

The Impossible Equilibrium: A Study of Le Guin's Earthsea Cycle

Hiroshi Aiki (相木 裕史)

I will discuss the fantasy series the Earthsea cycle by an American writer Ursula Kroeber Le Guin (1929-). At the present time, the Earthsea cycle consists of six books: *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), *The Farthest Shore* (1972), *Tehanu* (1990), *Tales from Earthsea* (2001), and *The Other Wind* (2001). These stories are all set in an imaginary world of vast archipelago called Earthsea. Before the publication of *Tehanu*, the three books, published by 1972, used to be called 'the Earthsea trilogy'. Le Guin confessed in 1973 that she herself considered the stories of Earthsea to be completed as a trilogy.¹ However, after eighteen years since the completion of the trilogy, came the fourth book, which was even followed by the fifth and sixth book eleven years later.

In the Earthsea cycle, Le Guin introduces the concept of Equilibrium in order to rethink how we should treat the dualistic concepts such as light and darkness. She complains that many fantasy works in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5), have adopted a dualistic contrast between light and darkness as the set of opposing elements, as the symbol of the conflict between good and evil.² They attribute the goodness to light, and the hero from the region of light goes to defeat the evil which is considered to subsist in darkness. In short, fantasy works have traditionally regarded the relationship between light and darkness as, in most cases, that of the conqueror and the conquered. The good light expels the evil darkness, bringing peace in the world. Le Guin tries to reconstruct such a hierarchical structure of dualism, using the concept of Equilibrium. She sets up the Equilibrium, or the balance, of any dualistic contrast as the ultimate principle in her imaginary world Earthsea. In Earthsea the evil is not in darkness, but in the mind of those who refuse to accept the Equilibrium of the world. However, it seems inadequate to conclude that her attempt ended up in complete success. The concept of Equilibrium which was established in the first half of the Earthsea cycle actually entailed some contradictions, and to solve them, she had to add three more books to the series.

The main purpose of the analysis is to demonstrate how she attempts to construct the world of Earthsea and what kind of narration she adopts. In this thesis I will concentrate on the analysis of so-called 'the Earthsea trilogy', which I will call "the first trilogy". In the first trilogy, the world of Earthsea is constructed by establishing three kinds of Equilibrium: light and darkness, man and woman, life and death. Three books from *Tehanu* to *The Other Wind*, which I will call "the second trilogy", will be mentioned in relation to the analysis of the first trilogy.³ Then I will summarize the analysis and consider the relationship between the first trilogy and the second trilogy. I will also show that Le Guin's understanding of the essential concept of world-construction, Equilibrium, has gradually changed when she moved on from the first trilogy to the

second trilogy: she attempts in the second trilogy to revise and reconstruct the Equilibrium which she has established in the first trilogy.

1. The Equilibrium between Light and Darkness in *A Wizard of Earthsea*

In her essay, Le Guin comments on the themes of the first trilogy: *A Wizard of Earthsea* treats coming-of-age, *The Tombs of Atuan* treats sex or the female coming-of-age, and *The Farthest Shore* treats death.⁴ It is crucial that all the themes are developed in the form of dualism. Ged's coming-of-age is achieved in the moment "[l]ight and darkness"⁵ meets, joins and becomes one. He reaches maturity by "naming the shadow of his death with his own name" (166). The theme of sex is treated as the problem of man and woman, and the theme of death as the problem of life and death. Thus Le Guin adopts three kinds of dualism as the essential factors of the construction of *Earthsea*: light and darkness, man and woman, life and death.

The coming-of-age process of young Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea* is demonstrated as a lonesome journey around the Archipelago on a boat named *Lookfar*, a journey to find out the shadow which he himself let loose. The climax of his journey is the moment when he confronts the shadow at world's end, the far east of the East Reach, and joins with the shadow, naming it with his own true name "Ged". Thus "[l]ight and darkness met, and joined, and were one." (164)

It is apparent that the dualistic contrast between light and darkness is closely associated with that between life and death. The world's end is described as "dark slopes beneath unmoving stars" (162), and at this point readers can recognize from earlier episodes that the place is the land of the dead.⁶ The shadow is a being from the land of the dead, or the land of darkness. Ged at first feels "the fear of the shadow" (91) or the "formless, hopeless horror" (91) constantly during his journey. At this point he has not yet reached such recognitions as "it is my creature" (147), but rather he regards it as his opponent, the other being he should defeat and conquer. However, after he recognizes that he should not conquer nor be conquered by the shadow, or that he is "neither hunter nor hunted" (138), all his terror disappears and the shadow begins to take the form of Ged himself, becoming "a presentment [...] or an imitation of" (144) Ged.

The motif of deathly, doppelgänger-like shadow mentioned above is not at all the unprecedented invention of Le Guin; the fact is that she succeeds in remodeling an already existing motif so that it functions as a factor of establishing the Equilibrium in *Earthsea*. Le Guin introduces the motif of deathly, doppelgänger-like shadow already existing in other preceding texts, but at the same time she reconstructs the unbalanced structure of the motif into the balanced structure in order to establish the Equilibrium in her imaginary world. To clarify this point, it will be helpful to compare *A Wizard of Earthsea* with some works of Edgar Allan Poe, who also used the image of shadow and doppelgänger.

