

## ANALYSIS

*The Lathe of Heaven* (1971)



Ursula K. LeGuin

(1929-2018 )

This is a futuristic novel, always a risky and courageous undertaking for any novelist, more so in this case because the future is so immediate, the thirty years or so after its publication during the Vietnam War. For example, according to its timeline, due to overpopulation nine tunnels and nine bridges are constructed in Portland within about ten years after 1971. That would be a miraculous feat during what is described as a collapse of the social infrastructure, not to mention prolonged delays due to lawsuits that would be filed by environmentalists such as Ursula LeGuin.

The name of her protagonist, George Orr, evokes George Orwell, author of *1984*, the timeless depiction of totalitarianism. In *Lathe* there is a New Constitution of 1984 imposing a “police state.” LeGuin could not foresee that this would occur during the administration of Ronald Reagan, who destroyed the real police state of the Soviet Union. Her female lead, Heather Lelache, has a mannerism of introducing sharp remarks with the word *well*, suggesting that she and Orr unite to form LeGuin’s answer to Orwell. The phrases “new world” and “brave new one” likewise evoke Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in ironic contrast. These allusions invite serious analysis of LeGuin’s vision.

*Or* is French for gold and George is gold indeed, once he discovers he has the power to create reality with his dreams, “changing everything since the Pleistocene.” Unfortunately, he has no control over them. “He was a poor damn crazy psycho on drugs.” LeGuin makes the dreaming of a drug addict analogous to the rational planning of men. When he violates drug laws, Orr becomes the patient of research psychologist Dr. Haber--in German, Dr. Spectre, a name recalling both James Bond and the “spectre” of Communism in the *Manifesto* of Karl Marx. Orr is a treasure. He is the Proletariat, representing the manipulable masses. He is raw material for the creation of a New Man. Who will dictate his dreams? In this novel the Germanic male fails like Communism, defeated by a Feminist with a different New Man in mind. Her enemy is more than a Mad Scientist in the tradition of Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Haber represents patriarchal western civilization and in particular all those men like Marx with grand schemes to improve the world. Lelache is

to be the exception. Implicitly, her grand schemes will succeed in improving the world--for Feminists and aliens from outer space.

Lelache, a civil rights attorney downtown who “comes on hard,” is introduced behind a screen. She wears a mask on her ring and she feints with her “weak, conciliatory ‘well’” before she strikes with her “venomous” tongue, stinging people with “fierce, scornful” remarks. She “thought of herself as a Black Widow. There she sat, poisonous; hard, shiny, and poisonous.” Heartless, she looks down on Orr as a “victim.” She “felt no mercy for him.” She helps him only because she thinks she can bring a lawsuit against Dr. Haber: “The spider had seen, at last, her prey...clicking her mandibles.” She becomes a government inspector, representing the police state in existence since 1984, as an official accredited ACLU observer.” The ACLU was founded by a Communist. “One thing the Black Widow was good at was the intimidation of lesser insects....The Black Widow pursues her prey.”

LeGuin is at her best dramatizing the procedures and technical details of brain research where a reader is inclined to suspend disbelief, also in Expressionistic passages such as the opening paragraph, where she renders the experience of a jellyfish as a metaphor of sensibility with imagination dreaming in the subconscious, the “undermind.” Orr becomes the jellyfish. Sea turtles are shy thoughts and Aliens have flippers and eco green armor. Traditionally, as in *Moby-Dick*, the ocean is an archetypal symbol of the unconscious. LeGuin’s metaphors are significant in that her undermind does not include the unconscious, the deep ocean. No sharks, no giant squid, no whales. In Melville’s symbolic terms, no Truth. The universe of LeGuin does not include the real world beyond her dreaming: “that dry, terrible outerspace of radiance and instability, where there is no support for life.”

