The Otherworlds of the Mind: Loci of Resistance in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World Is Forest* and *Voices* (Book II of the *Annals of the Western Shore*)

Gabriela DEBITA*

Abstract

Space is of utmost importance in Ursula K. Le Guin's fantasy and science fiction works, in which it often functions as a metaphor for the mind. The heterotopic spaces in the novella The Word for World Is Forest *(one of the works in her* Hainish *cycle) and in the novel* Voices *(book II of the* Annals of the Western Shore *series) serve as loci of resistance: otherworlds mirroring the consciousness of entire cultures fighting for survival. This paper analyzes the way in which two drastically different forms of resistance, violent and peaceful, unfold in the mindspaces of their respective cultures.*

Key words: *Le Guin, resistance, space, heterotopia, heterochrony*

Introduction

Although known primarily as one of the 20th century's most prolific and influential science-fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction writers – 'the SF writer most respected by the literary mainstream, the most studied academically,' as Ken MacLeod writes (2015: 3), Ursula K. Le Guin was also one of its preeminent political writers. Throughout her science fiction (and especially in her Hainish novels and short stories), but also in her fantasy series (*Earthsea* and *Annals of the Western Shore*) and other speculative fiction like *Orsinian Tales*, she explores the fine workings of autocratic and democratic systems, of capitalist and communist societies, of empires and merchant republics, as well as offering an astute dissection of utopian constructs and a hard, unflinching look at the cruelties and horrors of dystopian worlds not entirely dissimilar to our own.

* PhD Student, Graduate Assistant, 'Dunărea de Jos' University of Galați, gabriela.debita@ugal.ro

Among these, her preoccupation with political resistance, both violent and peaceful, and with 'the necessity and cost of resistance' (MacLeod 2015: 1) looms large. It is evident in a number of her works, from the relatively early *The Word for World Is Forest* novella, published in 1972, to the late *The Annals of the Western Shore* series, published between 2004 and 2007, towards the end of her long career. Resistance, before it can be exteriorized and translated into action, begins as a state of mind. In Le Guin's writings, the workings of the mind are intimately connected with the physical spaces, natural or constructed, which her characters occupy, and which serve as both backdrops for their journeys of self-discovery and transformation and as mirrors of their psyches. Therefore, certain spaces act as crucibles in which resistance is initially formulated and then manifested, and are just as important as the concept itself and its resulting acts.

In *The Word for World Is Forest*, Le Guin explores violent resistance to invasion and exploitation in the context of a double 'otherworld' – the alien world of Athshe and the strange mindspace which its inhabitants can access via 'the Dream,' a heterotopic mirror of the physical world in which time is synchronous, rather than linear, and which is populated by the ancestral heroes and archetypes of the Athshean culture.

By contrast, *Voices* (published in 2006), the second novel in the loosely connected fantasy series *Annals of the Western Shore*, documents primarily the formation and eventual success of a peaceful resistance movement in the also-occupied city of Ansul, in which two different types of heterotopic spaces – a network of minute sacred spaces (the god niches) and a secret ancient library – function as loci of resistance and as a connection to the city's pantheon, history, and culture. These three heterotopic spaces and the ways in which they operate as collective mindspaces and as cradles of different types of resistance represent the main focus of this analysis.

Michel Foucault, in 'Truth and Power,' describes power as 'a productive network which runs through the whole social body,' which 'traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse' (1984: 61). In other words, as Zamalin points out, power circulates through language, law, and epistemic systems and 'it is often cultivated in unseen ways by those who are politically weak' (2017: 4). In response to power, however, resistance emerges and Foucault draws a close connection between the two. Of resistance, he says that '[i]t is coextensive with it [power] and absolutely its contemporary' (1990: 122) and adds that

> as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy (1990: 123).

Resistance, thus, is a force which keeps power in check and modifies (or at least attempts to modify) its constructions. It 'entails taking charge of one's life and refusing to accept the extant configurations of the way things are' (Zamalin 2017: 3). Zamalin classifies resistance as 'public or private, collective or individual, directed internally or externally, enacted by those who are powerful or those who are weak' or 'intellectual' (2017: 3), and defines it as 'the story of the downtrodden, the marginalized, those lacking political voice who seek emancipation' (2017: 4). As for its specific location in the hierarchy of societal changes, Burgos places it 'between reform, which implies small-scale changes to existing institutions and structures, and revolution," which he defines as 'the kind of event that in a short period of time succeeds in wiping away the existing structures of society, including its norms and its various articulations of meaning and purpose' (2017: 3).

In the context of occupied societies, like the planet Athshe and the city of Ansul, the 'productive' and pleasant type of power which Foucault describes is replaced with a narrower type of power – the repressive power which '[carries] the force of a prohibition' (1984: 61). This kind of power is dispensed not only through law, but through violence, and inspires resistance movements which do not fit neatly into Burgos' model. These movements manifest themselves through both small-scale changes where possible and through restorative revolutions, which seek to collapse the artificial configurations imposed by force by the invaders and re-establish the natural, harmonious ones which are native to the societies in question.

As mentioned above, my focus is on the spaces which nurture the emergence of these resistance movements and on mapping their relationships with the collective psyches of the societies engaged in the former. This connection rises from a statement Le Guin made in a 1995 interview, in which she claims that 'place' is enormously important in all of [her] work' (Reinking & Willingham 1995: 54). This is by no means a surprising assertion, considering the vast and wondrous variety of places, both natural and constructed, which populate the body of her work.

