Like the previous one, the essay that follows takes up the issue of the relationship between magic, science and religion, the famous triangle as proposed by Sir James Frazer, in which any two of the three terms are opposed to the third. Magic and science are manipulative, they are supposed to work, while religion is petitionary (a point made firmly by C.S. Lewis at the start of the fourth of the ‘Chronicles of Narnia’, *The Silver Chair* (1953)). Meanwhile, magic and religion are regarded, by us, as ‘supernatural’, while science is ‘natural science’, two against one once more. The third two-against-one contrast is that religion and science are two powerful forces in the contemporary world, while magic has dwindled to being something only in the imagination, an entertainment.

And what has any of this got to do with science fiction, or fantasy even? There are two points I did not stress in this essay, but might have done if I had thought (or possibly, if I had known). One is that there is a good reason for relating Ursula Le Guin to anthropological theory, which is that she was brought up on it. She gives her own name as Ursula K. Le Guin, and the K. represents her maiden name, which is Kroeber: she is the daughter of two of the most prominent early-twentieth-century structural anthropologists, in the American Boasian tradition, Alfred and Theodora Kroeber. Even more than Jack Vance (see item 6, above) she is saturated in structural or cultural anthropology. Her *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) follows the established sf tradition of imagining a culture with radically different ground rules from our own, but does it semi-professionally, in that the novel incorporates some nine sections of anthropological field notes, which it is the job of the reader to relate to the main story (cognition and estrangement once again; see item 1). Her *Always Coming Home* (1985) goes even further in the same direction, adding music and myth to the presentation of an imagined culture, and indeed goes so far as to downgrade the sense of story – as do the later ‘Earthsea’ books, *Tehanu*
in Introduction 10 (1990), *The Other Wind* (2001) and *Tales from Earthsea* (2001), written many years after their predecessors.

The other point is one I find myself making with increasing stridency, usually with reference to Tolkien, but it applies here as well, and to much of sf too. It is that literary critics are still prone to writing off fantasy and sf as escapist, not serious, not concerned with real life, etc., whereas for most of the human species last century – apart from the small, privileged, sheltered, literary coteries of Britain and America – the serious issues were precisely those dealt with in fantasy and sf. The main ones last century were industrialised warfare and the corruptions of power (see Tolkien), and we hope very much that they will not be the main issues of this century too. Another vital question, tackled by authors from Wells onwards (see item 2, above), is whether a sense of morality can co-exist with belief in evolution by natural selection (which means, to be frank, ‘over-produce and cull’). A third is the relationship between nature and culture (see Vance and Le Guin again), but many others as well – there are few sf authors entirely unconcerned with it. And then there is the question of life and death, which is the centre of the ‘Earthsea’ books discussed here. How does one manage in the aftermath of the great lapse of religious faith, everywhere in the Christian world outside North America, which dates back also to the nineteenth century? All these are very much more serious contemporary issues than the kind of thing I was made to write essays about as a Cambridge undergraduate: personal emotional development (E.M. Forster), fine distinctions of taste (Henry James), the impossibility of ever expressing anything adequately (T.S. Eliot), etc.

And sf surely tells us that this century is very likely to be worse! Which is more ‘escapist’, *Pride and Prejudice* or the ‘Earthsea’ trilogy? Not that I have anything against *Pride and Prejudice*, a work which has shown astonishing powers of survival. But the argument from seriousness and contemporary relevance goes just the other way, whatever Bridget Jones may say.

I would add that in my reading Ms Le Guin counts as one of the twentieth century’s ‘traumatised authors’. There are some clear cases among sf and fantasy authors, like Kurt Vonnegut, who was in Dresden the night the British fire-bombed it, or George Orwell, shot through the throat in the Spanish Civil War, or Tolkien, who went over the top with the Lancashire Fusiliers at the Somme, or William Golding, who commanded a rocket-firing ship on D-Day and then at the dreadful battle of Walcheren. Le Guin is not quite one of those, and her ‘trauma’ is perhaps inherited rather than personal. But her mother wrote what is I think the most awful book I ever read in my whole life, about ‘Ishi’, the
last sad free survivor of the genocidally destroyed natives of Northern California (I refuse to give a reference to it: take my warning, do not read it, certainly not the adult version). Ishi was not his real name, which he would not tell anyone, and see the essay that follows for the significance of that! But Theodora Kroeber’s account of his life and his people’s extinction seems to me to be at the bottom of what must be Le Guin’s most famous and most-anthologised short story, ‘The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas’ (1973), a story which upsets everyone, not just me. This is what gives her work something that seems to me to be denied to many mainstream classics of last century: genuine emotional depth. That too can co-exist with sf and fantasy.
The Magic Art and the Evolution of Words: Ursula Le Guin’s “Earthsea” Trilogy

