

# The Other Ursula Le Guin

## History and Time in the Orsinian Tales

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**U**RSULA KROEBER LE GUIN, WHO DIED IN JANUARY at the age of 88, was a prolific American writer, winner of Hugo and Nebula awards, and was named the first female Science Fiction Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America in 2003. She was at the forefront of the gradual recognition of science fiction and fantasy as serious literature, worthy of careful study and scrupulous critical attention.

Le Guin was the first writer to send a boy wizard to school in her deeply imaginative *Earthsea* series, published decades before *Harry Potter*. And her many other works, such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, are now classics of speculative fiction. Populated by unforgettable characters and set on alien planets, they help readers explore our own world—its gender dynamics, social psychology, and even economics. As a result, these books have increasingly been studied, written about, taught at the college level, and examined critically. Yet one part of her body of work, the so-called mainstream stories, set in an imaginary country called Orsinia, have received relatively little critical attention. Part of the reason is that these early creations are eclipsed by her later, more famous, works. Another factor is that the Orsinian texts do not fit neatly into the genres and literary categories where Le Guin has achieved prominence. She herself recognized this bias and was at times poignantly funny about the genres she wrote in.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the fact remains that her mainstream stories, of what she called Orsinian Realism, have received comparatively little attention.<sup>2</sup> This article is an attempt to explore the richness of the other Le Guin—the imaginative literary depths of her Orsinian world and its connections to the rest of her oeuvre. Some of the most remarkable (and remarkably underappreciated) elements of

<sup>1</sup> Le Guin has addressed this issue in an essay called “Despising Genres,” which may be found as a free e-book extra in HarperCollins PerfectBound version of *The Birthday of the World*.

<sup>2</sup> This is a term from Le Guin’s list “Some Genres I Write in,” which appears in the collection *Unlocking the Air* as well as on her website: <http://www.ursulaklequin.com/AlternateTitles.html>

Le Guin's Orsinian cycle are her treatment of time and chronology, her experiments with the idea of interconnectedness, and her imaginative placement of herself (as a character and as the omniscient narrator), with her deeply-held Taoist view of the universe, in Orsinia.

First, allow me to provide some context. Orsinia, or the Ten Provinces, is a fictional Central European country, invented by Ursula Kroeber around 1951, when, as a graduate student at Columbia University, she began writing poems and stories set in this imaginary place. Orsinia's name is derived from the author's first name, Ursula, Latin *ursa* and Italian *orsino* for "bear," according to James W. Bittner. Orsinia's name also resembles such names as Bohemia, Galicia, Moravia—the small Eastern European nations that have never had lasting political independence or geographical stability. Ursula Kroeber's first finished novel, *Malafrena*, was set in Orsinia. Likewise set in Orsinia was her first published short story, "An Die Musik," which later became one of the collected Orsinian Tales, a book compiled and arranged by the author in 1976, after she had made a name for herself in the genres of fantasy and science fiction. Later still, in 2001, Le Guin wrote her last Orsinian Tale, "Unlocking the Air," which takes place in 1991.

Although it is a fictional state, Orsinia shares many of the real-life characteristics of Central or Eastern-European nations. Barbara Bucknall, in her book-length study, states that while "in fact, it cannot be identified as any particular country," some readers insist that Orsinia is recognizably Romania or Hungary, in disguise. There are several reasons for its uncanny verisimilitude. In the first place, Orsinia's history is replete with events of the real-world history of Central Europe, with its wars and revolutions repeatedly sweeping over a small country, dividing it both geographically and sociopolitically.