Her interest in natural places, and particularly in natural places which are distinctly and vibrantly alive, is evident in her science fiction and fantasy work: from the sentient forest in 'Vaster than Empires and More

Slow,' to the tree symbol in *The Telling*, which illustrates the interconnectedness of the world, to the tree rings in *The Eye of the Heron*, which offer shelter and acceptance, to the Immanent Grove on the Isle of Roke in the Earthsea series, a sacred place where magic patterns are woven, to the forest covering the entire world in *The Word for World Is Forest*, which serves as a connection to the Dream and without which the sanity of the native sentient species collapses.

The deeper intent behind this constant return to natural places, and especially to trees and forests, is revealed by Le Guin's acknowledgement of her interest in inner spaces. In the introduction to 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow,' she explains that her fascination lies not with physical actions, with literal happenings and adventures, but with 'what goes on inside. Inner space and all that. We all have forests in our minds. Forests unexplored, unending. Each of us gets lost in the forest, every night, alone' (Le Guin 2016: 1). This understanding of the forest as a metaphor for the mind serves to illuminate the profound importance and complexity of her natural places, and, to an extent this is reflected in the existence of early scholarly work on this topic (Watson 1975), as well as of continued critical interest in novels like *The Word for World Is Forest* and *The Telling*.

While the mind can be a forest, it can also be a labyrinth, an ancient school for wizards, or a vast realm functioning according to its own rules. Le Guin's constructed places also serve as a metaphor for the mind and for the journeys of the soul, and are present in even more significant numbers and more varied forms across her work: humble huts, slave quarters, ordinary farms, comfortable mansions, austere castles, and sprawling estates; tiny villages, floating communities, and living or abandoned cities; as well as sacred spaces, from minuscule god niches to subterraneous labyrinths and the entire realms of the Dry Land, of the Dream, and of the Other Wind.

Of these, the Dream world in *The Word for World Is Forest* (which we classify as a mind construct, rather than a physical one), the god niches in Ansul (*Voices*), and the library of the Waylord of Galvamand (also *Voices*), form the subject of this paper and have been previously referred to as 'heterotopic.' Foucault defines heterotopias as

> counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality (1986: 24).

Among heterotopias, he includes mirrors, 'crisis' spaces (from boarding schools to the honeymoon trip), cemeteries, prisons, theaters, gardens, libraries, museums, brothels, colonies, and ships. Clearly, while some of Foucault's heterotopias are pleasant or inclusive spaces, others are grotesque inversions. As Elana Gomel points out, the understanding of heterotopias as a better version of utopias and as 'zones of fuzzy diversity and mutual acceptance' (2014: 20) is incorrect and ignores their occasionally unpleasant or abominable nature, or the fact that they function as 'black holes of the social imaginary where ordinary spacetime is stretched, manipulated or fractured' (2014: 21). However, the particular set we are concerned with does not fall into this category, but rather that of magic mirrors and repositories of knowledge.

Although Foucault does not specifically mention otherworlds, the Dream world fits neatly into his definition as a site which represents and modifies the site of the physical world – a colossal mirror of sorts in which time is simultaneous and the unseen manifests itself. The god niches, which in themselves can be understood with the help of Gaston Bachelard's theories on corners and miniature spaces explained in *The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1964), form a network which reconstructs an invisible version of the city of Ansul which otherwise no longer exists – a sacred city in which its ancestral gods still walk unseen and influence the lives of its denizens.

Lastly, the library of Galvamand, as a repository of the region's literature, philosophy, and history is a classic Foucauldian heterotopia, and yet more, since it also houses the mysterious Oracle, an ancient force or spirit which finds a vessel in every generation and through which it speaks the truth. All of these sites give rise to various forms of resistance by offering refuge (literally and/or metaphorically) and a connection to the past and future of their respective societies.

1. *The Word for World Is Forest:* Violent Resistance and the Perils of Translation

> Sometimes a god comes […] He brings a new way to do a thing, or a new thing to be done. A new kind of singing, or a new kind of death. He brings this across the bridge between the dream-time and the world-time. When he has done this, it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream, to hold them inside the dream with walls and pretenses. That is insanity. What is, is. There is no use pretending, now, that we do not know how to kill each other (Le Guin 2015b: 127).

Written in visceral reaction to the Vietnam war, Ursula K. Le Guin's 1972 novella *The Word for World Is Forest*, represents, according to Fredric Jameson, one of the major SF denunciations of the American genocide in Vietnam' (2005: 274). The novella, which takes place within Le Guin's Hainish universe, transposes Vietnam's traumas to the alien world of Athshe, whose humanoid inhabitants (categorized as "hilfs" – highly intelligent life forms) mount a desperate resistance to Terran colonists sent to harvest the planet's plentiful timber. In the process, the native Athsheans are subjected to atrocities such as deprivation of liberty, forced separation from their native sylvan environment (which causes insanity due to the inability to establish a link with the Dream world), forced labor, rape, senseless murder, and attempted genocide, and respond with a violence previously unknown and unthinkable in their society.

