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27 Oct 76

Dearest Jo,

Your letter awaited me on return from a journey so god-awful I won't go into it, except to report that my very aged mother finally died. It was odd; as the disfigured flesh in the bed started to cool, it vanished in my mind and gave way to the fleeting, brilliant picture of her as the vivid, highly intelligent, dazzling, adventurous young woman I had briefly known as a child. I am a total atheist and materialist, but just on the zillion-to-one chance that something lives, I spoke to that ghost...Only it wasn't a "ghost".

Old age is a bad practical joke, you know. If only we could all be of an age, if Adolph Hitler exists somewhere as an appealing small boy, if all the pouted and crippled figures we see tottering off the stage could be for a day what they "really" are, young people sharp with hope and pain and love and interests...

Your letter was a lovely antidote. In it you are as usual "thinking with your mouth open," the total effort at definition and understanding going on right before my eyes. My impulse is to Xerox it and send you back the copy, I may do that unless you have a carbon. (Do you???)

In general, I agree, and of course life & death, good & evil, are in your works, but arising from the living characters. But they are in a sense still peripheral, you become beguiled with the living detail. Whereas in Ursula's work you have to allow for, or contend with, her "religion," the curious distancing effect. OMELAS is a perfect example of a story from an abstract base---is the happiness of a great public worth the knowledge that it is based on the terrible, unassuageable suffering of one innocent? (For one child, substitute the under-classes that made the remnants of Victorian life so idyllic for the "upstairs" world.)

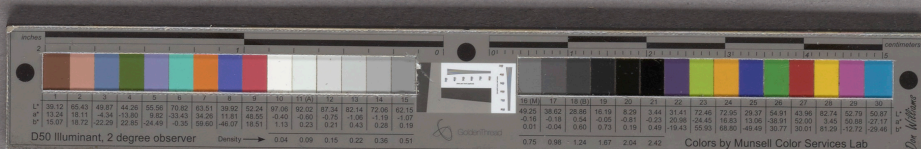
Now you never write a story from or to illustrate a question like that.

I think it worthwhile to explore, as you think, exactly how the impulse to write a given story arises in your critical subject, and contrast it with your own. How did the story actually jell---around a vivid character, a situation, a question, an agony, what? (Many of mine start with a voice dictating from behind my pancreas.) I think it is relevant to your inquiry, the actual practical method of genesis of Ursula's stories, as, say, compared to yours. I bet, a huge difference.

Also recall that strange streak of mysticism, or quasi-hope, hopeless hope if you prefer, the odd fatalism of her mind. She has an area of belief in---I don't quite know what. Cosmic balance, the I Ching, something deviant maybe that came down to her through her anthropological progenitors. But there is a dim, vague---but real---immaterial scenery behind her tales, deploying itself like tentacles through the motivations of some of her characters.

By the way, you can't wean me from my love for her LATHE OF HEAVEN. Something in that spoke to me grippingly, still does. I think whatever kind of writer she will be is prefigured in LATHE, a voice in which she speaks more directly.

There are aspects of Ursula's fiction which cover pain she can't bear to handle, which muffle pain like a pot-holder to grip too hot a kettle.



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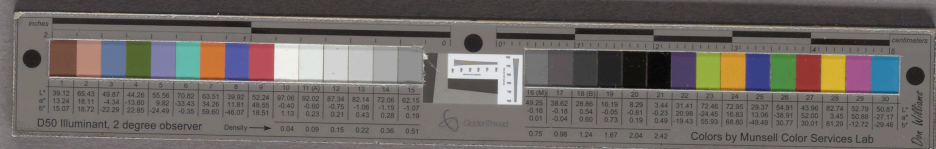
WATSON'S

Your letter was a lovely surprise. It is so good to hear from you again. I was glad to hear that you were all well. I hope you are all still the same. I am well at present. I have not much news to write at present. I am still in the same old job. I am glad to hear that you are all well. I hope you are all still the same. I am well at present. I have not much news to write at present. I am still in the same old job.

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I think it wonderful to explain, as you said, every day. I am glad to hear that you are all well. I hope you are all still the same. I am well at present. I have not much news to write at present. I am still in the same old job.



You can handle pain, but you sometimes give the impression of not knowing exactly how much it hurts, or is hurtful to the vulnerable reader. You are, actually, a tough cookie. Maybe that is your ultimate quarrel with Ursula. You are vulnerable to empathy, but you have it under control, or rather, when you get into one of your Tsunami fits you leave all questions of the effect on the hearer far behind.

Ursula is like me, in that the problem of irremediable pain is one of the big "givens" in her world, we both spend a lot of fictional time tip-toeing around the sleeping dog---the never-sleeping dog---of hopeless hurt. Making a dash in to refer to it, which is all we can bear; retreating again knowing that certain kinds of reader know exactly what has been touched.

I suspect that empathy, or pity for the web of agony that underlies the living world, is a great drawback to a writer. I can barely stand life. And I find I can less and less manipulate fictional situations in which the reality of pain is one of the pawns.....I may end up writing Peter Wabbit.

The more I think it over, the more it seems to me that not essentialism or existentialism or anything so grand is the main problem between Ursula and you. (And maybe between you and me.) It is the difference between your very real toughness and viability and our "I can barely stand it" weakness.

Enough.

I wrote back to Jim Baen saying you had invented the Colonising equivalent of Malzberg's agonised psychotic astronaut, put a human reality into the standard cheerful-aluminum scenario. That a real colony would go far more as you describe than is commonly envisioned.

Do you want a Xerox of your letter-essay on Thinking About Leguin?

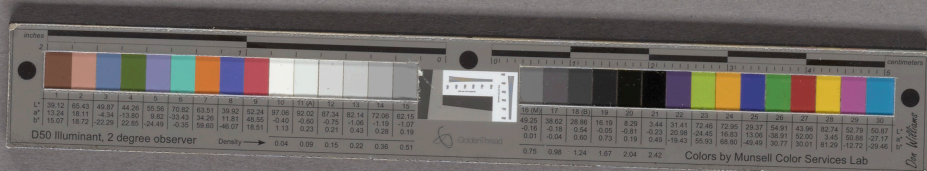
By the way, I regard A.E van Vogt as an android. Should I take him seriously? So far I simply can't. It is like a simlacrum of Calvin Coolidge writing fiction.

Again by the way, Tolkien---and, oddly enough, Wells, are writers who are writing around almost unbearable pain, too. A quite different affair from, say, Genet. Handling personal hurt---a motive for fantasy. In Wells you only see it indirectly, like that almost unreadable outburst, paen of hope, in, what was it, FOOD OF THE GODS? Where he for once lets himself describe what life might be like without it. (Without the needless, useless, omnipresent pain and cruelty.)

I think you would find it interesting to examine your own attitudes, and those of writers congenial to you, towards the pain and hurt of the world. Maybe you could divide us into survivors and non-survivor types. You would find a difference in the quality of the suffering. Something in you accepts, even is on the side of, pain and evil---perhaps you quite rightly feel it as a necessary ingredient. Even when you are howling in anguish it isn't the same as those of us who turn white, walk out and die. There is a tooth-gnash in your howl.

Now phones are ringing, I must go. My love to you, and special thanks for a letter that came into my life just when I needed to see my black swan flying.

Love *[Signature]*



BOND
USA
BERKSHIRE
COTTON FIBER CONTENT

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