In chapter 13, part IV of C.S. Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength* (1945), the changing relationships between magic, science and religion are expressed in a conversation between Dr Dimble (a teacher of English) and his wife. Dr Dimble remarks:

‘if you dip into any college, or school, or parish – anything you like – at a given point in its history, you always find that there was a time before that point when there was more elbow-room and contrasts weren’t so sharp; and that there’s going to be a point after that time when there is even less room for indecision and choices are more momentous … The whole thing is sorting itself out all the time, coming to a point, getting sharper and harder.’

This process of increasing distinctiveness is partly moral, partly practical; the drive of Dr Dimble’s argument is towards justifying the use of magic (in the person of Merlin) against science (as represented by the diabolist National Institute of Co-Ordinated Experiments), and he maintains it by asserting first that magic was in Merlin’s time not opposed to religion, though now unlawful for Christians, and, second, that when it had real power it was less occult and more materialistic than it is now generally taken to be. ‘Merlin’, he concludes, ‘is the last vestige of an old order in which matter and spirit were, from our point of view, confused’. In Merlin’s day, then, magic, science and religion were not the separate things they have since become.

The conversation, as one would expect from Professor Lewis, contains a good deal of semantic truth. The word ‘science’ itself is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘A branch of study which is concerned … with observed facts systematically classified and more or less colligated by being brought under general laws’ (xiv.649), and a definition of this kind is now what most people think of when they use the word. It is,
however, only the fourth heading offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and is recorded in that sense only from 1725. A man using the word in the fourteenth century, say, might mean no more than ‘mastery of any department of learning’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, sense 2). If that were the case, the distinction between ‘art’ and ‘science’ (now so critical in universities) would be hard to perceive; and the area we now call ‘scientific’ might be inextricably confused with the area governed by the *ars magica* or ‘magyk natureel’. The modern distinction between ‘astrology’ and ‘astronomy’ is not recorded until around 1480,1 while ‘alchemy’ is still jostling ‘chemistry’ a century later. To give a literary example, Chaucer in his ‘Franklin’s Tale’ explains the story’s central fantastic event by referring fairly impartially to ‘magyk natureel’, to ‘sciences / By whiche men make diverse apparence’, to ‘illusioun’, to ‘apparence or jogelrye’, even to ‘supersticious cursednesse’; the man who works the miracle is indifferently a ‘clerk’, a ‘philosophre’, a ‘magicien’. This Chaucerian lack of distinctiveness is no doubt part of what Lewis’s Dr Dimble had in mind.

The point, however, should be of interest to critics as well as to semanticists or historians, for the very sharpness and hardness of modern concepts raises inevitable problems for the writer of fantasy. ‘There is a desire in you to see dragons’, remarks one character in Ursula Le Guin’s ‘Earthsea’ trilogy to another, and he seems to speak for and about many modern readers and writers. But, however great their desire, all modern people, apart from very young children, have dragons classified irrevocably as fictional/fantastic, along with wizards, runes, spells and much else. Writers of fantasy in the present day, then, do not have the Chaucerian freedom, and are always faced with the problem of hurdling conceptual barriers. They know that magic, in particular, cannot be assumed, but will have to be explained, even defended, from the scepticism now intrinsic in the word’s modern English meaning. Of course, this restriction offers a corresponding opportunity, one which, like the problem, would be ungraspable by a medieval author: the modern fantasist, by his explanations and his theories, is enabled like Dr Dimble to comment on the real world, to create novel relationships, to suggest that the semantic ‘grid’ of Modern English is, after all, not universal. His art is rescued from the standard jibe of ‘escapism’ – ‘It’s only a story!’ – by its covert comparisons between ‘fantastic’ and ‘familiar’: the story embodies argument as well.