"Shadow — A Parable" is a short story Poe published in 1835. The narrator Oinos holds a drinking party in a noble hall at night. In the same hall is laid down a dead body of young man named Zoilus, one of the victims of the plague running riot at that time. When Oinos's singing voices fade away, he suddenly witnesses the shadow:

And lo! from among those sable draperies where the sounds of the song departed,

there came forth a dark and undefined shadow [...]. But the shadow was vague, and formless, and indefinite, and was the shadow neither of man nor of God [...].⁷

Oinos speaks to the shadow, and its answering voice takes Oinos and the rest of the party totally aghast, for the voice consists of the tones of a multitude of familiar friends who have already died.

In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged experiences the first contact with the shadow when he reads out a spell of summoning the dead.

Looking over his shoulder he saw that something was crouching beside the closed door, a shapeless clot of shadow darker than the darkness. It seemed to reach out towards him, and to whisper, and to call to him in a whisper: but he could not understand the words. (30)

The shadow described by Poe and that by Le Guin resemble each other in that they are both formless, and in that they both belong to the region of the dead. In "Shadow", the shadow looks down on the dead body of Zoilus and speaks in the voices of dead people, probably the voices of the victims of the plague. Moreover it is implied that the narrator Oinos himself will already have gone into "the region of shadows" when the text is read by those who are "still among the living"⁸. The shadow in *A Wizard of Earthsea* also belongs to the region of the dead. Le Guin and Poe both represent death by the image of shapeless, dark shadow.

However, there is one remarkable difference in the two shadows. While the shadow of Poe speaks in a clear voice and people can recognize it well, the shadow of Le Guin only whispers to Ged, who fails to understand the words. The whisper is reminiscent of Poe's "William Wilson" (1839), where the narrator named William Wilson is perplexed by the presence of a man with the same name. The narrator Wilson says that the man has "a weakness in the faucial or guttural organs, which precluded him from raising his voice at any time *above a very low whisper*"⁹. The man constantly appears in front of the narrator Wilson wherever he goes, and whispers into his ear. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged happens to encounter the shadow during his attempt at helping a sick child of Pechvarry, and during his travel on Osskil with his shipmate Skiorh. He hears on both occasions the shadow's whisper in which "there [are] no words" (81), and he realizes that "all his life that whispering [has] been in his ears" (103).

In both stories the mysterious whisperer eventually turns out to be the person whispered to: Ged and Wilson have to confront their doppelgängers. However, their confrontations show a vivid contrast. In "William Wilson", the narrator Wilson stabs the doppelgänger Wilson, who speaks out as follows:

*You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead — dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope! In me didst thou exist — and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.*¹⁰

As for *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the narrator describes Ged, who has just accomplished the union

with the shadow, in the following way:

Ged had neither lost nor won but, naming the shadow of his death with his own name, had made himself whole: a man: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be used or possessed by any power other than himself (165-6)

Both Le Guin and Poe employ the same images of whispering doppelgängers. However, Le Guin does not repeat Poe's plot where the protagonist defeats his doppelgänger, bringing about his own destruction. Instead, she lets the protagonist unite with his doppelgänger, without either victory or defeat, and attain his wholeness.

Thus the shadow in *A Wizard of Earthsea* is constructed by combining two images in Poe's works: the formless dark being from the region of the dead, and the whispering doppelgänger. What is remarkable is that Le Guin constructs the Equilibrium by introducing well-known patterns of images and reconstructing them. In *A Wizard of Earthsea* Ged attains the Equilibrium between light and dark in his union with the shadow, but this Equilibrium is generated only by denying the unbalanced ending found in other texts such as Poe's.

2. The Equilibrium between Man and Woman in *The Tombs of Atuan*

Tenar in *The Tombs of Atuan* is deprived of her name by the Nameless Ones, and from that moment designated as the Priestess of the Tombs of Atuan. The Tombs consist of a set of nine stones, depicted as follows:

They had stood there, it was said, since the time of the first men, since Earthsea was created. They had been planted in the darkness when the lands were raised up from the ocean's depths. [...] They were the tombs of those who ruled before the world of men came to be, the ones not named, and she who served them had no name. (187)

The Tombs, and the vast Labyrinth which lies in the underground of the Tombs of Atuan, belong to the ancient darkness that has existed since long before the birth of light. These are the places watched and guarded by the Priestess Arha, who was once called Tenar. The Priestess of the Tombs of Atuan is the "highest of all high priestesses of the Kargad Lands" (194). While most of the Archipelago of Earthsea respect and obey the power of the King in Havnor and the wizards in Roke, the Kargad Lands possess a different kind of religious and political system. They worship Twin Gods and Godking, choose the priestesses who govern the place. In other words, the Kargad Lands stay away from the male-oriented powers prevalent in Earthsea, and instead establish a unique society in which women hold power. Arha is considered to be the most powerful among the society.

When the Archimage Ged enters into the Labyrinth, therefore, she thinks of him as totally alien. Ged belongs to the society ruled by the power of a single King in Havnor and of wizards in Roke. For Arha, who is ignorant of such a society outside the Kargad Lands, Ged is nothing but "the fool, the foreigner, the unbeliever" (236). The difference between Arha and Ged can be

defined in several ways: Arha lives in darkness, has no name, and is a woman, whereas Ged lives in light, has his true name, and is a man. All the three contrasts relate to each other. In the first trilogy, womanhood is closely tied up with darkness and silence, while manhood is associated with light and word. Through the confrontation between Arha and Ged in *The Tombs of Atuan*, Le Guin tries to establish the Equilibrium of these manifold dualistic concepts, especially focusing on the sexual dualism.