As MacLeod points out, the novella is 'a reflection on invasion, exploitation and oppression' (2015: 1), as well on the toll that violent resistance can take on a previously peaceful society. The cost of resistance proves to be immeasurably high, and as Jameson explains, the novella's 'last line extends the guilt of violence to even that war of national liberation of which it has just shown the triumph' – an unusual perspective which indicates that, in Le Guin's view, there is 'no righteous violence' (2005: 274).

Using the heterotopic and heterochronic dimension of the Dream, Le Guin explores the corrupting nature of resistance, an unsavory aspect which, as MacLeod points out, is often 'put out of mind' (2015: 3), hidden, left unexplored and undissected. As the introductory quote makes clear, once a potential act or scenario has come to pass and has been 'walked' from one world to another by a 'translator,' considered a god by his people, the two dimensions of reality (waking and dreaming) have been bridged and the act can neither be returned to mere potential nor quarantined in the physical world. While in the linear time of the waking world, the act could be conceivably forgotten, in the synchronous/simultaneous time of dreaming, it persists indefinitely. Thus, due to the dreaming time's function as a repository of both the species' memory and of its future potentialities, acts of violence and murder, however necessary at the time, will continue to linger in their collective (un)conscious like an infection, a dangerous seed, which will not dissipate even after the perpetrator's permanent passing into dream-time. The 'gift' bestowed by one civilization upon the other, the gift of killing, cannot be reversed even after the invaders depart and the world of Athshe heals back to its natural state; instead, it remains imprinted on the Athshean psyche, altering it forever.

Although the ethical complexities of resistance in this novella have been previously noted by other critics (see Barbour 1974, Watson 1987, R.M.P. & Baggesen 1987, Cummins 1993, Burns 2004, Cadden 2005, Baker-Cristales 2012, Lindow 2012), the consequences of violent resistance have not been explored in the context of a heterotopic and heterochronic dimension. Before pursuing this argument any further, however, it is important to review Le Guin's rather complicated relationship with this novella. Initially published in 1972 in the anthology *Again, Dangerous Visions*, edited by Harlan Ellison, *The Word for World Is Forest* is one of Le Guin's most successful works. It was nominated for Nebula and Locus awards and won a Hugo award for Best Novella in 1973. It was subsequently republished as a stand-alone volume several times, beginning with the 1976 Berkley Books edition and ending with the 2015 Gollancz edition.

Despite the novella's success and recognition, Le Guin states in the 'Afterword' to the first edition that writing it was 'like taking dictation from a boss with ulcers. What I wanted to write about was the forest and the dream […]. But the boss wanted to talk about the destruction of ecological balance and the rejection of emotional balance' (qtd. in Watson 1975: 231). Similarly, in the 'Author's Introduction' to the 2015 digital edition, she notes that she had never written 'a story more easily, fluently, surely – and with less pleasure' (Le Guin 2015c). While explaining the origins of the work, she expresses a certain dissatisfaction with having 'succumbed, in part, to the lure of the pulpit' while in pursuit of 'freedom and the dream' (Le Guin 2015c). The reason for this was her separation from the anti-Vietnam movement she had been part of in the United States, and which had represented 'a channel of action and expression for [her] ethical and political opinions totally separate from [her] writing' (Le Guin 2015c). By contrast, in 1968, when the novella was written, she was living in London for a year, feeling 'useless, foolish, and obstinate,' and therefore more inclined to vent her political views through her writing. 'I knew, because of the compulsive quality of the composition,' she remarks, 'that it was likely to become a preachment, and I struggled with this' (Le Guin 2015c).

In a previous conference paper (Debita 2018), we focused on political paranoia in the 'world' time and space of the novella, and particularly on Captain Davidson's imperialist mindset and on its associated anxieties. However, Le Guin's desire to primarily write about the forest and the Dream has always been manifest to me given her interest in otherworlds – worlds which belong entirely to the mind, which mirror the physical world in some aspects, and which require an initiation in order

to be accessed (being in Athshean with the ability to dream, in the case of the Dreaming world; being dead or a trained mage in the case of *Earthsea*'s Dry Land; and being a dragon in the case of *Earthsea*'s mysterious Other Wind). Therefore, writing about the inevitability and corruption of the Athshean resistance in the context of the Dream and of the act of 'translation' feels like a necessary undertaking.

Having established that the Dream is a mirror-like heterotopia, based on Foucault's classification, it is important to add that Foucault also considered the temporal dimensions of heterotopic sites:

> Heterotopias […] open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time (Foucault 1986: 26).

Indeed, in all three of Le Guin's otherworlds mentioned above, time is not linear and could not be considered 'traditional time," at least according to human perceptions. The time of the Dream appears to be synchronic, as ancient archetypes manifest themselves at the same time as fragments of visions belonging to the future. Likewise, in the Dry Land time is different – frozen, immobile, as evidenced by the fixed stars and by its denizens' inability to either remember the past or dream about the future. Little is known of the Other Wind, but its time appears to be cyclical, a time of life, death, and rebirth.

If *Earthsea*'s Dry Land is a heterotopia of complete inversion, a prison/concentration camp, a cemetery, and a black mirror in which time is completely stationary and change becomes impossible, the current novella's Dream is a heterotopia and heterochrony populated by the gods and heroes of the Athsheans; a pleasant mindscape, prior to the Terrans' arrival, in which past, present, and future comingle to maintain the Athsheans' sanity and to help them understand and navigate the world better; a green mirror, as opposed to a black hole. Following the Terrans' invasion and violent exploitation of the world and its inhabitants, however, this dream dimension becomes veined with nightmare and produces, in Selver, its most terrible god to date.