1 The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not regard the issue as settled till much later (i.734–5), but there is a clear statement of the current distinction in Robert Henryson’s poem of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, ll. 586 ff.
Such creation of relevance from what appears to careless readers as unbridled fantasy is embodied as well as anywhere in modern literature by Ursula K. Le Guin’s trilogy of books, first published 1968, 1971 and 1972 respectively, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (*WE*), *The Tombs of Atuan* (*TA*), *The Farthest Shore* (*FS*). Significantly enough, it is based on a semantic point. The archipelago world of the trilogy (we never find out where or when it is) is devoid of science, but based on magic. Le Guin identifies the workers of magic reasonably indifferently as wizards or witches or sorcerers, but there is one term she does not use, and that the commonest of all in Modern English: a worker of magic is never described as a ‘magician’. The reason, of course, is that this term has a familiar current sense, deprecatory if not pejorative, ‘a practitioner of legerdemain’. The word has been much affected by the rise of ‘scientist’; it contains strong suggestions that magic is no more than a ‘pretended art’, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* so firmly insists – an affair of rabbits up sleeves and deceptive mirrors. A ‘magician’, then, is barely superior to a ‘conjurer’ or a ‘juggler’. Le Guin, accordingly, makes consistent use of the base-form from which ‘magic’ itself is derived, ‘mage’, from Latin ‘magus’; and from it she creates a series of compounds not recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* at all: ‘archmage’, ‘magelight’, ‘magewind’, ‘magery’, etc. The point may seem a trivial one, and yet is close to the trilogy’s thematic centre. The continuous and consistent use of words not familiar to modern readers reminds them to suspend their judgement: their ideas, like their vocabulary, may be inadequate, or wrong.

This, indeed, is the basic point repeated through the first half of the first book in the sequence, *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Definitions of magic are repeatedly implied, or stated, and then turned down or disproved: the definitions bear a close resemblance to those current in our world. ‘You thought’, says one of the characters to the hero, Ged, ‘that a mage is one who can do anything. So I thought, once. So did we all’. The idea is immediately reproved as boyish, dangerous, the opposite of the truth (which is that a mage does only what he must); nevertheless, we recognise it immediately, familiar as we all are with such phrases as ‘it works like magic’, which imply that magic is effortless, unlimited. The magic of Earthsea, though, is given moral boundaries; in an earlier scene it was given intellectual ones. There, Ged, still a boy and only just exposed to magic, finds himself facing a piratical invasion with the men of his village. In this situation, he naturally wishes for some

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2 As said in the ‘Introduction’ to this essay, there are now three further works in the series: *Tehanu* (1990), *The Other Wind* (2001) and the collection *Tales from Earthsea* (2001). They are markedly different from the earlier trilogy.
blasting stroke of magic, and rummages in his spells for one that might give him some advantage. ‘But need alone is not enough to set power free’, the author reminds us: ‘there must be knowledge’. The maxim gains added point by being a total reversal of a standard and familiar modern theory of magic, the anthropological one, stated most clearly by Bronislaw Malinowski, that magic is in essence a cathartic activity, called forth by stress, and working insofar as it produces confidence. ‘Science is founded on the conviction that experience, effort, and reason are valid; magic on the belief that hope cannot fail nor desire deceive’ (Malinowski 1954: 87). But Ged understands perfectly well the difference between desire and fulfilment, hope and fact. He is, in short, not the self-deluding savage whom Malinowski regards as the appropriate and natural practitioner of magic.