In mentioning the position and the power of Arha as the Priestess of the Tombs, the narrator consciously associates it with "her crossing into womanhood" (194). The Labyrinth under the Tombs is depicted as "the very heart of darkness" (200), the place where "[l]ight is forbidden" (200). At the same time, it is declared that "[n]o man can enter the Dark Places of the Tombs" (202). It is clear from those descriptions that the darkness is closely connected to Arha's womanhood, and is distinguished from the light and manhood which Ged symbolizes.

Her womanhood is interwoven not only with darkness but also with namelessness and silence. As I have mentioned above, there are solid connections between true names and true things in Earthsea. The wizardry means the availability of true names that belong to "the Old Speech, that language in which things are named with their true names" (27). However, the knowledge of "true names" is rigorously limited to particular people. As a Master on Roke insists, the true magic of Earthsea "is worked only by those beings who speak the Hardic tongue" (50), which has its origin in the Old Speech. In addition, women are excluded from the use of true wizardry. Traditionally, women are not allowed to enter the school on Roke, though the tradition is questioned in "Dragonfly" in *Tales from Earthsea*. All they can learn about the wizardry are only trivial matters such as causing illness, curing it, making up a love-potion or some other "rubbish and humbug" (17). Such women are called witches, who know "nothing of the Balance and the Pattern which the true wizard knows and serves" (16). There are even sayings on Gont like "Weak as woman's magic" (16) or "Wicked as woman's magic" (16). People in the Kargad Lands show strong disbelief in the wizardry prevalent in other regions of Earthsea. They deny or fear the power of true names, and their fear must be the reason why they worship the Nameless Ones and deprive the true name of the Priestess of the Tombs.

Moreover, the very darkness which Arha serves takes on the quality of silence. The world of Earthsea was created by "Segoy who spoke the First Word, raising up the isles from the deep sea" (304), but it is obvious that the darkness had existed from the moment the world was created, according to the fact that the Tombs had already been there on the moment the world was created. The darkness, where Tombs were planted, is by far "older than light" (187), older than the First Word, and therefore it is the domain of silence. The association between darkness and silence is also repeated in *A Wizard of Earthsea*: in the darkness of world's end Ged feels the "old silence" (164). *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Tombs of Atuan* both represent the darkness as something characteristically without directions. In the underground Labyrinth in *The Tombs of Atuan* no one can get anywhere because "there [is] no centre" (231) and "[n]o direction [is] right" (231). This is just as "[t]here [are] no directions" (163) in the darkness of world's end in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. The darkness without directions produces a sharp contrast with the region of light, the place where Ged lives seeing "the light of the sun" (249), because there are clear directions in the light region. The map of Earthsea adopts the cardinal points of North, South,

East, West, while excluding the Kargad Lands from the categorization. The lack of direction in darkness enforces the typical silence in darkness, for the directions are defined by words such as North, South, East, and West, on the map of Earthsea.

Womanhood, darkness, and silence are three concepts that symbolize each other throughout the first trilogy of the Earthsea cycle. Similarly, the other three concepts, manhood, light, and the word, symbolize each other. In addition, there is another kind of dualism that is tied up with the concepts listed above, that is, between water and stone. I will discuss this point later.

In short, all kinds of dualism found in Earthsea relate to each other and form the dual system of symbols. On the one hand is the group including womanhood, darkness, silence, stone, and death. On the other hand is the group including manhood, light, the word, water, and life. One factor symbolizes all the rest of factors in each group. It follows that the attempt to realize the Equilibrium between man and woman, which is the theme of *The Tombs of Atuan*, can be seen as applying to all the other kinds of dualism listed above.

Arha and Ged escape from the Labyrinth, climb the mountains, and sail to Havnor. The Tombs of Atuan collapse and break down, leaving the Nameless Ones buried in its ruins. Ged tells Arha in the following way: "You were never made for cruelty and darkness; you were made to hold light" (299). By bringing Arha out of the darkness and nameless region, Ged seems to achieve her freedom. She has been forced to serve evil by the society which denies true names and the region of light, putting an exclusively high value on the power of the darkness. Ged has to save her from the Tombs because such a society goes against the Equilibrium of the world. He insists that the Nameless Ones "should not be denied nor forgotten, but neither should they be worshipped" (266), just as he himself does not deny nor worship his shadow of death but simply accept its presence.

Ged's remark reveals a significant way of understanding the Equilibrium of the world. He firmly believes in the existence of the boundary which engenders and regulates the dualism. In other words, he takes it for granted that the boundary should be maintained between the dualistic elements such as light and darkness, man and woman, life and death. The most vivid example of the boundary is the low wall of stones which separates the living from the dead. Even though he goes on a journey for joining with the shadow and becoming one in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged does not intend to realize the union between the regions of light and darkness in *The Tombs of Atuan*. He is satisfied only with the knowledge of the darkness, and lets the darkness remain separated from the region of light. He remarks that "[the Nameless Ones] cannot leave this place; they are this place; and it should be left to them" (266), and affirms that the once-Priestess should belong to the light side of the world as Tenar, not to the darkness side as Arha. The dissolution of light and darkness accomplished in *A Wizard of Earthsea* does not take place in *The Tombs of Atuan*: Le Guin attains the Equilibrium between man and woman not by removing the boundary of the two and making them one, but by placing the two equally on one side of dualistic concepts, that is, the man's side. Strictly speaking, the union between light and darkness in *A Wizard of Earthsea* cannot be regarded as the complete dissolution of the boundary between them, because the union is treated after all as the living Ged's accomplishment of wholeness, not as that of the dead shadow. His home still remains on the light side of the world. His acceptance of the shadow is nothing but the process of initiation he has to go through to live

as a matured man there. In this sense, Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea* is still a resident of the region of light, which is separated from the region of darkness by this solid, unquestioned boundary.