It is important to note that this dimension is verbally referred as 'dream *time*' (emphasis my own), and yet described in spatial terms in Selver's chapters. Hence, it is difficult to settle on a correct term for it, as 'world' does not sufficiently capture the emphasis on what Foucault calls an 'absolute break with […] traditional time' (Foucault 1986: 26), while

'time' does not reflect the omnipresence of the forest and of its geography inside the dream. It is clear, however, that the forest's spatial presence is delicate, ambiguous, and fragmented in either dimension, to the point where a dreamer like Selver cannot always distinguish between dream-time and world-time. 'No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest' (Le Guin 2015b: 27), which belongs to 'the shadowy, the complex,' a complicated network of paths and branches 'devious as nerves' in which 'there was no seeing everything at once: no certainty' (Le Guin 2015b: 27). The ambiguity of this space is compounded by the synchronicity of its time, which makes it difficult to distinguish between memory, premonition, and memory of past premonitions.

The novella inverts the ways in which light and shadow normally function on a symbolic level, casting light as oppressive and shadow as protective. It is only under the forest's canopy, in its complicated obscurity and liminal space, that the Athsheans can cross into the Dream. By contrast, in the exposed spaces created by systematic deforestation, the connection is broken and the Dream becomes inaccessible, causing the Athsheans to become insane. The fact that the forest, the Dream, and the Athshean mind are inextricably linked is substantiated by the imagery of the forest paths as a complicated network, which immediately summons the picture of a neuron circuit, and by the explicit reference to 'nerves.' The forest, thus, as a physical presence, is the equivalent of the brain, while the Dream is the mind of this complex world.

It is in this realm that the old Athshean dream lord, Coro Mena, first sees the invaders: 'in the dream, the giants walked, heavy and dire,' with 'dry scaly limbs […] swathed in cloths,' eyes 'little and light, like tin beads,' followed by their iron machines which cut down the forest (Le Guin 2015b: 29). Humans cannot enter the Dream themselves, so their images are generated, in this world, from the perceptions and memories of the Athsheans who saw them in world-time, but also possibly from premonitions. Given the synchronicity of dream-time, it is not clear whether Coro Mena is reliving a recent memory others have brought into the Dream, watching a simultaneous image produced in real time, or seeing the immediate future.

The 'othering' of the humans is obvious in this passage and functions as a mirroring of the human othering of Athsheans. On the one hand, soulless giants with their machines of mass destruction; on the other, small furry green 'monkeys' whose complex civilization is invisible to those looking only for the signs of a technologically advanced society. The irony,

of course, is that the two species, both of which refer to themselves as 'men' and to the others as monsters or animals, are related via their common Hainish ancestor, and yet are incapable of seeing each other as kindred.

Recounting his dream to Selver, Coro Mena makes two statements which reveal foreknowledge: 'I took you for a god' (Le Guin 2015b: 28), he says to Selver, implying that Selver is not yet one at the time of the vision or of the utterance, although not long afterwards Coro Mena will acknowledge him as such. The other statement reveals a realization that even in a world in constant flux ('the world is always new […] however old its roots' (Le Guin 2015b: 32)), a fundamental change has taken place as a result of a chain of violent acts (the rape and murder of Selver's wife, followed by the latter's violent attack on the humans he held responsible):

> and all men's dreams […] will be changed. They will never be the same again. […] Before this day the thing we had to do was the right to do; the way we had to go was the right way and led us home. Where is our home now? For you've done what you had to do, and it was not right. You have killed men (Le Guin 2015b: 33).

Already, prior to the acts of violence which will lead to victory and the Terran exodus, Coro Mena knows that the culture of his people, for whom murdering one's own had been an illogical and insane act, has been fundamentally altered by the acts of one individual. The reason why Selver's actions reverberate so loudly inside both dreaming and waking time is because he is 'sha'ab,' a translator or interpreter, which are other words for 'god' in the Athshean tongue.

Interestingly, the semantics of 'sha'ab' are revealed to us in Lyubov's chapter, as the anthropologist is struggling to understand what Selver has become to his people. Perhaps his mediation was necessary, given that we, as human readers, have no experience of the dreaming world and of its rules and need to have them explained by someone who is himself an interpreter and capable of bridging cultures and ways of thinking. Lyubov comes to understand, on his own, that Selver's godhood is derived from his ability to

> 'speak about the perceptions of the subconscious. To 'speak' that tongue is to act. To do a new thing. To change or be changed, radically, from the root. For the root is the dream' (Le Guin 2015b: 84).

There is a lot to unpack in a statement like 'the root is the dream.' First of all, in the Athshean language, the words for 'root' and 'dream' are the same. Secondly, the word 'root' can be interpreted in two ways: literally, as the root of a tree, and metaphorically, as a foundation or point of origin. This ambiguity once again underlines the connection between the physical presence of the forest in the world-time and the mindspace of the Dream, as well as the fact that the forest is the foundation of the Dream.

