might not have gone so decisively towards fantasy and science fiction. But I think I was fated to do so because it was the only market that would buy non-realism, then. This was the height of modernism after all. The only literature is realistic. The more realistic the better. Think what a shock magic realism was, and it had to be called magic *realism*. It’s kind of odd when you think about it.

EM: It seems that so much of your writing is an experiment in place or in society. One of the other books I re-read on the train was *Changing Planes*, which seems to contain ideas which could so easily have jumped out into their own novels.

UG: I was getting on in age then, learning to write shorter and terser—just squeeze the orange quickly and go on as it were—but those stories were fun to write because the commitment in time was not so great. But to give a picture of something complete, it was fun. Some of them worked better than others.

EM: *The Dispossessed* is one of your most well-known works. Was there any novel which explored anarchism so explicitly before then?

UG: I don’t think so. That’s one of the reasons I thought of writing it. I’d been educating myself about pacifist anarchism for a year or more. I started reading the non-violence texts—Ghandi, Martin Luther King and so on—just educating myself about non-violence, and I think that probably led me to Kropotkin and that lot, and I got fascinated. Portland used to have a hundred independent bookstores, and one of them

was rather political, and in the back room, if he knew you, he would take you in to see his anarchist stuff.

EM: When would this have been?

UG: When was that book? The early 80s? Late 70s? That store had some wonderful stuff, which at the time was very hard to find. Not so much anymore. And of course I found out about some of the modern anarchist writers. I was excited following that up. And then at the same time I was reading utopias. And there was a utopia for every political thing you could think of, but not for anarchism. Isn't that odd? Well maybe I should *write* one. So then I had to re-read and read things to plan how on Earth would you organize an anarchist society, which was a lot of fun, but difficult.

EM: Especially on the scale of a world.

UG: Even a very thinly populated planet, there's a lot of people to organize.

EM: You said in an essay that a Utopia, with a capital U, should be a practical alternative. That really struck me.

UG: I'd have to think about that. In my own mind I've moved on quite far from the utopia of *The Dispossessed* to the semi-utopia of *Always Coming Home*, where I did try to make it simply a lifestyle. There was no political basis at all, in the sense of European or large nation politics, therefore people think that I was trying to idolize the American Indians or something. What I took from the Indians was, essentially, running your lives without a central government and using consensus as the basic mode, which you can't do in a big society, it's a matter of numbers. But I wanted to think out what it might be like. I think the lack of politics, for some of the readers, makes them think that it must be primitivist, and it ain't necessarily so.

EM: It's been influential in bringing the dialogue into the mainstream.

UG: Yeah. Writing a serious utopian novel that is an anarchist novel. It hadn't been done, and there were hardly any anarchist texts that weren't non-fiction, so just having a big

UG: Pure poets treat impure poets rather condescendingly. That may always have been true, but I don't think so. When was it decided that you could only write poetry or prose? Twentieth century I think. This whole genre-fication thing seems to have become very rigid. Now there are people like Virginia Woolf who simply didn't have any poetry in her, she said she couldn't even write doggerel, although she did sometimes. Keats certainly didn't write short stories. But there are so many who write both poetry and fiction. Start with Goethe! You simply cannot ignore Goethe. I think he's a much better poet than prose writer, but still.

EM: Your poetry has an obvious love of landscape. You're a California native, but you've lived here in Portland for most of your life?

UG: Fifty-one years or something like that. It's still the west coast.

EM: I can see why you love this place. Just looking out of the window you can see a pretty glorious landscape.

UG: Oh, this country…we've driven across, and gone across by train, many times because Charles is from Georgia [*Her husband, Charles Le Guin, is Professor Emeritus of History at Portland State University—Ed].* And so we would drive back and forth. It's absolutely splendid the whole way. There are parts of Texas and Arkansas that it's best to sleep through perhaps, but that's about it.

EM: It's magnificent. And it comes through in your writing, poetry and prose.

UG: There is a lot of landscape. Some of my books, like *The Tombs of Atuan*, came from a landscape. From first seeing the desert [in the case of *The Tombs of Atuan*].

EM: Which desert?

UG: South-east Oregon. High desert, over 4,000 feet. Sage brush desert with buttes and mountains in the distance. Oh man. We were only there for two or three nights, but I came back with a book. That's the most direct example of just seeing

EM: Has anyone tried to ban any of your books nearby recently?

UG: If so, I haven't heard about it. That whole surge, through the evangelistic churches, seems—

[*Pard at this point tries to climb the mantelpiece, and is quickly retrieved.*] Show off. What were we talking about?

EM: The banning of books.

UG: Oh yeah. I think those people have been organized more into politics than into book burning, as it were, lately. But the control of these churches over small towns' school boards is kind of scary. People have nothing else to do, so they can pester the school board, or get on the school board and become part of it, so it's stupidified what kids read an awful lot.

EM: Which of your books did they generally go after, or was it across the board?