It seems inadequate to consider that the Equilibrium is realized by the escape of Ged and Tenar into the light side of the world. As I have mentioned above, the light side of Earthsea is ruled and governed exclusively by men: the male King in Havnor rules the world, and only men can gain the knowledge that makes available true names and wizardry. Women do not have the opportunity either to know true names or master them. They can at best use some trivial magic without understanding what the wizardry really is, and such women are derogatively called "witches", the users of "weak" magic. In short, as long as we look at Earthsea as the world of wizardry, women are totally "silenced or marginalized".¹¹

Elizabeth Cummins points out the difference between Tenar's coming-of-age process and that of Ged and Arren: "[Tenar] has had to rebel against and break free of the society that nurtured her; Ged and Arren mature so as to fit into their home societies."¹² It is notable that Tenar's escaping the home society, the Kargad Lands, inevitably leads up to her participating into the "foreign" society. The narrator describes Tenar in Havnor at the end of the book as if she were "a child coming home" (300), but this cannot be her "home" in the same sense that her mother uses the word at the beginning of the book: "Come home, Tenar! Come home!" (175) The narrator seems to be ignorant of the unbalanced sexuality in the light side of Earthsea, and therefore unable to predict the rip current Tenar is going to experience later in *Tehanu*, in which she doubts and resists the womanhood that the male-oriented society expects her to take.¹³

3. The Equilibrium between Life and Death in *The Farthest Shore*

The third book of the first trilogy, *The Farthest Shore*, opens with the description of the Court of the Roke School:

In the Court of the Fountain the sun of March shone through young leaves of ash and elm, and water leapt and fell through shadow and clear light. About that roofless court stood four high walls of stone. (303)

At first sight, readers may notice the clear contrast between light and shadow, created by the sunlight and tree leaves, but there is another important contrast: the contrast between water and stone.

Readers of the preceding two books may well recognize at this point a similarity between the two contrasts: they both symbolize the dualism between life and death. As for the contrast between light and darkness, *A Wizard of Earthsea* vividly shows the symbolic association with the contrast between life and death, as I discussed above. As for the contrast between water and stone, readers have already been given some hints in two books: the wall of stones which forms the boundary between the regions of life and death; the dark Labyrinth of the Tombs of Atuan constructed of stones; and the geographical contrast between sea and land. As Brian Attebery says, "the symbolic association" of water and stone "is not at all obvious" at the point of the

beginning part of *The Farthest Shore*.¹⁴ However, the dryness of the land of dead is especially conspicuous in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Moreover, in *The Tombs of Atuan* Ged almost dies of thirst in the Labyrinth which is constructed of stones, under the nine stones of the Tombs. It is clear that the lack of water means death in Earthsea.

The contrast between the sea and the land is an expansion of the contrast between water and stone, or moistness and dryness. During the hunting of the shadow, Ged feels “a terror of meeting the thing again on dry land. Out of the sea there rise storms and monsters, but no evil powers: evil is of earth” (125). He clearly connects the deathly quality of the shadow to the earth, not to the sea. In addition, in *The Farthest Shore* the eldest dragon Kalessin speaks of the unbalance of life and death by using the image of the sea and the land: “There is a hole in the world and the sea is running out of it. The light is running out. We will be left in the dry land.” (439) Kalessin also connects death with the image of stones by talking about “villagers killing a baby on an altar stone” (439), and “a sorcerer killed by his townsfolk throwing stones at him” (439). After all, the name of the world “Earthsea” shows the importance of the dualistic contrast between the earth and the sea.

It is notable that Le Guin repeats the patterns used by preceding writers when she associates the image of the dry land with death. Mike Cadden says the dry land of Earthsea is “so reminiscent of the ancient Greeks’ Hades”¹⁵, the place where people go after death, depicted in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Brian Attebery associates Le Guin’s image of dry land with that of T. S. Eliot: her image “is reminiscent of the waste land” depicted in his poem of that name, but “even more of his “The Hollow Men”” published in 1925, in which the dead land is called as the “cactus land” and the place where “the stone images” are raised.¹⁶ Le Guin comments that her image of dry land may come from Rainer Maria Rilke, in his *Duino Elegies* (1923).¹⁷

As for her conspicuous contrast between sea and land, there is another writer who used the same contrast in his works: Herman Melville. Attebery associates Earthsea with Mardi, an archipelago appeared in Melville’s *Mardi* (1849), emphasizing that both are “[worlds] in fragments”.¹⁸ He goes on to say that “[a] world of islands must be fundamentally different from a world of solid land” in that each community is “isolated”.¹⁹ The setting of archipelagic world must be the result of the writer’s strong consciousness of the contrast between the sea and the land. Communities on the isolated islands have to be conscious of the marine region when they try to communicate with each other, while communities on the “solid land” do not have to. Melville’s *Moby-Dick, or the Whale* (1851) also shows concern for this contrast, and for an archipelagic world. The narrator regards this “a ship on its passage out”²⁰, and the very ship, the Pequod, vividly assumes a similarly archipelagic quality:

They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, *Isolatoos* too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatoes were!²¹

The identities of the sailors on the Pequod are not uniform but “Isolatoos”, exactly as the islands in Earthsea are, every one of which “is different from the others” (247). Such an archipelagic

setting of the world reflects the writer's strong concern for the contrast and for the very otherness the contrast spotlights.