Orsinia's history is closely connected to European history in general. It retains the evidence of a Viking invasion, which brought in the Norse religious practices portrayed in the story "The Barrow." According to Bittner, later on, the country was a part of the Hapsburg Empire in the 16th century and Austria-Hungary in the 18th, while in the intervening two centuries between those dominations, Orsinia was threatened by the Ottoman Empire, Prussia, and Austria. As one of the successor states after World War I, Orsinia would have had a short respite of true nationhood before being overwhelmed again by Hitler, and then by Stalin. Real historical events, such the upheavals of 1848, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the two World Wars, the anti-Soviet Budapest uprising of 1956, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and something very much like the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 affect Orsinia as they have affected all the nations of Eastern Europe.

Another reason for Orsinia's verisimilitude is that Le Guin's tales reflect the author's deep understanding and imaginative reach in recreating the psychological conditions of a small Eastern European

country, conditions which serve as the backdrop for the lives of her Orsinian characters. This informed speculation creates for the reader a level of believability George Steiner has called “hermeneutic trust” in his translation treatise *After Babel*.<sup>3</sup> Orsinia is “a product of cumulative impressions,” skillfully rearranged and combined with intelligent anticipations and educated guesses about the real-life conditions of Eastern Europe throughout history. History is for Le Guin not a science but an art, which can rarely claim absolute objective truths. In her interview with Jonathan White, she said that “every age has its own history, and if there is any objective truth, we cannot reach it with words.” The facts of history, remote or recent, are always enveloped in interpretation and affect each person differently, becoming a part of personal history. The self of each person is the sum of his/her memories, both personal, and collective. Therefore, historical truth becomes, in the words of one of Le Guin’s characters, “a matter of the imagination.”

By virtue (and tragedy) of its location, Orsinia is connected to Europe and the rest of humanity not only through geography and culture, but also through a multitude of intimate human relationships. In “An Die Musik,” the main character’s sister lives in Prague; the impresario Otto Egorin was born and raised in Vienna and speaks fluent German. Dr. Kereth, the protagonist in “The Fountains,” feels a close affinity with the French and claims the history of France as his own heritage. The radio in “An Die Musik” plays a song by Schubert, sung by the German-born Lotte Lehmann. Le Guin describes the subtler cultural connections that exist at a very personal level of her characters’ individual lives. The connections are deeply rooted in each person’s individual and collective history and experience.

This experience and cultural matrix are not all positive, however. To quote James Bittner again, Orsinia finds itself at the “sick heart of Europe.” So the darker side of these connections is also always near. One of the characters in “A Week in the Country,” for example, has a Nazi death camp number tattoo on his arm. The young blind man at the center of “Conversations at Night” is a World War I veteran. The Soviet-style political repressions in “The House” are a result of nationalizing private property. Likewise, in “The Road East,” set in 1956, political purges are exported to Orsinia from the Soviet Union via Hungary, and the Hungarian Revolution is explicitly mentioned. And in “Unlocking the Air,” set in 1991, the young Orsinians debate the potential consequences of the onset of market capitalism and consumerism for the future of their country.

Furthermore, and importantly, the European world of Orsinia expands to other continents, as well. In “A Week in the Country,” Le Guin writes: “On a sunny morning in 1962 in Cleveland, Ohio, it was raining in Krasnoy,” thus connecting the two continents in a single reach of thought. This intercontinental link is especially important because of Le Guin’s persistent motif of the essential interweaving of all humanity.

3 George Steiner’s discussion involves Ezra Pound’s imaginative (re)constructions of China in *Cathay*, which, according to Steiner, is fundamentally a “Western invention of China.”