UG: It's kind of across the board, because all fantasy is wicked because it's all satanic. Any fantasy. The one I actually went to the defense of was in a county of southern Washington state right across the river from here. They were after *The Lathe of Heaven*, and the people who brought the request to have it withdrawn from the curriculum used bad language as the excuse. But it was fairly clear that what they couldn't stand was a black woman having an affair with a white man. The school was a high school and their defense of the book was organized by the kids, and they were terrific, so that was a very heartening thing. That was years and years ago. One of the kids said, "I thought it was a really stupid book, but I don't want anyone to stop me from reading it." [*Laughs*]

EM: That's perfect.

UG: He knew his rights!

EM: To come back to the poetry for a minute, and again to take a line from a piece in *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, you talk about the problem of how poems from novelists can often get dismissed because they're from a novelist.

fiction work that's all about anarchists, I think made quite a difference.

EM: Especially with things like gender-neutral pronouns. It's a conversation that's been happening for a while, but is getting louder now. It shows how important linguistics is.

UG: Oh gosh yes. When you start looking for languages which have a gender neutral common pronoun, what have you got? Some kinds of Japanese and Finnish… I believe Finnish is gender neutral, which is cool. So translating *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a cinch for them.

EM: Your activism, or your thinking about things like anarchism, has changed.

UG: It's a little embarrassing to me when anarchists embrace me. Because—so long as they are my kind, pacifist—I love them, but I am a bourgeois housewife, I don't practise anarchism.

EM: There's no reason why you have to.

UG: A good anarchist answer there. [*Laughter*]

EM: One of my favourite things about your writing is the realization, usually about two thirds of the way through the book, that the main character is of color. It's subversive in the best possible way.

UG: It was incredibly subversive when I started doing it with *A Wizard of Earthsea*. That's very curious, that whole thing. There it was absolutely deliberate. I was just tired of all these white heroes. But I knew that if I was upfront about it, in the United States they'd be perceived as *black*, that is to say of African ancestry. And this is still a problem, in terms of cover art and casting films. Lots of people want to make a film, and I'm kind of saying, "well think Tiger Woods." Try to think that you cannot locate it on Earth, because to be able to locate it on Earth is going to be *wrong*. Oh this country. Racism in America… in some ways it looms larger and larger.

EM: It's not just here.

UG: I suppose that's true.

EM: The conversation might be a bit more out in the open here.

UG: Well in a way. On the other hand there's the murderous hatred of Obama because he's black, which is not voiced, except in living rooms and beer parlors. The senators who would destroy him cannot say openly why. And of course in America it's been going on for generations.

EM: It's great that in your books it's not front-and-center, in fact quite the opposite, and it's more powerful for that.

UG: One thing that I really like to say is that within that last five or six years, I have begun to hear from people who write me and say, "Your books were the first I ever found with a black protagonist. I wanted to read fantasy, I wanted to read science fiction, but I wasn't ever in it." These are people who are writing me as grown-ups but who read me as teens. I find it incredibly touching. "All right! It worked!" They noticed. A lot of people don't.

EM: That's great though isn't it?

UG: It really is. [*Laughter*] They really don't notice. Of course, the covers don't help [*The covers almost always feature a white protagonist—Ed*].

EM: What is going on with the covers?

UG: These days it's a little different. That sketch up there? [*Points to the mantelpiece*] That's the artist's very preliminary, very early sketch for an illustrated *A Wizard of Earthsea* that's coming out from Folio. David Lupton is [the artist's] name. I sent him some photos of Plains Indians, and if you don't go in for the classic Plains Indian hooked nose and so on, you've got a sort of generic human face. He could take off from that, working in a little Asian too. I've got enough clout now to say if I don't approve of a cover. But the two films–

[*We get a bit off track here for a few minutes while the Le Guins' cat Pard arrives and suspiciously sniffs everything for a few minutes. (You should look up the word Pard, preferably somewhere with pictures. Before you do, know that this particular Pard is a little black and white thing.) He then settles down for a while.*]

EM: There was a line in your essay collection *Dancing at the Edge of the World* making that point that the white and/or male author or editor or whoever really has to really think about their privilege. And that was written in the 70s. It seems like it's taken a while for most people to catch on to that.

UG: Well. [Laughs] Ask anyone who identified as a feminist in 1970 or so how far we've come. In some ways, staggeringly far. The whole conversation about gender construction, and so on, is amazing. And this switch in the United States about gay, hetero… wow! It's hard to believe. The people are way ahead of the government on that one. But in other respects, the more it changes, the more it's the same.

EM: In the world of literary magazines at least, there is such a taking to account if you're obviously not paying attention.

UG: Well I hope so. In terms of book reviews *TLS* is by no means the worst. *The New York Review of Books* I stopped looking at years ago, so maybe they've changed, but it was men reviewing men. If a woman was admitted then they had to find a woman reviewer because a man couldn't possibly spend his time, you know–and how often does *TLS* allow a woman to review a man? Not that often. And I didn't notice that the*London Review of Books*, which was founded by a woman I think, was that much better when I was reading it.

EM: Is it that there's more [racism, sexism, etc.] around now, or that now we hear about it?

UG: No, there's no more of it than there ever was. It's like it's more defensive and angrier. It's like they're feeling pushed. That's my hopeful Pollyanna interpretation. It's the only way I can keep hoping with something like [the June 2015 mass shooting in] Charleston. That awful little man. What's he so afraid of? But then we have this gun problem here, which is grotesque beyond words.