Ged is, in fact, at all times rather precisely placed within a framework of anthropological theory. For Malinowski’s ‘cathartic’ notion is not the only influential modern explanation of magic. Even more widespread were the ‘intellectualist’ theories of Herbert Spencer, E.B. Tylor, Sir James Frazer and others,\(^3\) by which magic was, as it were, a crude and mistaken first step in the evolution of man towards science and the nineteenth century, a ‘monstrous farrago’, indeed (so Tylor 1871: i. 120), but nevertheless one based on observation and classification, if not experiment: something closer to science than to religion (so Frazer argued, *Golden Bough*, 3rd edn, i. 221) because based on the assumption that the universe ran on ‘immutable laws’. It may seem that the magic of Earthsea can be reduced to a kind of unfamiliar technology in this way, since it depends on knowledge and has severe limits to its power, but that too would be wrong. For the very first thing that Le Guin does in the trilogy is to show us one way in which magic differs profoundly from science: it all depends on who does it. Ged, as a boy, overhears his aunt saying a magic rhyme to call her goat. He repeats it, ignorantly and by rote – and calls all his goats, calls them so strongly that they crowd round him as if compressed. His aunt frees him, promises to teach him, but at the same time puts a spell of silence and secrecy on him. Ged cannot speak, indeed, when she tests him; but he laughs. And at this his aunt is afraid, to see the beginnings of strength in one so young. All this, evidently, is not like our experience of science. A light turns on, an engine starts, regardless of who is at the switch; but spells are not the same. A mage, then, is knowledgeable, like a scientist; but his knowledge needs to be combined with personal genius, a quality we tend to ascribe to artists. And, unlike both, his skill (or art, or science)

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\(^3\) There is a handy guide to all these in Evans-Pritchard 1965: chap. 2.
has some close relationship with an awareness of ethics – something we expect, not of a priest, perhaps, but of a saint.

It is the oscillation between concepts of this kind (and they are all familiar ones, even if readers do not feel a need to voice them consciously) which draws one on into *A Wizard of Earthsea*, searching for conclusions; and the book is evidently a *Bildungsroman*, a story of a sorcerer’s apprenticeship, where one’s attention is simultaneously on the growth of personal maturity, as one would normally expect, but also on the acquisition of technique. Once again, the basic processes of magic in Earthsea depend on a concept brought to prominence by early modern anthropology: what one might call the ‘Rumpelstiltskin theory’. This is, that every person, place or thing possesses a true name distinct from its name in ordinary human language; and that knowing the true name, the *signifiant*, gives the mage power over the thing itself, the *signifié*. The theory behind this simple statement is expressed in many ways and at some length all the way through *A Wizard of Earthsea*. One of Ged’s first lessons from the mage Ogion (a lesson whose inner meaning he fails to understand, equating it with mere rote-learning) is on the names of plants. Later, and better educated, he spends much time at the Wizards’ School of Roke learning lists of names, and nothing more, from the Master Namer, Kurremkarmerruk. Even at the end of the book he is still explaining the ramifications of the theory to casual acquaintances (and, more relevantly, of course, to us). A key point, for instance, is the distinction between magical illusion and magical reality; it is relatively easy for a mage to appear to take another shape, or to make people see stones as diamonds, chicken-bones as owls, and so on. But to make this appearance real is another matter. Magic food and water do not really solve problems of provisioning for though they may satisfy eye and taste they provide neither energy nor refreshment. That is because the thing transformed retains its real identity, which is its name. As the Master Hand (or instructor in illusion) observes at one point:

To change this rock into a jewel, you must change its true name. And to do that, my son, even to so small a scrap of the world, is to change the world. It can be done ... But you must not change one thing ... until you know what good and evil will follow on the act. The world is in balance, in Equilibrium. A wizard’s power of Changing and of Summoning can shake the balance of the world. It is dangerous, that power. It is most perilous. It must follow knowledge, and serve need. To light a candle is to cast a shadow. (*WE*, chap. 3)
As with the definitions of magic, what is said here is in the end strikingly dissimilar to early modern statements of the importance of names, above all in its concern for morality, and its sense of philosophical considerations outweighing mere technology. Sir James Frazer opened his chapter on ‘Tabooed Words’ by saying firmly if carelessly that the reason why ‘the savage’ thought there was a real bond between *signifiant* and *signifié* was that he was ‘unable to discriminate clearly between words and things’ (*Golden Bough*, ii. 318). The statement is an echo of Bacon’s remark, so close to the development of self-consciously scientific attitudes, that the ‘first distemper of learning’ comes when men ‘study words and not matter’, a remark rapidly hardened into a simple opposition between words and things. Sir Francis probably believed in the truth of Genesis 2:19–20, which would give him pause; but Sir James had no real doubt that things were always superior to words. What Le Guin is clearly suggesting, though, is that this promotion of the thing above the word has philosophical links with materialism, industrialisation, the notion that, as Dr Dimble says in the passage of Lewis’s novel already cited, to modern men, ‘Nature is a machine to be worked, and taken to bits if it won’t work as he pleases’. In her imagined world, the devotion to the word rather than the thing is bound up with an attitude of respect for all parts of creation (even rocks), and a wary reluctance to operate on any of them without a total awareness of their distinct and individual nature. To the Master Namer, even waves, even drops of water, are separate, and not to be lumped together as ‘sea’; for the mage’s art depends on seeing things as they are, and not as they are wanted. It is not anthropocentric. Le Guin puts this over more fully and more attractively than analytic criticism can hope to, and, as has been said, it is for much of the time the explanations of technique, limitation and underlying belief structure that hold the attention of even young readers.

