

Introduction to “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place To Be”

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Ursula Le Guin's works typically recount the story of a voyage. Whether or not this voyage traverses vast distances of space, it is always an epic journey of the spirit. It is a kind of vision quest in which we who allow ourselves to be taken along confront the strange, the alien, the other, only to return with a deeper understanding of ourselves. We gain a better sense of who we are, but as is perhaps more crucial, we gain insight into where we are. In the end, the voyage is a journey home.

What we learn from those distant others we meet on the journey is not that we should try to be like them, but that we are capable of being, in a much deeper and more complex way, like ourselves; not that we should recycle their way of life as our lifestyle but that by confronting a mode of existence that is rooted in place and experienced as home, we can develop a profound appreciation of our own place, our own home.

Home in its deepest sense is that place we know most intimately and many-sidedly. This is also what home once meant for everyone. As Le Guin points out in "A Non-Euclidean View," for primal people each detail of nature and of place was "better known to human beings than it has ever been since." The history of civilization is thus a history of forgetting—a loss of consciousness of what is closest to us and what has been most sacred to us. Le Guin poses the question of whether our voyage to the elsewhere of the past or the nowheres of fiction can lead us to regain certain lost qualities of mind and abandoned sensibilities, so that we may be once again able to experience reality more intensely, and care about it more passionately, as it manifests itself precisely where we are.

Le Guin's epic voyage reveals the foolishness of our arrogant attempts to control and dominate a vast and mysterious universe, and of our futile efforts to capture and harness the infinite and the sublime through our simplistic, manipulative categories. This is the reason why Coyote turns up so frequently along the way. Lewis Hyde echoes Le Guin's point in his wonderful book on Coyote and the other Trickster figures, which, he says, reveal "no higher law, no hidden truth, but rather the plenitude and complexity of this world."¹ Coyote discloses what's right before our eyes—and, of course, our propensity to miss it completely.

The distinction between "hot" and "cold" societies that Le Guin borrows from Levi-Strauss will probably startle most readers. It seems a bit strange to think about the British spreading hot Anglo-Saxon culture to frigid places like Polynesia. But as Le Guin explains, this is really a distinction between societies that are suitably warm, like healthy living organisms, and others that are dangerously overheated, like broken machines running out of control. "Coldness" is a quality much like Spinoza's *conatus*, the natural tendency of a living being to "persevere in its own existence." For millennia all societies were "cold" in this sense and lived in a quite normal, organic way. It must have seemed unimaginable to them that human beings could ever do otherwise.

Then came the emergence of "hot" societies and everything changed. "Life out of balance" became the reality principle.

Before long the Taoist philosophers were looking back longingly to the mythical reign of the Yellow Emperor, when no one had to talk about virtue or propriety because all did quite naturally what was best for all. Thus, utopia was born out of the malady of civilization and the memory of what came before. One of the greatest of these sages, Lao Tsu, wrote of a once and future world in which people could find all that they needed "without venturing far from home."

"Home" in this sense is the generous and bountiful community, a place of simple but abundant treasures. This ideal underlies Le Guin's citation of the perhaps disquieting, perhaps inspiring question: "What if I believe that Arlington, Texas, is utopia?" Surrealists have always stressed that "the wondrous" (*le merveilleux*) is all around us in everyday life if we are susceptible to its power. Similarly, Le Guin reminds us that the most radically utopian possibilities are already realities. She says of utopia "that if it is to come, it must exist already." It must exist where we are.

There are certain works of fiction that give you the feeling, "This is more real than ninety-nine percent of what I see around me!" The reason they produce this reaction is not that they help us escape

¹ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 289.

from reality, but rather that they focus our attention on that small part of our world that we experience as eminently real; indeed, more than real. They point us toward that remnant of something greater, that “almost nothing” that we somehow know could “be all.” Heraclitus said that we should expect the unexpected—the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary—or else we won’t find it. Such works help us find the unexpectedly wondrous at the heart of the ordinary.² In the end we discover, as Hakuin Zenji expresses it in the chat Zazen-Wasan, “This earth where we stand is the Pure Lotus Land, and this very body, the body of Buddha!”

Le Guin points out in “A Non-Euclidean View” that this wondrous aspect of reality is closely related to wildness. She reminds us that the wild (also called the Tao, the way or path of nature) is a force greater than we and all that we have created, and that its traces are all around us even in the most domesticated and pacified landscapes. As she states it, “the wild oats and poppies still come up pure gold in cracks in the cement that we have poured over utopia.” This recalls Thoreau’s famous statement that “in wildness [not only in ‘wilderness’] is the preservation of the world.” The wildness remains, even where wilderness has been gone for centuries or millennia. It is always here, in the wild oats that continue to grow, the wild children who continue to be born, the wild culture that proliferates despite all the efforts of the state and capitalism, the wild, creative mind that haunts our dreams, even when it is banished from waking life.

Le Guin takes us on a voyage along the path where the wildness of dreams meets the wildness of the world.

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² Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* is such a work par excellence. Robert Nichols’ *Daily Lives of Nghsi Altai*, which Le Guin recommends so highly, is another good example, as is, more recently, Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing*.

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