

Joanna Russ, 3121 Washington St., Boulder, CO 80302

18 October 1976

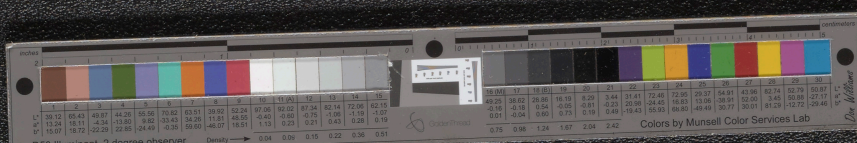
Dear Tip,

Thanks for the letter. I laughed at your description of the word-tsunami--intimidated and furtive indeed! Rather like villagers fleeing a volcano. ("Whatever the Gods are, they aren't angry," in one Chas. Addams cartoon with fireworks & Roman candles coming out of Mt. Pelee.)

Your letter somehow touched off some more thoughts about Ursula. It's true that I worry at her work and keep nipping at it. But I think the quarrel between us (me and her) is far more basic than feminist politics and is more like the politics of being, to coin a phrase. I feel somewhat like the heroine of I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, who after graduating from her inner mythical world of saints and demons, when asked her religion, answers without thinking, "I'm a Newtonian." I never lived in a world of demons and angels (very much alike, I should think) exactly, but I tried very hard and believed in it very hard. From about 15 to perhaps 30 I was so intensely lonely and messed over that I really did try my best to escape right out of reality (without being in the least mad enough to go mad; it's a type one finds a lot of among s.f. fans). I loved Lovecraft. I read bushels of fantasy. I believed that literature was a "higher" truth than the mere things that happened every day around and about. I didn't quite think that the Great Love Affair in the Sky would rescue me from myself and my horrible situation, but I hoped conscientiously that it would and tried very hard. I could appreciate rational arguments against thinking that if I only met The One, He would solve everything; that writing wasn't (after all) real and that one had to live in the real world, and so on. But I was in the peculiar position of knowing perfectly well that if the outré solutions I had devised or made up for my life didn't work, neither did the common-sense ones. Which fact I kept trying to explain to my shrink--who wouldn't listen--until feminism came along and I found out there was another kind of uncommon common sense.

I loved Lovecraft. I read George MacDonald. I must've read every fantasist who ever breathed. I existed on Hammer films! And vampire movies and s.f. I've tried to put the unreality of those years in New York into fiction, but haven't done it all yet; it was genuinely schizoid and neurotic and miserable. And I kept looking very hard for the fantasy or belief or religion ~~xx~~ that would truly rapt me (or all of us) up from the mundane level into the realm of Platonic abstractions.

It never worked. I don't mean that works like MacDonald's or Poe's or The Well at the World's End are hard to ~~workxxx~~ write or seldom good; I mean that they never work. I've tried to explain this to students enraptured by s & s and of course they don't listen. The kingdom of fantasy is inevitably regressive in the sense of being ~~x~~ traditional and conventional. The damned stories always begin well, only to fall apart. I'm talking now about Water Babies and the great Victorian fantasies. They start with such an extraordinary promise of freedom, only to steadily contract--or grow shabby--until you realize you're right back ~~x~~ in your own living room and that under the exotic surface of that story is good old incest again, or Authority is Good (C.S. Lewis) or I Want Mama (MacDonald) or some utterly threadbare piece of silliness that if you'd seen it for itself at first go you would've rejected outright. The only mode in which fantasy can escape this fate is the comic/satiric (which is a kind of anti-fantasy) or the psychological, in which what finally counts



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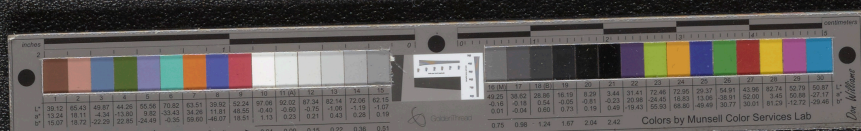
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is the realism or psychology projected in the tale. I still like some of James for that, some of Kipling, a very few "ghost" stories. LeFanu is still fine. But these can be read in the same way one reads realism; they bring you face to face with the same problems, they are tough-grained and concrete and specific in the same way.