The questions remain: ‘Where does the background stop and the story start? What is the story really about?’ By asking these one sees that the semantics and the explanations and the detailed apprenticeship of Ged are all necessary preparations to allow the author to approach a theme which cannot be outranked in importance by those of the least ‘escapist’ of ‘mainstream’ fictions, and which can perhaps nowadays only be expressed in fantasy: matters, indeed, of life and death. This theme

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4 Bacon made the remark in Book I of *The Proficience and Advancement of Learning* (1605), not far from the place where he dismisses alchemy, astrology and natural magic as imaginary sciences. He was echoed noisily by Abraham Cowley in his *Ode to the Royal Society* and Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society*, both published in 1667.
has been adumbrated by the Master Hand’s statement quoted above, and by the mage Ogion’s summary of the magical and anti-scientific viewpoint: ‘being ... is more than use ... To speak, one must be silent’. For the temptation which runs as a thread through the account of Ged’s apprenticeship is to act, to exploit his power, to reject the wise passivity of the true mage. He shows this from his first appearance, when he calls the goats, not because he wants them, but to make them come; his instinct is fostered by the witch-wife who is his first teacher; and it leads him to repeated acts of mastery when he attempts to summon the dead (to please a girl), and does do so (to outdo a rival). This instinct is not entirely selfish, for he acts several times for others’ benefit, saving his village from the pirates, saving his later ‘parishioners’ from the threat of a dragon. But it is always dangerous, exposing Ged three times to bouts of catalepsy, and furthermore inhibiting his development and causing him to be sent away twice (affectionately enough) from his mentors at Re Albi and at Roke. It is dangerous not just because it breaks the rules of magery, including the often-mentioned but dimly defined concept of Equilibrium, but because light and speech draw their opposites, shadow and silence: which are, quite overtly, terms for death. In seeking to preserve and aggrandise himself (and others) Ged draws up his own extinction.

The point is made clearly enough when Ged (like the Sorcerer’s Apprentice) reads his master’s book for a necromantic spell, discovers a shadow watching him and is saved only by his master’s return; and again when (like Marlowe’s Dr Faustus) he calls up the spirit of the most beautiful woman known to history, to show his power, and – unlike Dr Faustus, though in line with the severer morality of Earthsea – calls with it a shadow-beast, which savages him and pursues him ever after. In a way, though, the most powerful scene of the book is a relatively incidental one when Ged, from pure disinterested affection, breaks the first rule of magic healing and tries to bring back the dying son of his friend from the land of the dead. This ‘undiscovered country’ is visited spiritually, but conceived physically, and its almost casually undramatic nature makes a stronger impact than any charnel-scene:

he saw the little boy running fast and far ahead of him down a dark slope, the side of some vast hill. There was no sound. The stars above the hill were no stars his eyes had ever seen. Yet he knew the constellations by name: the Sheaf, the Door, the One Who Turns, the Tree. They were those stars that do not set, that are not paled by the coming of any day. He had followed the dying child too far. (WE, chap. 5)
Ged turns back up the dark hillside and climbs slowly to the top, where he finds the ‘low wall of stones’ (why ‘low’? we wonder) that marks the boundary between life and death. And there he finds the shadow-beast waiting. Nevertheless, it is not that which is frightening, but the land of the dead itself, with the little boy running uncatchably downhill into it: a conception lonelier and less humanised than the Styx which Aeneas crosses with his golden bough, and yet closer to Classical images than to the familiar Christian ones of Heaven and Hell.