It may be interesting to compare Le Guin with Melville, for both writers show strong interests in dualistic contrasts such as the sea and the land, life and death, and light and darkness. The narrator of *Moby-Dick* expresses his interest in the dualistic contrast in the following way: "truly to enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast."²² He then contrasts "light" with "darkness", preferring the latter to the former because it is "the proper element of our essences"²³ according to him. He also considers the "matter of Life and Death", and seems to appreciate the latter saying: "Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance."²⁴

We can again see the different attitudes of the two writers toward the dualistic contrasts, as we have seen in Le Guin and Poe. While Melville tends to regard the dark side of the contrast as possessing some kind of essential quality, Le Guin presumes that the Equilibrium of dark and light is essential. Her world-construction again takes place by establishing the balance in the existing motifs which have been used in an unbalanced way in other texts. Ged at first thinks that "evil is of earth" (125) just as the narrator of *Moby-Dick* thinks that "in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God"²⁵. However, Ged cannot meet and join with the shadow until he realizes that the evil is not the shadow nor the dry land itself, but his "refusal to grant these things their rightful place in the balance of nature"²⁶.

Similarly, Le Guin adopts the Christian motif of world-creation by balancing the unbalance. Earthsea was created by Segoy, who spoke the First Word and raised the islands from the deep sea. His world-creation apparently parallels that of God in the Bible. Both texts, the Bible and the Earthsea cycle, employ the dualistic contrast between light and darkness, but the attitudes toward the dualism differ. While the Christian God makes the world by bringing Light into existence, Segoy creates the world by making the balance between sea and land, which means symbolically the balance between life and death, between light and darkness. The Christian God admits the superiority of Light over Darkness, which means that the unbalance between Light and Darkness is the essence of his world-creation. Segoy denies any superiority of each element, and therefore the balance between light and darkness is the core of his world-creation. Here again we can see Le Guin's remodeling of the existing motif by balancing the unbalance in it: she seems to repeat the Christian concept of world-creation, but she makes her new world by rewriting the biblical Un-Equilibrium between light and darkness into the Equilibrium.

The dry land of the dead in Earthsea shows a curious trait. Ged and Arren meets a man named Hare, who explains that "names don't matter" (349) in the dark land because they are cut off from "the reality" (349). He declares that "[a] name isn't real, the real, the real forever." (349) In Hort Town in Havnor, a drug called Hazia prevails among people, and this drug has the same effect as death: the separation of the name from its reality. Arren witnesses a woman using Hazia, and thinks of her peculiar gesture as "a spell without meaning" (338). In the living world of Earthsea, wizards can perform magic because "the name is the thing", or in other words, the name means the reality. This connection between the name and the reality is essential in the Old Speech and wizardry, while in the dry land of death the connection is cancelled. Even in the light side of Earthsea, wizards cannot perform magic if they are far from Roke, approaching the

dry land. Ged experiences it during his journey to the far east, and later tells Arren as follows: "I doubt whether any word that can be spoken would bear, everywhere and forever, its weight of meaning and its power" (365). It follows that they must set up some defensive measures against the power of disconnecting the name from the reality, for the purpose of maintaining their wizardry.

Therefore, the wizardry in Earthsea can only maintain its power by distinguishing the two regions: the living side of the world where the name means the reality without fail, and the dead side of the world where the name is cut off from the reality. Wizards cherish and supervise the Equilibrium between life and death in order to secure the essence of their power, that is, the absolute connection between the name and the reality. In short, wizards necessitate the boundary between life and death lest their power is nullified.

It is a man named Cob who disturbed the balance between life and death, desiring his own eternal life. Ged and Arren have to cross over the wall of stones to shut up the hole into which the sea, light, and life are running out. Hunted down by Ged and Arren, Cob bursts out:

You sought [the Way of Immortality]. All of you. You sought it and could not find it, and so made wise words about acceptance and balance and the equilibrium of life and death. But they were words – lies to cover your failure – to cover your fear of death! (460)

Maybe the wizards have not sought the Way of Immortality for themselves, as Ged protests to Cob. However, it may be that they have instead sought the Way of Immortality of wizardry itself. Cob is correct in one point that the establishment and maintenance of the Equilibrium has been done for the sake of wizards and their own magical power. In *The Other Wind*, the latest book of the Earthsea cycle, Ged and other characters break down by their own hands the wall of stones which has separated life from death. They realize that they "built a false wall", and therefore it "must be unbuilt".²⁷ Ged's belief that "[opening] the door between the worlds" (423) is wrong, after all, turns out to be wrong in the last scene of the Earthsea cycle.

As for Arren, he reaches maturity by closing the life-draining hole with Ged: he succeeds in "[making] the world whole once more". Ged teaches him: "I know that there is only one power worth having. And that is the power, not to take, but to accept." (424) Arren can accept his mortality during his journey to mend the hole opened by the mind which refuses death.

All the three young adults in the first trilogy, Ged and Tenar and Arren, reach maturity by accepting the existence of the other side of the world, darkness and man and death. It is notable that their coming-of-ages all synchronize with the movement of the world toward union, the shift from the divided into the united. Ged and his companion Vetch have to sail on the sea toward the far east to reach the dry land of the dead, and there they experience a mysterious union between sea and land: they suddenly find that the sea water has turned into sand without their noticing it, as if "an enchantment of illusion" (162). Tenar escapes the Tombs of Atuan by accepting Ged and his request to restore the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, the ring which has on its surface "the Bond-Rune, the sign of dominion, the sign of peace" (269). Without the Rune, the king cannot rule the world well. Tenar herself mends the broken halves of the Ring to make it

“whole” (273) as if to promise the recovery of peace in the world.