Now I believe that the fantasy I was after in my 20s was a kind of Platonism, an attempt to short-circuit real experience and the vagaries of real life, and go right to the heart of the great essences: truth, beauty, love, and so on.

I believe that Ursula is a kind of Platonist. She is not centrally interested in specifics (or has not been until fairly recently). The attempt to get "inside the song" as ~~Bilbo~~ Frodo (or somebody) says in The Lord of the Rings is exactly this kind of motive. Its hallmarks are nostalgia, the exotic, the magical.

I think it's no accident that the two writers in American s.f. who have done most with the real feel of magic are two anti-romantic, anti-Essentialists: Blish (in Black Easter) and Leiber (Conjure Wife). I love the hero's attempt to do magic in Leiber's book; the "slipperiness" of things, the feeling of immense forces resisting him, &c. But Leiber can only do this because for him exoticism and glamor only dissolve into kindness (unless he's writing horror stories, which he does badly), or love (the witch lady in "Mirror World") or facing oneself ("The Change War"). The supernatural is a deliberate objective correlative for something else. He doesn't want to lose himself. And Blish may be a Platonist intellectually but he certainly isn't emotionally; his whole body of work denies it. A dryer writer never lived.

What I dislike in Ursula's work is exactly this longing for the magical, the exotic, the lyrical moment, the Meangfulness of everything. When I got to the Immanent Grove in her last children's book, I believe I snarled aloud.

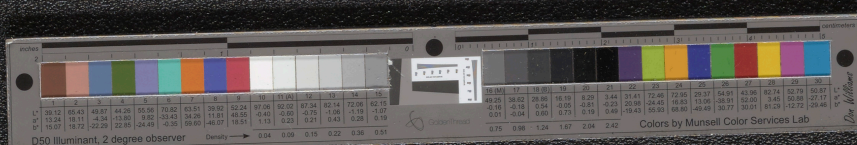
How can anyone write about anything except life? There isn't anything else. Abstractions grow out of the concretes, and death and life and good and evil are observations made about concrete specifics. That is my view. Ursula ~~x~~ seems to believe (or rather, to feel) that the value and beauty of specifics: characters, places, things, come ~~x~~ from their participation in the Great Abstracts.

At which point I snarl out loud again.

Death, indeed! I've written a whole novel on the subject. Only to conclude that there is nothing to write about death per se because death per se isn't. Wittgenstein says somewhere "Death is not part of life. Death is not lived through." And in the end, that's it. It is perplexing and horrible and heartbreaking, but it is not.

She's not an abstract thinker. She'd write a lot better if she were (say I, snidely). She doesn't think at all, in fact. She participates in the Legend, the Essences, the Magic, the Great Old Things.

The only thing wrong with such things is that they don't really exist. They are cultural constructs pretending to be Universals and Timeless. They are very old, but they are not timeless. Ursula is an Essentialist who really believes that objects-in-the-world are a kind of language, that the world can be interpreted. It is medieval thinking.



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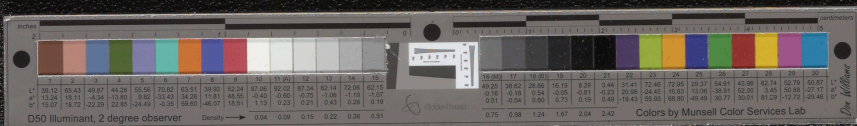
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I do not so believe. The only things-in-the-world which in any way contain ~~MMMMMM~~ Ideas are those things human beings have created--only they embody ideas. Ursula thinks (or writes as if) everything embodies ideas. I don't believe it.

Everything in her work is mysterious and yet familiar. But I love surprises. Real ones. I love real mysteries, like Stapledon's Martians. Not, mind you, objects which radiate Mystery but which have at their core a strange and awesome familiarity--these are merely Freud's return of the repressed--but really strange things, things we don't yet understand and may never understand. That's why I love Lem so much. In The Invincible and still more (they say) in Solaris he creates material we genuinely cannot fully know. There are no surprises in Poe's horror stories, either, though he ~~xx~~ does put them in his detective stories and his satires.

Nothing really new happens in LeGuin's work, or in most of it, certainly.