Perhaps the best illustration of that is the fact that Le Guin places her younger self and her own family as characters at the chronological center of the Orsinian Tales in the story “Imaginary Countries,” set in 1935. This is the luminous, dream-like tale Bittner calls “A portrait of the author as a very young girl.” Zida, Le Guin’s child avatar in the story, lives in an enchanted world of a loving and comfortably well-off family. She makes a unicorn trap with colored bits of paper and falls asleep in the woods. Her father is a gentle, caring, and wise professor of Medieval History. Her mother is a beautiful goddess-like woman whom her husband calls Freya. The family’s summer house, the so-called Asgard at the center of the story, is a literary recreation of the Kroebers’ summer residence in California’s Napa Valley, where young Ursula and her siblings grew up. In the story, Zida and her brothers play the game they call “Ragnarok,” the Norse mythology’s apocalyptic war. The game is both an archetypal reenactment and a foreshadowing of real-world cataclysmic events coming up in Orsinia and in Europe. None of the children are aware that the world as they know it is as fragile as it is enchanted. In real life, all three of Le Guin’s brothers fought in World War Two. While distancing them in time, space, and characterization, the author writes of people, places and events closest to her own heart, suggesting an unbreakable spiritual bond, indeed a unity, between herself and her Orsinian characters. In one of her conversations with Helene Escudie, Le Guin also has called Orsinia her own “half-imaginary homeland.”

The kinship of East and West is also underscored, as Le Guin explores the “moral meaning of history to the individuals living through it,” writes Charlotte Spivak. And, in the words of Le Guin herself, the realization that all humans share the “singular catastrophe of being alive,” is essential to the experience of being fully human.

As the examples above demonstrate, it is not geography or history as such that are important in the Orsinian tales and elsewhere in Le Guin’s works, but geography and history as they connect the characters’ lives, because, as James Bittner puts it, “relationships, not discrete things, are the subject of all of Le Guin’s fiction.” And Warren Rochelle writes that Le Guin’s vision is of human “communities of the heart.” That is why, according to Bittner, the actual geographical boundaries of Orsinia are meant to be fluid and undefinable. This fluidity of geographical boundaries, another distancing technique, is a perennial theme in Le Guin’s fiction, and it is discovery, not recognition, which is the goal of her imaginative art. Be it the drifting ice on a distant planet of Gethen in *The Left Hand of Darkness* or the Orsinian karst plain, perpetually reshaped by underground streams, the tectonics of Le Guin’s imaginary lands reflects the psychological and social uncertainties, the inherent instability and fluidity of human existence. Likewise, in the story called “Ether, OR,” in her 1996 collection *Unlocking the Air*, an American town has no fixed

geographical location; it moves and shifts perspectives, geographically, and—while the story switches from one narrative voice to another—psychologically. Similarly, Orsinia’s location, history, and geology are ever changing.

The theme of the essential inter-connectedness that is central to her early Orsinian Tales, continues in most of Le Guin’s other, more famous worlds. Her expanding Hainish universe, for example, is called the Ekumen (from the Greek “oikumene” for “home” and “hearth”), and all its planets are connected to a common source. Likewise, the humans, the animals, and the dragons of Earthsea are inter-connected by verbal magic, which permeates their existence, so that if one creature or person tampers with the world by abusing his, her or its power, the world’s balance is violated and has to be restored.

This idea of the essential balance all creatures depend on is a belief Le Guin derives from the Taoism that influences all of her writing.<sup>4</sup> One of the messages of Taoism is that a non-combative, non-competitive, non-violent, contemplative existence and individual self-knowledge are the way to intra- and inter-personal harmony. Taoists believe that every human tendency, good or bad, should be in balance with its opposite. According to this philosophy, opposites are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. Allowing one to dominate the other creates imbalance, suffering, and violence, which is, she writes, “the loss of options.” Another important Taoist belief influencing Le Guin’s fiction is the view of time as both linear *and* cyclical. The next section explores the implications of this belief in the Orsinian Tales.

4 Not to be confused with the Taoist religion. Le Guin’s philosophy is secular.

### **The Non-chronological Arrangement of the Tales**

Each of the Orsinian Tales is dated at the end, but the overall arrangement in the 1976 collection does not follow the actual internal chronology. Chronologically, the earliest Tale is “The Barrow,” which takes place around 1150, at the time when Christianity is taking hold of Orsinia’s outermost regions; this Tale is actually the book’s second text in order of appearance. The Tale that opens the collection, “The Fountains,” dated 1960, is actually the ninth chronologically. The last Tale in the 1976 collection, “Imaginary Countries,” set in 1935, is actually its chronological center.