It follows, then, that the coming-of-age process of characters in the first trilogy can be regarded as the symbol of the establishment of the Equilibrium in Earthsea. Such a symbolic correspondence between characters and the world owes its success to the narrator’s way of constructing the world, that is, the narrator’s dependence on the concept of the Equilibrium. The concept of “Equilibrium” makes sense only when there is the concept of “Un-Equilibrium”.²⁸ In other words, the narrator cannot construct any kind of “Equilibrium” in Earthsea without presuming “Un-Equilibrium”: the existence of Equilibrium is guaranteed by the very difference it has from the Un-Equilibrium. The two concepts, Equilibrium and Un-Equilibrium, always emerge simultaneously.

Introducing the concept of Equilibrium, therefore, enables the narrator to produce the dynamism from the Un-Equilibrium to the Equilibrium, from the broken to the whole. If the narrator defines the coming-of-age process as a movement from one-sidedness to wholeness, he can easily equate it with the dynamism of the world. Owing to the concept of Equilibrium, the narrator can equate any immature character with the unbalanced world, because both similarly have to strive for the wholeness.

4. The Un-Equilibrium in Earthsea

The world of Earthsea is constructed on the basis of the concept of Equilibrium, but actually, the world cannot exist without the Un-Equilibrium behind the Equilibrium. When the narrator desires to establish the Equilibrium, the necessity for the Un-Equilibrium inevitably arises, because the Equilibrium can exist only in relation to the Un-Equilibrium. Thus, readers may add another unwritten line to the epigraph of *A Wizard of Earthsea*: only in the Un-Equilibrium the Equilibrium.

The wizardry in Earthsea owes its existence to the essential connection between the name and the thing in the Old Speech, the language of wizardry. All the three stories in the first trilogy concern how they recover the Equilibrium of the world in parallel with the coming-of-age of young adult characters. Their efforts to accomplish the Equilibrium are also the efforts to secure the wizardry in Earthsea, for they can possess the true name on the condition that the Equilibrium guarantees the exact distinction between the light place where the true name means the true thing, and the dark place where the true name means nothing and makes no sense. The trueness of the light place is guaranteed only by the dark place where the trueness cannot exist.

Characters in the first trilogy, therefore, take it for granted that there is some boundary between dualistic elements. However, the second trilogy poses a doubt about, and even resentment at, the existence of a boundary which engenders and regulates the dualism. Characters in the second trilogy feel more or less incredulous of the absolute powers of wizards and the King, that powers which try to maintain the Equilibrium and the validity of the true word. At last, in *The Other Wind*, the low wall of stones which, dividing life and death, symbolizes the boundaries between all the other kinds of dualism, is totally broken down by the hands of many characters: Lebannen, Tehanu, Tenar, Ged and so on. The second trilogy concludes with the destruction of the boundary between the dualistic concepts.

In the first trilogy, the Earthsea people are rather blind to the unbalance and repressiveness of the power which tries to maintain the Equilibrium. The world-creation of Segoy took the form of making the balance between the sea and the land, by raising the lands from the deep sea. To maintain the balance, however, requires some kind of authoritative power. Gamble, a guide of the school on Roke, knows it well, and says: "The Balance lies here, but the Power should lie in the king's hands." (317) People in the first trilogy show no incredulity of the notion of the absolute power or centrality in such islands as Roke and Havnor. They need the power to maintain the order of the world, the power to distinguish the language of true names from the other "not-true" languages.

There is obviously a hierarchical order among the languages in Earthsea: the distinction between the "true" and the "not-true". In *A Wizard of Earthsea* the narrator explains the languages of Earthsea in this way:

The Hardic tongue of the Archipelago, though it has no more magic power in it than any other tongue of men, has its roots in the Old Speech, that language in which things are named with their true names [...]. (27)

The passage above shows that there are two types of languages in Earthsea: the language of "true" names, namely the Old Speech, and the language of "not-true" names, like Hardic. Other languages of "not-true" names are listed in *Tales from Earthsea*, such as Osskili, Kargish and many dialects.²⁹ Of course, as I have said, the trueness of the Old Speech is guaranteed only by the difference it has from other languages like Hardic that are composed of not-true names.

In the first trilogy, true wizardry is rigidly restricted to men. That is because the restricting power tries to apply the man-woman dualism to the true-untrue dualism. In doing so, it expects that the strict distinction of the former dualism will rub off on the latter. The Equilibrium in Earthsea, therefore, is nothing but the state of the world desirable only for male wizards.

However, it seems that Le Guin, the constructor of the world of Earthsea, gradually understood such a quality of the Equilibrium during the long years from the first trilogy to the publication of the sixth book. *The Other Wind* describes the site of the reconstruction of the world. Lebannen, Tehanu, Tenar and others decide to tear down the wall of stones, allowing the region of death mingle with the region of life. Their action clearly repeats Segoy's deed of creating Earthsea, in that both let the deathly, dark, and earthy element into the live, light and marine element. It dawns on them that the Equilibrium in their world has long been creating the Un-Equilibrium: the fact that the Equilibrium itself is one-sidedly desired and needed by people in the light side of the world, especially by male wizards. In consequence, they succeed in reconstructing the world, which was constructed by setting up the Equilibrium, by breaking it down.