Lelache likes George, despite his being “psychotic.” She sees him as “whole” before he is sane, before he has free will, before he has any character, before they have united, before he meets his Alien Self and before she has carved him up on her lathe of heaven. Orr is whole from the start and gets wholier without effort or growth. This jellyfish is “the strongest person she had ever known.” She tells us she is whole and yet she needs to “lean on him.” He is too weak to resist. Lelache is all at sea and Orr becomes her anchor, a jellyfish. They need each other to float upright in the vertical mode with her on top forever. Their love moment is almost without affect: “They hung on to each other, in touch at all available surfaces, absolutely unified, while the liver and onions sizzled in the pan.”

LeGuin argues for subjective perception. During the war in Vietnam, she has Lelache declare, “What does it matter whether you call it real or dreams? It’s all one— isn’t it?” Orr replies, “I don’t know.” Mental patients and fans of LeGuin’s science fiction might agree, but the literary reader wants to know. The lives of police officers and soldiers in combat and people crossing a busy street and anyone taking drugs depend on knowing. This is why escapist genres are separated from literary fiction. The importance of being able to differentiate between fantasy or appearance and reality has been a major theme of literary fiction since *Don Quixote* (1605).

Those accustomed to literary fiction are likely when reading *Lathe* to become preoccupied with trying to determine what is real and to establish a chronology of events in order to make sense of the linear narrative. The action would be more dramatic, and might even be felt, if the reader were not disoriented by obscurity. Dates are given, hints of what happened when, but information is withheld that involves the reader in the confusion of Orr, an example of what the critic Yvor Winters called “the fallacy of imitative form.” The novel is all fluid dreams and never comes up for air, never comes to life in the sense of establishing any clear reality, which reduces the effects of the symbolism. The reading experience is similar to swimming in murky water just deep enough that you can never touch bottom with your toes, but you keep trying. As a political agenda emerges, the murky confusion seems to be a cover for implausibility and propaganda.

In *The Lathe of Heaven*, world population has reached nearly 7 billion, the same as it is now in 2009. LeGuin imagines this population causing many huge immense gigantic enormous catastrophes and so much famine that in 1980 92% of the world population goes to bed hungry. In the real world, the last thirty years have been a period of unprecedented prosperity. In her Chicken Little vision, LeGuin predicts that “global warming”—by now exposed as a Socialist fraud [Human efforts to change the climate are hubris because they can only have miniscule effects, especially since India and China will not cooperate]--will have even

more sudden and disastrous effects than since predicted by Al Gore: “Undernourishment, overcrowding, and pervading foulness of the environment were the norm...Some of the European countries got...birth control going early enough.” Yes, enough to exterminate their populations. Dr. Haber is said to be pro-life, yet LeGuin thinks he is the one who is insane. In the real world, thanks to the grand scheme of Feminists like LeGuin, the problem of many countries today is not overpopulation but a declining population of workers. The birth rates of some ethnic groups have declined beyond recovery. LeGuin herself is implicated in causing a real Plague that may be permanent, unlike the imaginary one caused by Haber--the death of Europe. Science fiction writers are supposed to be good at seeing the future.

In LeGuin’s world, the “Parks and Forests were reserved strictly as wilderness, what there is left of them...land preserved long ago from the logging companies. Not quite all the forests of America had gone... A few remained...And no goddamn Tree Farms either, all stumps and sick seedlings.” If this were true, the tree farmers would have gone out of business. LeGuin does not realize how much of the green forest all around her is growing on tree farms. She blames logging (men) for a massive reduction in forestland. On the contrary, at the time she wrote, there was more forestland in the Pacific Northwest than before Columbus, because of planting and because Indians burned so much forest. LeGuin is more familiar with space aliens than with her many rural neighbors who are tree farmers adding to forestland and preserving it from development. Though she imagines outer space, she is a Portlander, with a mind confined to city limits. As an urban liberal, she sees forestland as her personal scenery. Nor does she know her urban neighbors. She says the Willamette River would be “concreted over” if it was not useful for shipping. She has never noticed the houseboats, water taxis, pleasure boats, pageantry and all the recreation along the river through her city. As a dreamy environmentalist living in her own world, she is unfamiliar with her real environment. She resembles Dr. Haber: “Not interested in what’s true, in what is, he can’t see anything except his mind--his ideas of what ought to be.”