This seemingly strange arrangement is a narrative device that serves a few important functions. First, as I have already mentioned, it shifts the chronological center so as to suggest that it is incidental, that the center can be and is any or all of the stories, or even the gaps between them. History is full of gaps, and the historical events alluded to in the Tales cannot be dismissed as unimportant. Secondly, Warren Rochelle points out, this arrangement enables “meaning [to] emerge from a network of relationships” among the Tales, without

imposing a linear cause-and-effect sequence. This is a strategy Le Guin employs in many of her other stories and novels, namely, *The Dispossessed*, which alternates chapters depicting the “present” and the “past” and suggests similarities in themes between them. *The Left Hand of Darkness* also alternates both narrative voices and time perspectives. Similarly, the novel *Always Coming Home* is a “multi-media” compilation of first-person narratives, folklore, songs, poems, and even music. The meaning of these works is fluid, equivocal—very much in the spirit of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called “polyglossia,” a literary device of allowing multiple perspectives and interpretations to coexist in a literary work. Orsinian Tales can be stand-alone, readable separately, in any order. Therefore, the whole series, or rather the cycle, has multiple access points. Le Guin has experimented with this format a lot. The reader is invited and encouraged to co-create the text, to make his or her own conclusions. In her introduction to another collection, Le Guin brought up the need to find a new name for a compilation of related stories, “which form not a novel, but a whole.” She called it “a story suite,” similar to the musical form, as in the “Bach cello suite.” In such a compilation, all the parts are integrally interwoven and related, though they are also “performable” on their own, readable separately. The Orsinian Tales form a similar interconnected cycle, which also includes, as I mentioned earlier, the novel *Malafrena*.

Such an open-ended text arrangement is typical of Le Guin. The most obvious examples are the Earthsea series and her Hainish universe—what she called the Ekumen. The Hainish, in Le Guin’s works, are the original human race with a long and involved history of settling many widely separated planets, some of which form a loose association (the Ekumen) for the purposes of gaining and exchanging knowledge. Le Guin often revisited both Earthsea and the planets she had already discovered in the Hainish universe. Often she discovered new worlds, new cultures, new societies, new people. The same can be said for the Earthsea cycle, which started out as a novel about the boy-wizard Ged, expanded into a trilogy, but was later expanded further by two more novels and a few short stories set in that particular world.

As for the Orsinian Tales, the last one she wrote is “Unlocking the Air.” In a September 2002 letter, Le Guin told me she would include in a collection with the rest of the Tales, if she had the chance to do so. This Tale is set about the time of the fall of the Soviet empire and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Because in its original published form, the Tale was not dated at the end, I asked Le Guin to date it, if she saw the necessity of doing so. She dated it 1991, one year ahead of the Tale’s actual original copyright date (1990), though with the benefit of hindsight. This small leap into the future is not incongruous with what Bittner calls “a complex organic vision of history” embodied in Le Guin’s arrangement of all the Orsinian Tales.

Her vision of history and of time is cyclical, as well as linear. Here is how Le Guin explained this twofold nature of history, in speaking of her Hainish universe:

...[Y]ou can ask the Hainish, who have been around for a long time, and whose historians not only know a lot of what happened, but also know that it keeps happening and will happen again.... They are somewhat like Ecclesiastes, seeing no new things under the, or any, sun; but they are much more cheerful about it than [the author of Ecclesiastes] was.... The people on all the other worlds, who all descended from the Hainish, naturally don't want to believe what the old folks say, so they start making history; and so it all happens again.