To create the Equilibrium is to create the Un-Equilibrium, just as "[t]o light a candle is to cast a shadow" (48). It is natural, then, that there is always some Un-Equilibrium in Earthsea founded on the Equilibrium. In the first trilogy, they try to dissolve the Un-Equilibrium by bringing it back to the Equilibrium, but that will inevitably promise another kind of Un-Equilibrium. In the second trilogy, then, they attempt to dissolve the Un-Equilibrium by

destroying the boundary which engenders the very concept of Equilibrium, and thus nullifying the dualism between the Equilibrium and the Un-Equilibrium. As a result, the world of Earthsea is truly saved from any kind of "Un-Equilibrium" at the end of the second trilogy: neither "the Un-Equilibrium" nor "the Equilibrium" can exist as they do in the first trilogy.

5. The Wholeness of the World

In the first trilogy, Le Guin attempts to establish the concept of Equilibrium and to construct a new world based on it. The dualistic world-view she employs in her narration is not at all original, but a conventional framework that has been used in many other texts over and over again. What is original in her narration is the remodeling of the unbalanced structure of the conventional framework of dualism. She attempts to construct "a world where no voice has ever spoken before" by such remodeling. She intends to create her unique world by introducing the concept of Equilibrium into the traditional dualism in which the one represses the other. As I discussed above, readers find some motifs already existing in other preceding texts such as the works of Poe, Melville, and the Bible. She creates a new world by reconstructing the unbalanced structure of the dualism found in the motifs, by balancing the unbalance.

The concept of Equilibrium cannot exist without the concept of Un-Equilibrium. By introducing the concept of Equilibrium into the narration, the narrator obtains the dynamism from the Un-Equilibrium to the Equilibrium. The condition of the balanced world is regarded in the story as the necessary condition of wholeness: in the first trilogy, the wholeness signifies the condition that the two elements of the dualism are united. The dynamism from the Un-Equilibrium to the Equilibrium is, in other words, the dynamism from the divided to the united. When the narrator assumes the process of maturing of a young character as the same dynamism from the broken to the whole, he or she can identify the two processes in the story, that is, the maturing of a young character and the recovering of Equilibrium of the world. Both characters and the world are expected to move from the divided, unbalanced condition to the united, balanced condition, from the broken to the whole. That is why the maturing character and the world on the way to the Equilibrium symbolize each other in the first trilogy. Such a symbolic relationship between a character and the world makes the first trilogy the "fantasy" works in the same sense as the author defines it herself: her definition is that to write a fantasy work is to narrate about a subjective, inner world, and the world of Earthsea can be seen just as such a world for Ged, Tenar, and Arren, reflecting and symbolizing their inner maturing. Therefore it was a success for Le Guin that she devised the concept of Equilibrium for the purpose of producing fantasy work which accords with her own definition of fantasy.

However, she has to add the second trilogy to the Earthsea cycle eighteen years after, because she has to deal with the problem that the very concept of Equilibrium she established in the first trilogy possesses a quality of Un-Equilibrium at its root.

She notices that her Equilibrium is actually an impossible Equilibrium; such an Equilibrium can be generated only by an unbalanced procedure. In order to maintain the Equilibrium, one must keep on controlling the world so as not to fall into the Un-Equilibrium. One can accomplish the Equilibrium only when one represses the Un-Equilibrium, and the very act of

repression is done one-sidedly by the light side of the world, by the region of wizardry. As I pointed out earlier, wizards have to maintain the boundary of dualism, because their wizardry cannot exist without a definite dualism. The wizardry attributes its power to the presence of true names, and the validity of the true names depends completely on the presence of the dualism. Their act of maintaining the Equilibrium is, after all, nothing but the act of maintaining the solid boundary of dualism. As a result, the Equilibrium in the first trilogy is impossible in two senses: firstly, the Equilibrium is needed and desired one-sidedly by those who belong to the region of light, life, and male-oriented wizardry; secondly, the very concept of Equilibrium is generated only by the unbalanced procedure in which the Equilibrium represses the Un-Equilibrium.

Bearing the impossibility of the Equilibrium in the first trilogy in mind, Le Guin concludes the second trilogy by the nullification of the dualism, that is, the cancellation of the boundary of dualism, which is suggested in the story as the scene of breaking down the stone wall between the regions of life and death. What is important here is that the second trilogy succeeds in dissolving the impossibility of the Equilibrium in two senses mentioned above. Firstly, the unbalance of the one-sided desiring of the Equilibrium by the light region is dissolved in that both regions, life and death, desire the breaking down of the stone wall: Lebannen, Tenar, or Ged decide to tear down the wall in sympathy with the dead people like Lily who desire it to disappear. Secondly, the unbalance of the repression of the Equilibrium over the Un-Equilibrium is dissolved in that there is no longer the dualistic contrast between the Equilibrium and the Un-Equilibrium now that the boundary of dualism itself is cancelled.

The nullification of the concept of Equilibrium also implies that the second trilogy ceases to be the “fantasy” work in the same sense with the first trilogy. Le Guin succeeds in creating an inner world which directly reflects the personal maturing of a character by introducing the concept of Equilibrium. Nevertheless, she does not abandon the narration of constructing a new world in the second trilogy. She rather tries to maintain the “wholeness” of the world of Earthsea in the process of dissolving the impossible Equilibrium. The wholeness of the world she seems to assume in the second trilogy is, of course, different from that of the first trilogy. The second trilogy should be read as the redefinition of the wholeness, not the denial, for the breaking down of the wall in *The Other Wind* takes place as the act of characters who achieved their own wholeness such as Lebannen, Tenar, and Ged. Le Guin chooses the characters who possess the first-trilogy wholeness, not those who have nothing to do with it, as the destroyers of the stone wall. The destruction of the wall thus involves reconsiderations as to what “wholeness” should really be by those who have already embodied wholeness in the first trilogy. Le Guin reconstructs such a concept of wholeness in the second trilogy in its conclusion.