Overcrowding is a major theme in her novel, yet LeGuin, though living in Oregon, is unaware that thinning of overcrowded national forests by loggers is required to reduce danger from catastrophic wildfires such as are now destroying many wilderness areas. Also, Feminists like her in government agencies such as the Wildlife and Forest Services are using the Endangered Species Act as a front to slaughter thousands of barred owls to prevent them from displacing northern spotted owls, in accordance with their Owl Recovery Plan. Their grand scheme is no less than to stop natural selection, as documented in *Salishan*. Science fiction writers are supposed to know science.

*The Lathe of Heaven* conveys the political agenda that emerged from the counterculture of the 1960s: pacifism, abortion, civil rights and radical environmentalism. The most convincing moment in the story is when the liberal dreamer helps enemies invade the United States. Orr the dreamer has shoulder-length hair, a beard and the laid-back passivity of a hippie. Lelache had a hippie mother and lived in a commune. LeGuin quotes profound lyrics from The Beatles. Dr. Haber is the male “Establishment” in post-1971 America, soon a “police state” implicitly no better than Nazi Germany. Political demonstrations and communes are against the law. Since everything in the novel is only dreaming, nothing has to be factual or logical. Haber (America) is fascist, believing the end justifies the means. The horse in the picture on his office wall is named Tammany Hall, implying that corruption of Robber Baron magnitude is permanent. Orr dreams that Haber is full of shit. He “voted Isolationist last election...to pull us out of the Near East... He had grown up in a country run by politicians who sent the pilots to man the bombers to kill the babies to make the world safe for children to grow up in.” This is what Jane Fonda and the other Communist enemies of the United States were saying at the time, with the Vietnam War in progress, that Americans set out to kill babies in Vietnam. LeGuin is spitting on war veterans.

Her novel projects a consciousness that is vertical like that of Edgar Allan Poe, who likewise polarized black and white. Lelache calls the protagonist Mr. Either Orr. We go down into the sea to a limited depth, but not up into the Sky. There is no heaven in *The Lathe of Heaven*. The formerly romantic moon is occupied by Aliens and now symbolizes “the Unattainable.” Nobody in this novel gets off the ground. Orr is too “feminine” and stays home dreaming of the spider woman. In the archetypal model of metaphors he is the heart (or sensibility) in a vertical mode, subordinated to the head, or ego, here embodied in Lelache. Unlike Poe, LeGuin unites opposites in Lelache, who is racially balanced, and supposedly further balanced in her union with Orr. However, their relationship is not balanced. People in this novel are not equal. They

relate to each other vertically in terms of power. Haber and Lelache contend for dominance and both manipulate Orr like a jellyfish.

In archetypal literary fiction, the union of lovers takes place in a garden setting of some kind, the natural realm of the heart, as documented in "Model of Metaphors." The "garden" of Lelache is an isolated cabin, a shelter from the masculine wilderness, a place to hide. Her "good place" is a paranoid version of domestic Victorianism with gender roles reversed. Instead of an angel, there is a spider in the house. As James Russell Lowell wrote of Poe, "The heart seems all squeezed out by the mind." Lelache is French for coward. "It was a slaveowner's name" and that is consistent with her relationship to Orr. "She had a sneaky, sly, shy, squamous personality. She had French diseases of the soul." As soon as she gets an opportunity, she hypnotizes George: "He was in her power: and his power was incalculable." Power, power, power. Now she is parallel to Haber, but the "sneaky" lawyer assures us that she will not play God like him because she is "whole." She is a whole Black Widow spider.

The archetypal individuation process is represented in literary fiction by a journey into a wilderness of some kind, as in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Orr does not journey into the wilderness. He does not really individuate, he merely dreams. Nor does he have any mystical experience such as produced the many Taoist quotations in the novel. After he kills six billion people, his head "ached fit to split." He dunks his face in cold water and comes up "blind" and all "wet as a newborn baby." The simile implies a spiritual rebirth he has not had. In fact, he sees himself as a monster who must be stopped.

