Revisioning the Gethenians: Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and the Ethnocentric Perspective

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Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* relies on the first-person perspective to articulate how Genly Ai's narrative understands and relates to the Gethenians as a means of questioning the patriarchal assumptions of ethnocentrism. Initially, the text engages with these concerns through the limitation of Genly's narrative voice. It is not until we are given access to Estraven's perspective that Le Guin attempts to balance the solipsism of Genly's masculine position to bridge the differences between himself and the effeminate Estravan. With this gesture, Genly becomes capable of re-constituting himself as merely part of a greater whole in which femininity and masculinity are reconciled within Le Guin's humanistic vision. Genly's perspective, however, remains the dominant point of focalization as both a first-person narrator and protagonist central to the novel's development despite his attempts to assure us that "the story is not all mine, nor told by me alone" (1). The expedition to Gethen is fuelled by Genly's project as an Envoy to incorporate its citizens into the Ekumenical coalition; in turn, the alien world becomes subject to Genly's judgment and scrutiny as a Terran

despite his status as an outsider. Therefore, Le Guin's use of the first-person perspective to privilege her protagonist with narrative authorship is a challenge to Genly's assertion that it is in fact "all one story" (1).

My intervention complicates this narrative authorship in Le Guin's text by dissolving Genly's first-person perspective into the third-person in the moment he fully acknowledges Estravan's femininity:

> "And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man… what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality" (LeGuin, 248)

Instead, I have rewritten the passage as follows:

> "And Genly thought to himself that perhaps he had seen what he had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in Estravan: that he was a woman as well as a man… Genly felt that he had been left with, at last, an acceptance of him as he was. Until then he had wondered whether he had rejected him, refused him his own reality" (248).

In general, without Genly's confessional mode of narration, Estravan's and Genly's voyage across the Gobrin ice sheet back to Karhide is reduced to the

particulars of their journey with less regard for the internal "bridging" of Genly's relationship with Estravan. More specifically, Genly's eventual recognition that he has refused Estravan's "own reality," also becomes radically less significant as a fundamental turning point in Genly's understanding of his own ethnocentric position in relation to that of the Gethenians as "others" (248). When Genly speaks from the first-person perspective, there is an assumption of narrative authority, which includes the potential to either deny or accept a version of reality separate from his own. Therefore, this authority disintegrates through an omniscient retelling. With the third-person point of view, both Genly's and Estravan's narrative autonomy—and difference—is eliminated; their respective voices, the vehicle through which *Left Hand* deals with thematic concerns of overcoming the perceived differences between a dominant culture and the alien "other," are no longer available to us for comparison and reconciliation.

My speculative re-visioning of Le Guin's text provides space for omniscient commentary on both characters' internal states during their time on the ice sheet; however, Estravan's own conclusion that he and Genly have become "equals at last, equal, alien, alone" would be given little narrative weight without first-person insight into the progressive diminishment of Genly's patriarchal feelings towards him (232). The moment in which *Left Hand* assumes that Genly and

Estravan have reached a mutual recognition of one another depends on the contrast between their two distinct voices, which have mostly been "spoken" within the confines of their private written accounts.

This is not to say, however, that Le Guin's first-person epistolary mode does not pose narrative constraints in terms of how Genly's or Estravan's interiority can be accessed. In the first chapter, Genly informs his readers that he has been tasked with assembling a report for the Ekumen, although he has decided to write his report as if he "told a story" instead (1). This instance marks a paradigm shift from a purely documentary account to a subjective first-person perspective that Genly himself has consciously constructed. Although Genly proclaims that his story is more fully representative of various perspectives because it "alters with an altered voice," his first-person point of view as Envoy to the Ekumen in charge of authoring not only his journals, but also the entire arrangement of documents that constitute "the story," gives him the privilege of both author and curator of events.

To critique the privileging of Genly's patriarchal voice in Le Guin's use of the first-person, the third-person perspective also functions at the level of stream-of-consciousness. Stylistically, this level of narration would enable deeper access to Genly's interiority to override the assumption of power in his first-person

narration by melding Genly's consciousness with Estravan's during a moment when the framework of the Ekumenical documentary report working on the assumptions of ethnocentric control could be suspended. From the vantage point of this narration, the perspectives of Genly and Estravan could be given equal attention through the very elimination of their independent voices. This approach would, however, trouble the text's emphasis on the paradox of a utopic vision of humanity in which individual ethnological differences must be recognized, but that a united understanding can, in fact, be achieved.

Further, Genly's knowledge of mindspeech—a skill the Gethenians do not possess—as well as his desire to teach Estravan, can be understood more symbolically from a closed narrative vantage point as opposed to one that is all-knowing. For both parties to use mindspeech represents the ideal of possible mutual understanding between Genly and Estravan. Thus, mindspeech serves as the ultimate interlocutor between two minds alien to one another, despite the caveat that Genly and Estravan would become participants in a process of reverse enculturation. However, because we may only identify with one narrator at any given time, mindspeech also presents the text with the possibility of enabling the two narrative voices to speak simultaneously rather than intermittently. Similarly, through the use of stream-of-consciousness third-person narration, such differences

in narrative voice could potentially be liberated from the assumptions of power made from first-person storytelling. The solipsism of individual minds, as well as their tendency to set forth paradigms of object-subject relationships, remains, however, the keystone for which Le Guin has chosen Genly's patriarchal perspective as a structure for overcoming prejudiced understanding—and for the alien "other" to be, at last, "named, known, recognized" (111).

My speculative intervention in Genly's perceptual shift also questions the role that archival documents occupy within the narrative understanding of Genly in Le Guin's text. The various mythological texts are presented simultaneously as giving subjective voice to the Gethenians within the context of Genly's story, while objectively documenting the ethnographic details that characterize their culture. Yet, even the presentation of these various documents contain ambiguities that render their narrative unstable. The Orgota Creation Myth, for example, has been "recorded in many forms;" meanwhile, the sound-tape collection of the North Karhidish "Hearth Tales" is told by an "unknown narrator" (237, 21). In the third-person perspective, Genly's voice is absorbed by the multivocality of mythological and historical retellings. Alongside the rest of these documents, Genly and Estravan's radical subjectivity, from which *Left Hand* explores the political interplay between the two cultures at the immediately

personal level, is omitted; thus, the redemption from a patriarchal worldview has no point of origin from which to instill this movement away from theories of ethnocentrism to embrace all-encompassing humanism. Ironically, Genly's narrative privilege through the first-person perspective prepares the conditions for his relationship with Estravan to become an essential part of the story with the incorporation of Estravan's recovered diary entries.

The re-visioning of Genly's narrative to accommodate the omniscient perspective rather than the first-person point of view therefore draws attention to the ways in which Genly's cultural power in relation to the Gethenians is enhanced and diminished through narrative framing. Evidently, this shift also reveals the ways in which Estravan's reality as both a man and a woman can be either refused or denied by Genly, a Terran, whose biologically and culturally limited imagination makes it "almost impossible… to accept" (94). For Le Guin, voices are the vessels through which ideological perspectives are carried; it is, therefore, through the voice of patriarchy and ethnocentrism that *The Left Hand of Darkness* seeks to recover histories of exploitation in which we have mistaken not only strangers, but our own neighbors, for our enemies.

Works Cited

Le Guin, Ursula K., *The Left Hand of Darkness.* Penguin Books Ltd., 1976.