As Coro-Mena had understood as well, Selver is not one of the archetypes of his people: the Pursuer, the faceless Friend, the Aspen-Leaf Woman, the Gatekeeper, the Snake, the Carver, or the Hunter, but something far more dangerous and powerful. He is someone who, via a new speech act, has managed to change reality, 'radically, from the root.' By leading 'so great a newcomer as Death across the bridge between worlds' (Le Guin 2015b: 85), Selver has created a new reality for his people, which includes the previously unthinkable concept of murder – for it is not mere natural death who is a newcomer, but violent death.

Aside from 'translating' this concept of godhood to us, the purpose of Lyubov's monologue is also to ask a fundamental question: had Selver's actions risen from 'his own dreams of outrage and bereavement' or from 'the undreamed – the actions of strangers'? (Le Guin 2015b: 85). Was Selver speaking his own language or Davidson's language? This is when Lyubov articulates the idea of 'an infection, a foreign plague, which would not make a new people of his race, but destroy them' (Le Guin 2015b: 85). The act of translating languages is clearly metaphorical here: in learning the language of the 'yumens,' Selver also learned the language of their psyches, the lack of regard for other lives and sometimes for their own lives, the 'kill or be killed' mentality of the savage, the disdain of the conqueror for the conquered. In translating their psyches, he found human solutions to Athshean problems. It could be argued that the click, the transfer from potentiality to actuality, takes place in the instant of translation, where the god is caught between worlds and becomes a conduit for new concepts.

Likewise, it is impossible to determine whether the pathogen was native or alien. Although Athshean society had never developed violent tendencies of its own, the fact that Athsheans and humans share a common ancestor suggests that perhaps the seed of violence had already been present, in a dormant state, and that it became activated when an act of desperate resistance was necessary.

Due to the way the dreaming world works, however, this act forever changes the nature of the Athsheans, and the fact that their violence

was necessary and justified does not appear to mitigate its unethical nature: 'Maybe after I die people will be as they were before I was born, and before you came. But I do not think they will' (Le Guin 2015b: 128), Selver says at the end of the novella. He has perfect awareness of the fact that due to the heterochronic quality of the dreaming world and to the fact that this dimension is, in fact, an image of his people's collective psyche, with all its parts, there is no turning back: the memory of his acts is already part not only of current Athshean minds, but likely of future ones as well. The consequences of violent resistance, therefore, are all the more severe given the complexity of the Athshean world and mind.

2. *Voices*: Loci of Peaceful Resistance

Annals of the Western Shore, Ursula K. Le Guin's last fantasy series, is a mature, highly introspective work which explores, in addition to the hero's journey, experiences of slavery and loss, of finding and of being found, of magic, and of art. In fact, it could be argued that the series represents Le Guin's fictional *ars poetica*, written in the twilight of a life dedicated to the literary arts, and that it devotes extensive space and attention to the matter of innate gifts, of found powers, and to the ability of poet and poetry to transform reality and bring hidden potential into actuality.

The series, which consists of three novels: *Gifts* (2004), *Voices* (2006), and *Powers* (2007), has undeservedly received minimal critical attention (see Lindow 2006, Oziewicz 2011, Anderson 2016) even as the already substantial body of criticism dedicated to the *Earthsea* series continues to grow. Although all three novels take place in the same world of the Western Shore, a universe with clear Greco-Roman influences, they are only loosely related, with each of them documenting a character's coming of age story, their struggles with a particular form of slavery (metaphorical or literal), and the triumph of finding one's true calling.

Voices, in particular, explores the possibility of peaceful resistance and of restorative justice. As Marek Oziewicz explains,

> [n]arrated by a rape-child, *Voices* is the story of an occupied city-state and of how the conquered and the conquerors negotiate a formula for peaceful coexistence. They do so by enacting a restorative justice script which is shown to be more practical than the alternative, retributive justice script (Oziewicz 2011: 34).

The novel tells the story of the conquered city of Ansul, previously known as 'The Wise and Beautiful' for its famous university, storied libraries, and elegant architecture. Fallen under the control of the Desert Alds, a nomadic, monotheistic people who worship the fire god Atth, Ansul becomes, in the words of Memer, the novel's protagonist, 'a broken city of ruins, hunger, and fear' (Le Guin 2015a: 6). As the Alds look for the Night Mouth, a passage to a dark realm belonging to the adversary of their god, they ransack Ansul and lay waste to its sacred niches and libraries. The occupation of the city comes to an unexpected, yet peaceful, end almost twenty years later, when a velvet revolution, aided by the presence of the famed poet Orrec (the main character of the first novel in the series), leads to the Alds' withdrawal.

During the nearly two decades of occupation, the people of Ansul continue to resist in quiet ways: by organizing secret meetings which, until Orrec's arrival, serve little practical purpose; by salvaging books, whenever possible, and bringing them to the lord of Galvamand for safekeeping; by continuing to acknowledge the presence and existence of their numerous gods; and by continuing to honor the gods even in the latter's physical absence, by making their signs and acknowledging the power of their now-empty god niches. The god niches, which are Ansul's answer to the traditional temple, permeate the city: once full of miniature statues, of flowers, and of offerings, they can be found in homes, at street corners and crossings, and at once-important landmarks, and allow the population to preserve their culture and customs even under extreme deprivation and duress. Together, they create a spiritual palimpsest of the city as it was once was, allowing it to persist no matter how the Alds choose to reshape and 'rewrite' it.