Orr is a "city man" always living in the city, then he is said to be staying in a cabin in the wilderness. He does not stay long. Haber is mocked for having an "electronic forest" on the wall, but that is more vivid than the wilderness LeGuin does not get into. Real wilderness is beyond her control, like real men. Orr is the cowardly aspect of herself. When Lelache joins Orr at the cabin, they spend the entire wilderness episode indoors. Spider Woman does not believe she needs any spiritual growth. She thinks that simply "in being a part one is whole." She is wholier than thou. In this novel, being whole is equivalent to being hip. Lelache is wholly in an unreal universe that stops at the cabin doorway, where she says, "I can't hear you over that damn creek. I thought the wilderness was supposed to be silent."

Taoism and environmentalism, while sincerely advocated as New Age causes, are fronts in this novel, much as Communists used fronts and art as a weapon. LeGuin pommels Haber with Taoist quotations like a blind child flailing at a piñata, but her alter ego is not a Taoist. Lelache wants Nature to shut up. Taoists go with the flow, Feminists go for the power. Dr. Haber is pro-life. That is the Taoist position. Feminists try to shut up Nature with abortion: "She shut the door on the voices of the unborn children." Taoism blends with Feminism like water with fuel oil. The many Taoist quotations that begin chapters are a redundant distraction from the fact that Feminists resist Nature and that nobody in this novel is capable of a mystical experience. Nor does the author try to induce one in a reader. LeGuin talks the talk but cannot walk the walk. Her Feminist undermind is not deep enough to access the unconscious, the *or-igin* of mystical experience.

At the end, the Alien declares that he is "Self"--in Carl Jung, the unconscious or transcendent dimension of human nature that makes us part of the whole universe. Otherwise, LeGuin abandons Jungian psychology, archetypal symbolism and mysticism. She attributes salvation to the ego. Spider Woman saves Orr, and herself, by ordering the Aliens off the formerly romantic moon. Then, without effort or true individuation George Orr is befriended by Jor Jor the Alien. "Orr recognized his own name," confirming that the Alien represents his Self, which includes the universe. Contrary to literary tradition, LeGuin locates transcendent revelation not in Garden, Wilderness or Sky, but in what T. S. Eliot called the Unreal City--in the mind, even more unreal because her universe is a dream. Jor Jor tells Orr he has "lived well," echoing the speech mannerism of Lelache, implying that she was his savior. Still, "He did need help" from her, which is not a characteristic of a whole person who contains the universe.

According to Jung, to attain psychological wholeness the ego (Lelache) must face the shadow enemy, her repressed negative traits (Haber); and subordinate herself to her holistic Self. This never happens because LeGuin never dives into the deeper ocean of the unconscious, the real wilderness beyond her

control. Her “undermind” is too shallow. Consequently her symbolism is contrived and inconsistent with reality, history, psychology and literature. Haber says humans can evolve to become gods, acknowledging limitations. Orr replies that we already are gods. Margaret Fuller famously declared, “I accept the universe!” LeGuin thinks she *is* the universe. Lelache never subordinates herself to anyone, not even the Alien who represents the transcendent. He is a mere shopkeeper and she is a Customer. The novel ends still fixed in a vertical mode, at the Kitchen Sink, with Lelache triumphant and Haber locked up in an insane asylum. To individuate toward wholeness truly, LeGuin would need to realize that she is not a Goddess, she is the radical Feminist counterpart of Haber.

At the conclusion Orr works for the Alien E’nememen Asfah, a name that sounds Arabic, as a designer of kitchen equipment in the Kitchen Sink, pleasing housewives. “E’neme-men” translates “enemy men.” Aliens are not enemies, men are. That means Orr is his own worst enemy. Men are enemies until they submit to the lash of Lelache. George is her animus and can only satisfy LeGuin by giving up his manhood. Her ideal male is a jellyfish. LeGuin’s symbolism and explicit declaration of war are evidence of her radical Feminism and of her own lack of holistic consciousness, as she polarizes against half the human race and sides with alien invaders against all humanity.