Similarly, in the Orsinian Tales, time and history are presented as cyclical in many subtle ways; history is a web of memories, a delicate weaving full of gaps. The Tales are connected both by the gaps and by other factors, such as setting, theme, and the characters' names. Within the stories themselves, there are numerous shifts of time and perspective, as if time's course constantly loops back to the past or branches out into the future. In "The House," when Mariya has a vision of her former residence, she is described as "squeezed ... flat between past and present." She also sees another time and place in a blind mirror, as though the mirror were a window into her past. In "A Week in the Country," such shifts occur in the characters' memories and their projections into the future, as, for instance, when Bruna tries to gauge her prospects with her future husband, Stephan. In "The Road East," time and space converge in Maler's dreams of the road that leads into the past, into history: "... in his mind he walked to them on foot and it was long ago, early in the last century, perhaps." In a key scene, he sits down to rest on the side of this imaginary road, eases his back-strap off his shoulders; yet, when his mother calls him to supper, he gets up and joins her at the table in their apartment. In one sense he has not left the living room, and in another, he joins her out of the past and through a great distance.

In "Unlocking the Air," the idea of time as both linear and cyclical is the most prominent. History is presented as a cycle of retelling the same fairy tale. Within one paragraph, the past, the present, and the future converge:

This is history. Once upon a time in 1830, in 1848, in 1866, in 1918, in 1947, in 1956, stones flew.... The soldiers raised their muskets to the ready, the soldiers aimed their rifles, the soldiers poised their machine guns.

The passage connects the events of European history with Orsinia as it exists in 1991 and with the events in the novel *Malafrena*, where the protagonists take part in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Orsinian nationalist uprising against Austro-Hungarian rule.

The less obvious examples of time as both cyclical and linear appear as symbols in the Orsinian landscapes and cityscapes. The limestone karst of “Brothers and Sisters,” though seemingly unchanging, has underground rivers that carve it and reshape it ceaselessly. Humans also change the karst by mining it, transporting, depositing, and transforming the materials. They also farm some of the land, irrigate it, as well as bury their dead in it. All this perpetual change is both linear – entropy—and cyclical—the lime deposits are simply shifting, not diminishing. Time and history are both cyclical and linear as humans perceive them: in the eponymous Tale, “Ile Forest,” which, in the present, consists of just a hundred or so trees, expands into the past in one character’s imagination and covers the entire Orsinian province of Valone Alte.

The dual quality of time is also subtly reflected in the structures built by humans. In Foranoy, the Old City and the New City are connected by a bridge, where the hero of “An Die Musik” spends a few tranquil moments, connecting the past and the present, while the river beneath it, a current in time, reflects the arches of the bridge, “each with its reflection forming a perfect circle.” Another Taoist feature of this vision of time and history is the emphasis on the contemplation of the present as the moment of true human power. The past and the future are both affected by the decisions of the present; moreover, they are present in the present. It is not about control, because control is deemed illusory by the Taoists, and the need for control, according to this philosophy, results from fear. Instead, it is about making the right decision. But what would be the criteria for “rightness” and correctness? Le Guin does not give the answers; her fiction is open-ended. The implication is that there are no sure prescriptions, no dogma to guide every human decision; the answers are always context-bound. Therefore, to make the right decisions is to recognize the context; usually, it is a context larger than the immediate circumstances. The constructs of music and art (as well as history and nature) serve to provide this larger view by allowing the present to expand and coalesce with the eternal. Ladislav Gaye, the composer in “An Die Musik,” gets a glimpse of eternity through music, which helps him transcend his immediate circumstances. The young characters in “A Week in the Country” listen to old love songs in various foreign languages and are moved by them to see their own love from a universal perspective. Art, history, music, poetry, because of the fluidity of their meanings and individual appeal, seem to be particularly well suited for providing an enlarged perspective necessary for contemplating the current circumstances and for making decisions in the expanded present. In one of her poems from the collection *Sixty Odd*, Le Guin describes this essential relationship between the contemplation of history and the decisions of the present:



We make too much History.  
[...]To be we need to know the river  
holds the salmon and the ocean  
holds the whales as lightly  
as the body holds the soul  
in the present tense, in the present tense.