This novel is, more than anything, a rich and complicated tapestry of small, interwoven encounters, which begin quietly and in relative secret, and swell into an uprising which takes the city by storm and leads to its liberation. Although at no time do the gods manifest themselves physically, their presence is permanently felt due to the multitude of minute sacred places scattered throughout the city. There is a sense that it is these places which keep the gods in the city, as long as the native population continues to remember their purpose and acknowledge their importance, and that it is the sacred encounters these places facilitate which eventually lead to Ansul's liberation and the restoration of its ancient ways. In order to better understand the functions and power of the god niches, we will turn to Gaston Bachelard's theories on corners and miniature spaces explained in

The Poetics of Space, and to the close analysis of two particular encounters which may appear inconsequential at first, but which lead to an entire chain of events culminating in the city's liberation.

God niches are initially described as 'the thousand little marble temples of the street gods' (Le Guin 2015a: 6) and can be found in both private and public spaces. In homes, they are similar to the spaces dedicated to the *lares* and *penates* of Roman households, complete with altars where offerings can be made, with oil lamps which must be lit at certain times, or special places in the doorways. The house of Galvamand, for example, has enough niches and altars to make worship a day's job for young Memer, the novel's protagonist. Nevertheless, however tiresome the job, she finds comfort in the memory of her mother performing this sacred duty and in the thought that 'the Alds called our gods evil spirits, demons, and were afraid of them' (Le Guin 2015a: 25), which at this point is her own modest form of resistance. Interestingly, the library, a secret and sacred space in itself (not only as a repository of rare and beautiful books, but as the heart of the resistance following the Alds' prohibition of the written word, as a heterotopic space, and as the home of the Oracle spring) has a god niche of its own tucked between the book shelves.

In public spaces, they can be found at street corners and street crossings, in the markets, or may appear in different forms, such as Sill Stones: 'I went on, speaking to the Sill Stone, and touching the street god's niche as I passed the corner and turned left to the West Street' (Le Guin 2015a: 39); 'I passed by the market god, the round stone that represents the oldest god of the city: Lero' (Le Guin 2015a: 40); 'I left the penny in the hollow under Lero, where people leave god gifts and poorer people find them' (Le Guin 2015a: 48). The reason why the god niches and other small sacred spaces around the city have escaped complete destruction is because the Alds did not realize that their function was similar to that of a temple. Instead, they looked in vain for majestic buildings which would have fulfilled the same role as their own temples dedicated to Atth. One of the conversations between Memer and the Ald boy Simme fully illustrates this inability to see sacred spaces which do not fit an expected mold:

> 'How could people get inside a temple?'
> In Ansul, the word 'temple' usually means a shrine on the street or in front of a building or at a crossways – altars, places to worship at. Many of them are just god-niches like the ones inside houses. You touch the sill of the temple to say the blessing, or lay a flower as an offering. Many street temples were wonderful little buildings of marble, two or three feet high,

> carved and decorated, with gilt roofs. The Alds had knocked those all down. Some temples were hung up in trees, and the Alds left them, thinking they were birdhouses. […]
> I knew that to the Alds a temple meant a full-sized building. (Le Guin 2015a: 155-156

Gaston Bachelard's theories of corners and miniature spaces provide additional insight into the ways in which the god niches of Ansul function as loci of resistance for the native population. For example, Bachelard explains that a corner (relevant in our case because god niches can often be found at street corners):

> is a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly – immobility. It is the sure place, the place next to my immobility. The corner is a sort of half-box, part walls, part door. It will serve as an illustration for the dialectics of inside and outside (Bachelard 1964: 137).

A corner is, thus, a space of solitude, of meditation, of self-containment, where the dreamer can occasionally retire away from the world. This is how the Waylord is able to survive his torture at the Alds' hands and not succumb to trauma and nightmare after his return to Galvamand. The immobility cited by Bachelard is also a marker, in our case, for stubborn resistance: the refusal to abandon one's sacred spaces, and therefore one's culture and customs. It is what allows Ansul to endure unchanged as a mental and psychological space, regardless of the Alds' destruction of some physical spaces.

Regarding miniatures, Bachelard notes that

> the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness. Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness (Bachelard 1964: 155).

The world which the narrow gate leads to is that of the gods: Lero, Ennu, Deori, Luck, Sampa the Destroyer and Sampa the Shaper (who are, in fact, one), and many others. Additionally, there are guardians of the hearth and of the doorway, of the natural world, ancestors, room-spirits, and the gods protecting various parts of the city. Through the god niche, one enters a mindspace populated by miraculous beings, some of them protective, some mischievous, and some difficult to appease. Yet by allowing themselves to maintain a connection to this otherworld, Ansul residents like Memer open

themselves up to strange and wonderful coincidences, to random encounters which end up profoundly shaping the course of the story and the destiny of the city.

Miniaturization is also a form of possessing the world, according to Bachelard. In our case, this is particularly relevant because, at the beginning of the book, the natives of Ansul do not own anything anymore. They are considered slaves, although the Alds do not appear interested in enforcing this aspect. By compressing an entire mindscape populated by a thousand gods into small, unobtrusive spaces, they can continue to possess it to the extent that it can be possessed by mere human beings; more specifically, they continue to incorporate it to closely in their lives, that they cannot be effectively separated from it.