It may be said that the fear of this dim place underlies the whole of the Earthsea trilogy, to be faced directly in the third book. But the land of the dead also acts as an ultimate support for the structure of ideas already outlined. Ged’s temptation is to use his power; it is a particularly great temptation to use it to summon the dead or bring back the dying; he rationalises it by wishing to ‘drive back darkness with his own light’. And yet the respect for separate existences within the totality of existence, which is inherent in magic dependent on knowing the names of things, resists the diminution of others that comes from prolongation of the self, extension of life. One might say that the darkness has rights too. So the nature of his own art is against Ged, and his attempts to break Equilibrium with his own light only call forth a new shadow. The shadow, as has been said, appears in the ‘Sorcerer’s Apprentice’ scene, becomes tangible and ferocious in the ‘Dr Faustus’ scene. The questions that agitate Ged and the reader from then till the end of the book are: ‘What is it? Has it a name?’

On this last point opinions are divided. Archmage Gensher says it has no name. Ogion, the dragon of Pendor, and the sorceress of Osskil, all insist that it has. Their disagreement is one of philosophy, not of fact. For Le Guin is evidently no Manichaean; her powers of darkness are essentially negative (shadow, silence, not-being) rather than having a real existence that is simply malign. It follows that the shadow-beast, being absence rather than presence, should be nameless. But Ogion says, ‘All things have a name’. The puzzle is resolved in the only possible compromise when Ged, after being hunted by the beast and then turning to hunt it instead, catches up with it in the desolate waters beyond the easternmost island. As he catches up, the water turns to land; evidently, to the dry land, the ‘dark slopes beneath unmoving stars’, which we have seen before as the land of the dead. Here man and shadow fight, and fuse; the land turns back to sea: for each has spoken the other’s name simultaneously, and the names are the same, ‘Ged’. The shadow, then, is equal and opposite to the man who casts it; it does have a name, but not one of its own. And the scene rounds off the definitions of magic, the debate over names, the running opposition of death and
And he began to see the truth, that Ged had neither lost nor won but, naming the shadow of his death, had made himself whole ...

In the Creation of Ea which is the oldest song, it is said, ‘Only in silence the word, only in dark the light, only in dying life: bright the hawk’s flight on the empty sky.’

The key words are perhaps ‘his’ and ‘empty’. The first tells us that Ged’s call to resist death would, in the end, not be selfless but self-preserving; the beast was born of fear. The second reminds us that – since the sky is empty, hiding no divinity – the fear is justified, but has to be accepted as Ged accepts and fuses with his shadow. Yet the emptiness that frames his mortality also enhances it. He is the bright hawk, of the last image, for his use-name is ‘Sparrowhawk’. The story then makes a clear final point, needing almost no critical exegesis. What should be realised further and more consciously, however, is first that this point about the nature of existence is in harmony with the earlier discussion of the nature of magic, with its restrained if not submissive philosophy; and, second, that all the philosophical implications of A Wizard of Earthsea exist in defiance of twentieth-century orthodoxies, whether semantic, scientific or religious. It is an achievement to have created such a radical critique and alternative, and one so unsentimentally attractive.

One final way in which the book may be considered is indeed as an alternative (one might say a parody or anti-myth, if the words did not sound inappropriately aggressive). Ged’s re-enactment of the scene of Helen and Dr Faustus has already been noted, as has his return from the land of the dead, reminiscent of the Aeneid in its difficulty – hoc opus, hic labor est, as the Sybil says (vi. 129) – though different in being done without a golden bough. To these one might add the final scene. For one of Sir James Frazer’s great achievements in The Golden Bough was to create a myth of wasteland and fertility rite and a king who must die, a myth mighty yet, as one can see just from book-titles. The regenerative aspect of that myth, as Jessie Weston restated it, was the ‘freeing of the waters’, the clearing of the dry springs. In Ged’s sudden return from the dry land of the dead to the open sea, we have a version of it; yet it is typical that with the ‘glory of daylight’ that is restored to him comes ‘the bitter cold of winter and the bitter taste of salt’. The weakness of Sir James’s myth was that it asked us to accept a cyclic process as rebirth; and Le Guin knows the limits of such consolation.
More positively, there is another aspect in which *The Golden Bough* is rejected by *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Sir James entitled his third volume—which contains the discussion of names—‘Taboo and the Perils of the Soul’; and his account of true- and use-names was accordingly entirely about psychic dangers and the universal mistrust of savages. But Ged and his companions, once again, are no savages, for all their habits of nomenclature. Repeatedly in the book we have moving scenes where characters, instead of concealing their names as is normal and advisable, reveal them to each other in gestures of trust and affection. Vetch saves Ged at a black moment by this gift; at Roke the Master Doorkeeper tells his name to all graduands, in a mildly comic rite of passage. And that is the final impression that Earthsea gives: a world surrounded by the ocean in space and by the dry land of the dead in time, but still bright, warm and fearless, removed from both the insecure exploitativeness of modernity and the meaningless murderousness of Frazerian antiquity. It offers a goal rather than an escape.