History is a human construct, a linguistic construct, essential to our collective and individual identity. However, history is often used as a weapon, an excuse, or a justification for perpetuating interpersonal and international violence. Humans have often been unable to balance the past, the present, and the future; often one dominates or overwhelms the others. Yet the future might depend upon achieving this difficult balance, the larger vista of time and humanity's place in it. Envisioning—without fear—a time when one did not and will not exist, one might take comfort in this thought, as, apparently, did Ursula Le Guin and sometimes her characters. For instance, “An Die Musik,” one of the first stories she published in her long career, explores the role of music in particular and art in general in the human search for a broader view of time and identity. Music and art at times remove all hindrances to contemplating the “complete, enduring darkness” of eternity. Again, in this Tale, the past and the future are balanced in the present, if only for a moment. These moments of atonement with nature, with humanity, with history, and with time, are fleeting but important to the balance of human experience. The Orsinians are often aware, if vaguely, of their own longing for this balance; yet, as Le Guin seems to suggest, this awareness is not at home in cultures privileging linearity over cyclicalness, results over process, action over contemplation, youth over maturity, control over freedom, masculinity over femininity, etc. Thus, humans often doom themselves to perpetuating the imbalance of their own lives and, by extension, of history; as a result, human history privileges war over peace, power over understanding, and competition over cooperation.

By contrast, in “Unlocking the Air,” history is being made in the present by the active/passive participation of many “soft faces with shining eyes, soft little breasts and stomachs and thighs protected only by bits of cloth.” The “softness” of the crowd is contrasted with the compact, rock-hard tension of the “palace of power,” “a bomb [...] if it exploded it would burst with horrible violence, hurling pointed shards of stone.” In Le Guin's own rendition of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, she writes:

This is called the small dark light:  
the soft, the weak prevail  
over the hard, the strong.

In “Unlocking the Air,” the young people are described as “absolutely certain and completely ignorant. Like spring – like the

lambs in spring. They have never done anything and they know exactly what to do” And once again, in her translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, Le Guin writes:

To know without knowing is best.  
Not knowing without knowing it is sick.  
To be sick of sickness  
Is the only cure.

In Orsinia, this sickness is the fear that the past will repeat itself, but the young Stephana Fabbre, a student of early Romantic poetry, knows without knowing that history does repeat itself, that the tide always draws back again, but also that qualitative change is inevitable. And she knows that the way to effect this change is through cooperation. The young join forces with previous generations, and, as Stephana says to her mother, “there is enough time to go around.” The girl’s father, who has been hiding from the world in his research laboratory, and her mother, who is initially frightened by the prospect of sweeping social change, both join their daughter, trusting her to make the right decision. As Le Guin writes in another poem, “outside trust, what air is there to breathe?” In one sense, history is the sum of each individual’s memories and life experiences, all of them subjective, some of them imaginary, most of them reportless. So what is there for us all—Americans, Orsinians—to share? As Le Guin puts it, we “share ... the singular catastrophe of being alive” and the hope that the next generation will join us in making the right decisions. We also share humor, music and art, as well as the inevitable realization that all of our lives are woven into the tapestry of Time, that we are creating its intricate patterns by using language, and composing a tale, parts of which we are doomed to repeat, “till we get it right.”

Orsinia is where Le Guin’s published oeuvre began. And these Tales reflect her philosophical framework, as well as her understanding of time and history. Her imaginative placement of herself as a girl growing up in Orsinia reflects her convictions of universal inter-connectedness. Perhaps more important for Le Guin’s fans is that Le Guin’s other (more famous) worlds are, in many respects, rooted in and connected to Orsinia, the first imaginary country she created in detail. The Orsinian Tales provide a larger vista of her literary achievements and offer many glimpses into the remarkably detailed and soulful visions that have been Le Guin’s trademarks. A

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