As mentioned before, the plot of the novel is woven out of a myriad small encounters, each of them important in its own way. Of these, we selected two, which we consider particularly interesting both due to their nature and due to the purpose they serve inside the narrative. Memer's first encounter with Gry, which leads Gry and Orrec to the Waylord, is touched by the sacred even though the sacred does not physically manifest itself. 'This is a day of Lero,' Memer tells herself even before encountering Gry and her lion, a day when everything goes right regardless of obstacles. It is also a day of Luck, the deaf god whose help cannot be invoked, but simply enjoyed when randomly bestowed. The fact that Gry is accompanied by a pet lion (and that the lion startles the horse Memer quiets) also indicate the presence of Ennu, which in other areas of the Western Shore is represented as a lioness. About Ennu, Memer tells us that she 'makes the way easy for the traveler, speeds the work, mends quarrels, and guides us into death' (Le Guin 2015a: 292). In Ansul, she is often carved in the form of a cat, and while we are never allowed to forget that Gry's companion is a lion, the playfulness of her feline nature is often emphasized (the hunger, the grumpiness, or the fondness for treats). In this case, Ennu working through Gry and Orrec certainly speeds the work of the resistance movement, which had been hoping for years to stir the people enough to rise against the Alds. To an extent, she also manages to mend quarrels, as the uprising (with the exception of the tent burning) is a largely peaceful event; by helping the Alds' leader, Ioratth, defeat his son's *coup d'état*, the representatives of Ansul manage to negotiate the Alds' departure. Thus, even though this episode involves a literal, fortuitous encounter between Memer and Gry, its other layers point to a brush with the sacred – Ennu's sleek form deftly navigating

realities and destinies, ensuring that those it touches, blesses, and guides can fulfill their roles in the grand scheme of things.

The second encounter is that between Orrec and the people of Ansul, when he decides to perform his poems for their benefit, rather than the Alds' entertainment. 'He raised his lyre, and as they began to quieten, he sang out the first line of his song 'Liberty': 'As in the dark of winter night …' And we sang it with him, thousands of voices' (Le Guin 2015a: 207). This encounter between poet and the crowd of oppressed men and women of Ansul allows us to see art reshaping reality. As the thousands of voices meet, those who had been afraid are no longer afraid, and Lero once again makes its presence felt:

> the tumult rose again, cheers and calls for more, but also shouts as of anger, and somewhere in the crowd a deep-voiced man called out 'Lero! Lero! Lero!' – and other voices took it up as a chant, with a fast beat on a mounting tune (Le Guin 2015a: 207).

The 'Lero!' chant, invoking the god whose name means 'justice,' will become the rallying cry of the revolution and will sound throughout the crowd scenes until the city's liberation. Of course, Orrec has a great gift as a storyteller, and it could be argued that being in his presence alone counts as an encounter with the sacred. However, given that his poem makes room for a religious invocation, it is more likely that his art serves as a conduit between the collective consciousness of the Ansul crowd and the god they have been carefully remembering all through the occupation and to whom they continued to dedicate dozens of small spaces around the city. Interestingly, once the crowd moves on, Memer sees people 'touching the space where Orrec had stood […], touching it for the blessing, and no one would walk across that spot for a while' (Le Guin 2015a: 208). Even though the poet's person is not sacred in itself, the space he occupies during an act of profound importance for the fate of Ansul becomes sacred, akin to the god niches: a source of immobility (clinging to one's roots) and of possession, but also impressed with the god's fleeting presence.

The other significant locus of resistance in the novel is the library at Galvamand. The Alds' invasion marked the end of Ansul's other libraries, due to the fact that, in Aldean culture, writing and books are forbidden, and those found to be harboring books or engaging in reading and writing are put to death (by drowning, as burning is a sacred act involving the power of their god). Thus, as a result of the occupation, Ansul is stripped not only of its material wealth, but also of its culture, traditions, and

history. Sulter Galva's ancient family library, however, endures because it is twice protected by magic – by the mysterious formula required to unlock its secret door and by the vow sworn by those aware of the place's existence.

Thus, the heart of the resistance lies deep in the House of Galvamand, the domain of Ansul's former Waylord. Tortured and physically broken by the Alds in an attempt to extract information regarding the Night Mouth, the Waylord maintains a quiet presence in the city even as his house becomes a secret meeting place for those citizens planning an uprising. His title can be interpreted in several ways: as someone who leads and shows the way, or as someone who preserves the ways of his people. Sulter Galva does both and is also the one who teaches the young girl Memer how to read both in her own language and the ancient language of Aritan.

The reason why the library represents the most important locus of resistance in the city is because it serves both as a physical storage place for the city's books (many of which are brought in secret to Galvamand after the invasion) and as a spiritual repository of its literature, history, and philosophy. As a space, it is also heterotopic and heterochronic. As Foucault writes:

> Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, even at the end of the century, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything […] of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages […] belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century (Foucault 1986: 26).