In a story so concerned with the fear of death and the assertion of life, one must expect to find strong statements of pathos, as with the pointless and unstoppable death of Ioeth, the little son of Ged’s fisherman-friend. Throughout *A Wizard of Earthsea*, however, pathos is very rarely caused by deliberate, human cruelty; and what cruelty there is comes not from the Inner Lands, but from the eastern empire of Krego-At. The pirates who raid Ged’s village at the start are Kargs; and when Ged, pursuing his shadow, finds himself wrecked on a desert island, the two wretched creatures he finds living there are maroons, left by the Kargs as a move in some dynastic struggle. There is, again, a pathetic scene as the female member of the pair shows Ged her two treasures, a broken ring and the embroidered silk dress she was wearing when abandoned as a baby, and presses the former on him as a gift. But the sense of human cruelty is restated when Ged offers to take the meroons away, and the man refuses: ‘All his memory of other lands and other men was a child’s nightmare of blood and giants and screaming: Ged could see that in his face as he shook his head and shook his head’ (*WE*, chap. 8). It is an extreme move, then, to set the second book of the trilogy in Atuan, one of the four islands of the empire; and to use it as a setting for discussion of another element not represented in the first book, the nature of religion. The change may be felt the more sharply by many modern Americans or Europeans if we see it further as a move from strangeness towards familiarity: for the Kargs are more like historical Europeans than are Ged’s people from the Inner Lands. They are white, for one thing, while Ged is brown. They are fierce, hierarchic, imperialistic, slave-owning. They have an organised state religion, and
indeed an organised state, both unfamiliar in the rest of Earthsea. And, officially at least, they do not believe in magic. ‘What is this magic they work?’, asks one character in The Tombs of Atuan, to be told, firmly, ‘Tricks, deceptions, jugglery’. And, again: ‘How do they get the power? … Where does it come from?’ ‘Lies’ is the orthodox answer; ‘Words’, suggests another, more open-minded but not much better-informed (TA, chap. 4). The Kargs, in fact, agree with the Oxford English Dictionary. They are the first sceptics to appear in Earthsea.

This is perhaps not too apparent in the opening scenes, which once more oppose pathos to cruelty. The book begins with a mother watching the child who is soon to be taken from her; and goes on to describe the ‘installation’ of the child as priestess of the cult of the Nameless Ones, a cult that depends on the theory that as each priestess dies she is reborn as a girl-baby, who has then to be identified and brought back. The ceremony of dedication is purposely a cruel one, in which the child is symbolically sacrificed, and progressively deprived of family, and name, and membership of humanity. Once Tenar is made priestess she has to be called Arha, ‘the Eaten One’, because the Nameless Ones have eaten her name and soul; she cannot be touched, either in affection or (and this is cruel too) in punishment. Kargish religion appears horrific, then, both in our terms, which exalt family life and individual rights, and in the values we have learnt from A Wizard of Earthsea, values that depend so ultimately on the right to be called by one’s proper name. But, as has been said already, Le Guin thinks that even the darkness has rights, and as the book unfolds we are forced to consider what all this cruelty is for, what is its basis in reality. The option exercised by Frazer, of looking on at savage foibles with amused contempt, is not left open.