Real mysteries can, of course, be solved. They don't contain the essence of mysteriousness. It is simply happenstance that we don't (or probably won't ever) understand them fully.

Mystery, magic, nostalgia, and legend are fakes. Or rather not exactly fakes, but effects produced by point of view, i.e. where you're standing. Hop down to another hill, move the lamp about, and they cease to exist. They're very much like optical illusions.

Ursula's first short story, "Semly's Necklace" at one point has a man asking another man ~~xxxx~~ (upon beholding the heroine) something like: don't you feel as if you're in a legend? The answer to which in my mind is absolutely impulsive: Don't be a damned fool.

Good and evil and death are not "as yet" peripheral in my writing; they are in fact very much in my thoughts a good deal of the time. But I reverse the cause-and-effect. These Great Subjects do not exist unless they arise from particulars. In no way ~~xx~~ do the particulars borrow their life from the abstractions.

Ursula is, goddammit, an abstract writer. You can, I suppose, put it that way. Blake is not a Platonist in this sense. His experience is visionary but it's quite concrete; in fact, he had the most organic view of abstractions of anybody I've ever read. That's why he can do such marvelous epigrams. Blake thinks in specifics even when he is thinking about abstractions; that's why he's marvelous. And, of course, thoroughly political, as you may have noticed!

Yes, Ursula's images are real, especially the king in the drafty, scrubby stone castle. And the ice-fields and the rocks. I don't think her forests are real. I was re-reading a section from Dispossessed (where Shevek assists at the birth of Takver's baby) and was very impressed. I suspect that Ursula's fragments, something like A.E. Van Vogt's, are terribly impressive, and that they lose in context, don't gain. Chip's critical article on LeGuin compares her to Van Vogt, a comparison I thought rather nerdy at first, but there is a genuine analogy there. Although Ursula is obviously not a scatterbrain, like A.E.

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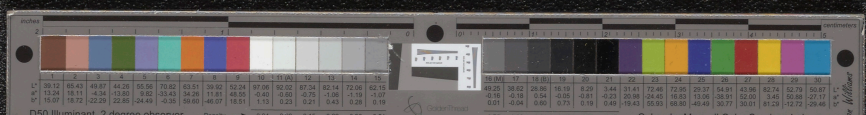
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parents dressed up in angel (or devil) costumes. One impresses them on a child's tender mind at the imprinting age and voila!--a whole preternatural world, or, if you've got the mind for it, a whole philosophy.

To dig down to the experiences themselves, to the "archetypes" that are really Pleasure and Pain and Horror and Ecstasy in themselves, and you can get a wonderful visionary world, like Blake's or Sexton's, but I suspect that verse is better for this than prose. Certainly to try to hook up the experience of the feelings-in-themselves with a Magical/Nostalgic vocabulary of dramatic events derived from literature is fatal. After all, MacDonald also has his moments when the magic works, but then it works because it's really a distorted version of real experience. I am not, you know, plumping for analytical or observing writing. Only for a view of experience that doesn't ring in Platonic Essences.

By the way, marchen themselves are much more tough-minded and concrete than the kind of thing I'm talking about or the kind of thing Ursula (or Tolkien) writes. They're not fantasies, although they may be full of wonders. People who told them had to half-believe and that gives them life.

I really begin to think that the Platonic Essences plus the philosophy is the fatal combo. Water Babies, a book I loved when I was in my teens, now gives me the pip. Although parts of it are still lovely, but they could be just as lovely in Victorian-real-life terms. Like the Magical Lady, who is really mamma going out to dinner in hew new dress and diamonds.

People who can write the kind of work in which everything or nothing is metaphor--in which the whole story is one single objective correlative--are the visionaries. But as you say, Ursula isn't one.

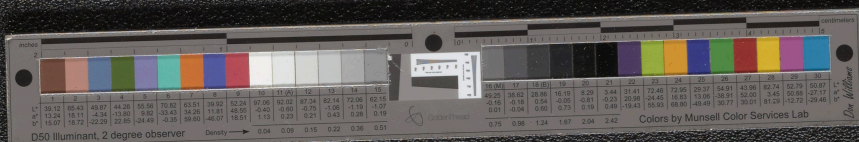
My dear friend, what else is there except life?