It seems that her belief in the possibility of the narration of fantasy has not changed. She still believes in the possibility of constructing a new world that is whole. The fact that she began to write a new fantasy series, the first of which is *Gifts* (2004) and the second *Voices* (2006), clearly suggests her belief that one can construct a world of wholeness in narrating a story. She continues to hold such a belief through perpetual reconsiderations, criticisms, and reconstructions of the concept of wholeness. For her contemporary writers, especially those who form the literary trend of so-called postmodernism, it might seem quite old-fashioned or even ignorant to assume any kind of definite wholeness in the world of the story. In the 60's and 70's,

when Le Guin started telling her story of Easrthsea, other American writers were oriented more or less toward the revelation of the essential fictitiousness of literature, employing various experimental techniques in their literary works. The 60's, in particular, is the period that produced many experimental, fantastic works, full of techniques such as parody, black humor, or surrealistic writing. Among the writers who represent the trend of postmodernism are John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon.³⁰ Such writers attempted to make their worlds of the story fragmentary and highlighted the metafictional qualities of their worlds. In spite of that trend, Le Guin did not reject the literary belief that one can construct through narrations a world which possesses some kind of wholeness. The Earthsea cycle is the most conspicuous example of her practice of the belief.

The wholeness of the world she presents by introducing the concept of Equilibrium in the first trilogy, however, results in exposing a basic contradiction. Confronted with the problem of her own narration, she does not choose to abandon the wholeness altogether: she instead proceeds to reconsider, criticize, and reconstruct the wholeness she once assumed. Le Guin's strong belief in the wholeness of the world of the story can be persuasive to readers just because she has never quit the severe self-criticism of her own works. Her literary attitude should therefore be regarded as particularly valuable because it offers us a standpoint from which we can grope for alternative ways of moving beyond postmodernist fragmentation and which opens up continuing possibilities not only for fantasy but also literature more broadly regarded.

Notes

¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Rev. ed., ed. Susan Wood (London: Women's Press, 1989) 45.

² Le Guin, *Language* 58.

³ I follow Mike Cadden in his categorization of "the first trilogy" and "the second trilogy". See Mike Cadden, *Ursula K. Le Guin Beyond Genre: Fiction for Children and Adults* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 79-113.

⁴ Le Guin, *Language* 44-5.

⁵ Le Guin, *The Earthsea Quartet* (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 164. The edition is the collection of four books: *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan*, *The Farthest Shore*, and *Tehanu*. All the subsequent references are to this edition and will be found in the text.

⁶ T. A. Shippey, "The Magic Art and the Evolution of Words: *The Earthsea Trilogy*," 1977, *Modern Critical Views: Ursula K. Le Guin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 106.

⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004) 136.

⁸ Poe 134.

⁹ Poe 222.

¹⁰ Poe 232.

¹¹ Peter Hunt, *Children's Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001) 168.

¹² Elizabeth Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, Rev. ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 47-8.

¹³ In her essay *Earthsea Revisioned*, Le Guin regrets that she wrote the first trilogy "as a male", and regarded the male as "normal, dominant, active" while the female as "other, subject, passive". See Ursula

K. Le Guin, *Earthsea Revisioned* (Cambridge: Green Bay Publications, 1993) 22.

¹⁴ Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) 178.

¹⁵ Cadden 81.

¹⁶ Attebery 170-1.

¹⁷ Attebery 198.

¹⁸ Attebery 167.

¹⁹ Attebery 168.

²⁰ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or the Whale* (1851, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 40.

²¹ Melville 121.

²² Melville 53.

²³ Melville 54.

²⁴ Melville 37.

²⁵ Melville 107.

²⁶ George E. Slusser, "The Earthsea Trilogy," 1976, *Modern Critical Views: Ursula K. Le Guin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 77.

²⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Other Wind* (New York: Ace Books, 2001) 197.

²⁸ The word "Un-Equilibrium" is an original usage in this thesis. Neither Le Guin nor other critics uses it. The word signifies the condition in which the conflict of dualistic concepts is not balanced yet.

²⁹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Tales from Earthsea* (New York: Ace Books, 2001) 254.

³⁰ Ohashi Kenzaburo, Saito Hikaru, and Ohashi Kichinosuke, eds., *Sosetsu Amerika Bungakushi* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1975) 443-53.

Works Cited

- Attebery, Brian. *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980.
- Cadden, Mike. *Ursula K. Le Guin Beyond Genre: Fiction for Children and Adults*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Cummins, Elizabeth. *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*. Rev. ed. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993.
- Hunt, Peter. *Children's Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *Earthsea Revisioned*. Cambridge: Green Bay Publications, 1993.
- . *Tales from Earthsea*. New York: Ace Books, 2001.
- . *The Earthsea Quartet*. London: Penguin Books, 1993.
- . *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Rev. ed. Ed. Susan Wood. London: Women's Press, 1989.
- . *The Other Wind*. New York: Ace Books, 2001.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick, or the Whale*. 1851. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988.
- Ohashi, Kenzaburo, Saito Hikaru, and Ohashi Kichinosuke, eds. *Sosetsu Amerika Bungakushi*. Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1975.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. G. R. Thompson. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004.
- Shippey, T. A. "The Magic Art and the Evolution of Words: The Earthsea Trilogy" 1977. *Modern Critical Views: Ursula K. Le Guin*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. 99-117.
- Slusser, George E. "The Earthsea Trilogy" 1976. *Modern Critical Views: Ursula K. Le Guin*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. 71-83.