Unlike men, the space aliens in *Lathe* are harmless pastoral creatures--after conquering our planet--not only benign, but domesticated like good husbands. Of course, they are merely a projection by Orr in a dream of what he needs to be whole and what the universe needs for intergalactic peace. For an allegory to be coherent, the figurative must correspond with the literal in a plausible way. In this Feminist fantasy, the conquerors are submissive, as men should be. Earthlings have been fighting these Aliens in space for years, yet Orr/well imagines that invasion is good for America: “The Government liked them because they willingly accepted governmental constraints.” Invading aliens will not want to take over our government, they will become small business owners in a Feminist matriarchy: “E’nememen Asfah stood immense in greenish armor, holding an egg whisk.”

After his domestication, Orr dreams back Lelache as no longer a Black Widow lawyer. He dreams her softer. She is now only a modest legal secretary, working for the firm of Rutti and Good-hue. Don’t kid yourself, George. You’re dreaming. There is no evidence that she has really changed. You’re an emasculated masochist, dreaming up your anima Mama. Orr proudly shows her an egg whisk he designed with “good balance” like the French make, and she says, “You’re a real artist.” As opposed to an American artist. The Alien boss agrees, “speaking from the left elbow.” What a relief it did not speak from the right.

Orr will now design whisks and leave redesigning the world to Lelache. From now on he will live only to please her, happily ever after: “There she stood, the fierce, recalcitrant, and fragile stranger, forever to be won again.” Their marriage supposedly made him even wholer and wiser, yet she is still a stranger he must keep winning forever. “I’m a born tool,” he says. Again and again he must win her, ever softer and more limp, while she remains fierce and recalcitrant. She is no modest secretary after all--certainly not the woman of his dreams. True love is unattainable like the moon. Conditional “love” forever is the fate of a male housewife caught in the web of a radical Feminist dream. “George! Wake up!” If she feels like it, a Black Widow will devour her mate.

The ending of *Lathe* is similar to the ending of *Surfacing*, published the very next year, in 1972. In both novels, strong independent women end up needing weak, emasculated, unformed or incomplete males they can manipulate, especially Lelache. Both novels are Feminist allegories. LeGuin sees evil as male. Atwood is able to see evil as human. She is not afraid of reality. Her woman is complex, undergoes a long traumatic individuation experience in a convincing wilderness, surfaces from her depths, redeems the aborted child within yet ends ambiguously, on the verge of salvation or “freezing over.” LeGuin’s “venomous” alter ego thinks she needs no redemption. She is superior by gender, by color and, best of all, by French blood--by birth, like an aristocrat before the Revolution. She has a politically correct identity in three categories and is therefore triply righteous, despite being a black widow spider.

The argument of the novel depends upon bad outcomes: Haber is the most incompetent research scientist in fantasy history, giving such vague orders to his subjects in experiments that his outcomes are repeatedly disastrous. He never learns. He tells Orr to dream of “no killing of humans by other humans. So

I dreamed up the Aliens.” If Haber had asked him to dream of no more war, the outcome might have been good. But then, Haber is the Right Wing Bad Guy--so he has got to be stupid for the plot to work. Unbelievably stupid. Again and again.

Having seen how stupid Haber was, again and again, Lelache gets her chance to order a dream. Think of it. A Feminist is given an opportunity to change the world. Surely she will demonstrate how superior women are to men as leaders who plan ahead. What does this super smart attorney do for humanity? “She didn’t know what to say, how to say it, knowing that whatever she said could go wrong.” She orders Orr to dream that “the Aliens aren’t out there on the Moon any longer.” So they invade the earth. Does she ever win a case? That is the kind of foresight that got us into the Vietnam War. Outcomes usually depend on the intelligence of those giving orders, or writing novels.

The story is an allegory of the relationship between the subconscious and the conscious minds of one dreamer. LeGuin is the lathe of heaven, not the Tao. She is so much into herself that at times she does not bother to make clear which character is speaking. Her novel is her solipsistic dream of Orr and its outcome is no better than those ordered by her characters. See “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and “The Birthmark,” critiques of science by Hawthorne, for true gold.

Michael Hollister (2009)