Here, I would suggest that Foucault ignores, for a reason which is difficult to fathom, the existence and purpose of ancient libraries – not the private ones, which indeed must have reflected the tastes and interests of their owners, but the public ones, which also sought to accumulate scrolls and artifacts from various parts of the world and different time periods. Ansul and its sister city-states were quite obviously modeled after the city-states of the Ancient World, although Galvamand resembles both a Roman villa and a Renaissance city manor. The library at Galvamand is initially a 17th-century type of repository, reflecting the tastes of its recent owners, but also, traditionally, the interests and preferences of the Waylords of

Galvamand. In a time of crisis like this, however, the purpose of the library expands to include books which are relevant to the culture and history of the city as a whole. The preservation of older slices of time is all the more critical in times when the city and its culture face a serious existential threat.

In addition, the library is housed in a hybrid space, both constructed and natural. Closest to the door are the table and tall shelves, but as one walks along this elongated space, the walls give way to natural rock and the room becomes a cave: the cave of the ancient Oracle, whose wisdom, channeled through a chosen one in every generation, has guided Ansulians for centuries. The intersection of natural magic and human learning and ingenuity turn this space into the secret umbilicus of the city – likely the place of its origin and the locus of its continuity as a civic and cultural entity.

As mentioned above, the library can only be accessed via a secret door, which opens only when certain letters are traced in the air. The association between writing and magic, or between magic and speech acts, is not new to this series; in fact, language forms the entire basis of Earthsea's magic, and it is evident that Le Guin has transported a similar kind of magic to the world of the *Western Shore*, where it quietly manifests at times. It is also unsurprising that when writing becomes the object of a great prohibition, the natural locus of resistance would be a library, that the Oracle's answers appear between the pages of a blank book, or that poetry becomes the driving force behind a velvet revolution. Coming back to the way in which the library is unlocked, we must note that the fact that access to the library is granted only once a ritual has been performed is congruent with Foucault's thoughts on the accessibility of heterotopic spaces:

> Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. […] To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures (Foucault 1986: 26).

For the girl Memer, who learned the magic formula from her long-dead mother, Decalo, the library is initially a protective space. She cannot read yet, so she makes a fort under the great table and looks inside the books, searching for the shapes she had learned to draw on the air. At this point, she does not know that the symbols are called 'letters' or that 'the words in writing are the same as the words in speaking, that writing and speaking are different ways of doing the same thing' (Le Guin 2015a: 15). She knows, however, that 'it's writing that opens the door' – 'only for the

door you do it in the air, in the special place' (Le Guin 2015a: 15). In this context, the door refers, on a literal level, to the library's door: a safe space, inaccessible to the invaders, and permeated by her mother's comforting presence; metaphorically, however, the door which is opened is one towards knowledge and beauty, towards poetry and histories, and, eventually, towards liberty.

Although Memer is the novel's protagonist, she is not the main force behind the events which culminate in the Alds' withdrawal and the city's liberation. Like the goddess Ennu or the fickle god Luck, and most likely guided by them, Memer appears to be in the right place at the right time, steadying a horse only to meet Gry, the lion trainer and the wife of the great poet Orrec Caspro, who had been invited to perform in front of the Ald leaders. With Orrec and Gry ensconced at Galvamand thanks to Memer, numerous little wheels are put into motion, and Memer is just one tiny force who does not appear to exert much influence. As the events of the novel unfold, as the revolution is planned, as the Alds are revealed to be split into factions themselves, with many disgusted by the occupation, as Orrec's poetry moves hearts on both sides of the conflict, as Desac's violent uprising fails disastrously and all its leaders are consumed by flames, as hope of liberation fades, the downtrodden people of Ansul rise and demand their freedom peacefully. Surprisingly, the Alds, who despite their autocratic ways and strange superstitions have a keen sense of justice, agree to withdraw for the time being. It is, of course, unclear whether or not the truce will hold, but for the time being, the conflict is resolved in a manner which pleases both sides.

And yet, although Memer remains in the shadows as Waylord and Gand and Poet play out their parts on the world stage, she is the one chosen by the Oracle to be its Speaker in this generation. She protests the fact that these unknown forces use her as a conduit, feeling scared of what she calls 'the darkness' and perhaps violated by the way she is possessed without consent. The Waylord encourages her to think of the voices as mothers and grandmothers, linking female presences with tradition, lineage, and history.

Memer, like Selver, is a translator, who walks concepts from one world into the other across a thin bridge of consciousness. Unlike Selver, she cannot walk the other world, the world of dreaming, populated by archetypes, by the heroes of her people, and by the grandmothers who spin the threads of fate, so the library serves as a place where the sacred and the mundane converge and she is imbued with the knowledge she must

dispense to the world. As the world around her rearranges itself in a more harmonious pattern, it is difficult to predict if the truce will indeed hold or if peace will once again dissolve into vicious conflict. We are to assume, however, that should another warlord bring Ansul to its knees, the old loci of resistance will light up once more, even though the cast of characters passing through them will inevitably change.

Conclusions

Ursula K. Le Guin's distinct preference for peaceful resistance is evident in the different outcomes of the novella *The Word for World Is Forest* and of the novel *Voices*. In the novella's case, violent resistance, although justified and perhaps inevitable, forever taints the collective consciousness of the Athshean people. As the concept of violent death crosses the bridge between their two worlds, 'translated' by the new god Selver, it can no longer be buried and forgotten, and has, therefore, permanently altered their culture for the worse. By contrast, Ansul's velvet revolution, nurtured by peaceful acts of religious and cultural resistance in the sacred ancient spaces of their city, takes place through poetry and song – an act of creation, of 'making,' and of restoration.

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