To my mind Ursula is writing (and thinking) backwards. And they are all foregone conclusions, which is a horrible sin.

You talk about the "neutral" themes of mortality and virtue--and yet, you know, isn't Chip one of the most insistently moral writers doing anything today? Aren't I? Except that abstractions have no existence except a mental one, and so must be constantly re-checked against the experience that one can't manipulate. Which is why children can be so fine; ~~they~~ haven't learned to distort their feelings in the service of abstract morality. Be wary of books in which children (or adolescents) must learn from the wisdom of their elders; usually (as in Heinlein's juveniles) they are learning a fixed morality given by authority. I find myself in my new book having a forty-year-old superwoman learning everything from a silly twelve-year-old baby poet girl.

I'm not really against ~~x~~ escape, you know. If one could! But it doesn't work. Even those who devour s & s feel the sense of ~~x~~incompleteness, the need to go on, to devour another, &c. And if you're lucky you eventually see through the whole enterprise. It's a whole different universe when you finally ~~realize~~ realize that magic and nostalgia are only tricks of the light, that they don't exist. I think Ursula may get there, but she is certainly backing into it.

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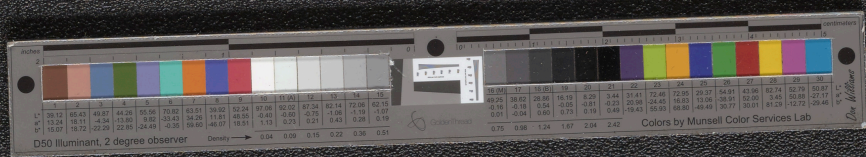
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I certainly don't see how anybody can be an essentialist and a feminist both--although that is where Jung comes in, you see, enabling such women to both hold on to the Ancient Universals and avoid existentialism, and yet ~~enlarge~~ enlarge the sphere in which they personally can exist.

I loathe essentialism more than I can ~~say~~ ^{say} (even in 4 pp.).

In fact, I could write better Nostalgia/Magic/Legend stuff with one hand tied behind my back than most s.f. writers now breathing. Not better than Ursula, though. I don't, by the way, wish she'd turn into a realist, in the manner of ~~xxxxxx~~ Lathe of Heaven. I wish she'd trust her images more and write less connected stories, perhaps, or find some way of not integrating the philosophy and the images. They don't, in fact, go together.

You are ~~xxxxxx~~ right about the images: stone, ice, dragons, kings, cold castles! And stone, stone, stone. Chip does a lovely bit on these in his article. Dispossessed (which he persisted in spelling Dispossessed in the ms.) is full of cross-connections of this kind and there really are extraordinary passages in it about Anarres, which have nothing at all to do with her politics and everything to do with something else.

And yet what sort of world can this woman inhabit, finally? Not one where they'd let her in. That's what I keep coming back to. For a woman this kind of g regressive/traditional/~~xx~~ nostalgia is so absolutely fatal. She is actually performing miracles in putting the two together, and yet where the dickens can you go from her early work? You have to remain always a man-in-disguise, a woman-in-disguise-as-a-man, or there's no imaginative place for you in your own imaginative life. I believe her when she says that men attract her artistically because men are alien; that's what happens when you want to make literature, not life.

I don't write literature, you know; I must've stopped some time ago, somewhere between Picnic and Chaos. At least that's what I keep getting told anyhow, even by you ("loose ends" huh? Feh!).

I must go watch Beverly Sills in Elizabeth Regina. Two sentences of the libretto and you know it's Italian opera; it is totally cracked. Every time I hear "Reynaldo is torn between love for Isabella and his honor as Duke of Boston" I know. They are such wonderfully horridly silly plots.

But alas, there is no future for fiction that doesn't get away from doing what music or paint could do better. One reason, probably, why s.f. illustration is so good, so often, and the writing so ~~xx~~ bad. Illustration is the real medium.

What's "in here" is never "out there." Fiction can only be written on the understanding that ~~xxx~~ it's a language. Marxistly speaking, Ursula tries to substitute Nature for History, and that's what I hate.*

Have you read Roland Barthes' Mythologies? Says all this better than I can.

*To be more clear, she is denying that history is history and insisting that it's Eternal Nature, which is bullshit.

Love,
Joanna