For there are depths even beneath the horror of Kargish religion. The cults of the Nameless Ones, and the Godking, and the God Brothers have, after all, some good points. They offer an escape, in particular, from the fear that haunts A Wizard of Earthsea and The Farthest Shore, the fear of exile to the dry lands of the dead. The Kargs do not believe that they will go there. Kossil, priestess of the Godking and in general representative of all that is worst in Atuan, regards the inhabitants of the magelands with a scorn which does not rise to pity, because they are subject to death as she is not: ‘They have no gods. They work magic, and think they are gods themselves. But they are not. And when they die, they are not reborn. … They do not have immortal souls’ (TA, chap. 4). Her last sentence is a terrible one, redefining humans as animals, but it shows the assurance her religion offers. The real fear beneath Kargish religion is to have that assurance taken away, to have the whole thing exposed
as a tragic mistake, or swindle, and the threat that Arha, accordingly, fears most is that of atheism – even if this is a warm and affectionate atheism like that of Earthsea mages or many modern agnostics. To this threat she is exposed in the persons of three sceptics: her friend/subordinate Penthe, her teacher/rival Kossil, her liberator/seducer Ged.

The first of these is easily subdued. Penthe does not believe in religion, which she knows, on the sensible ground that the Godking is only human. On the other hand, she believes in magic, of which she has no experience, in an entirely credulous way: ‘they can all cast a spell on you as easy as winking’. The ‘solidity’ of Penthe’s unfaith frightens Arha for a moment, and shows that reason can still work even in the stronghold of superstition. But her opinions are evidently not generally reliable, and she is soon brought to heel by a touch of fear. Arha makes her point, that ‘Penthe might disbelieve in the gods, but she feared the unnameable powers of the dark – as did every mortal soul’ (TA, chap. 4).

Kossil provides tougher opposition. As the story proceeds, we realise that she too fears the dark, but has little belief in the religion she herself represents (the cult of the Godking), except as a focus of secular power. And she, unlike Penthe, is consistently sceptical even about her own fear, and is prepared to put matters to the test. It is almost the turning-point of The Tombs of Atuan when Arha discovers Kossil in the Undertomb – the place most sacred to the Nameless Ones, where light is totally prohibited – digging in the ground to discover whether Arha has really killed her prisoner, Ged, and doing it with a lantern burning. And the Gods do not react. Arha is converted to atheism on the spot, and weeps because of it, because ‘the gods are dead’. The true turning-point, however, is the reaction of Ged. He too has brought light into the holy place, searching for the lost half of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe – the ring the female maroon gave him was the first half – and he has been trapped as a result, provoking a crisis of conscience for Arha, who ought to kill him but cannot. Nevertheless his attitude is very different from Kossil’s or Penthe’s. Neither superstitious like the latter nor incredulous like the former, he expresses firm belief in the Nameless Ones, and asserts that it is only his magic power that is keeping them from a violent reaction.

All this leaves a modern reader slightly baffled. The story drives us to identify with Arha, and to accept Ged’s authority. The one tells us that the dark gods exist, the other’s grief makes us want to believe it. But we are more likely, intellectually, to agree with Kossil and Penthe, and to be repelled in any case by the cruelties inflicted on Arha in the name of the religion she serves. So, who is right, about the Nameless Ones, about reincarnation, about souls? As with the anonymity or
otherwise of the shadow-beast earlier, there are questions with quite objective answers at the core of *The Tombs of Atuan*. Nor are the new answers very dissimilar. Ged’s central statement is that the Nameless Ones are powers, but not gods, and that their strength has two sources. One is the innate cruelty of the universe – a concept familiar to us since the time of Darwin. The other is the human reaction to that fact, the impulse to propitiate and sacrifice and offer scapegoats. Just as the shadow-beast was born of Ged’s fear of (his own) death, so the Nameless Ones feed on the institutionalised cruelty, itself born of fear, which took Tenar from her mother and made her Arha, the Eaten One. They would exist without worship, but their worshippers make them stronger. Ged’s essential point, and Le Guin’s, is that though the universe cannot be denied, and loss of one kind or another is therefore inevitable, what can be controlled is the placatory impulse which seeks to control death but in practice makes an institution of it. Pathos is always with us, in short, but cruelty can be stopped.

This is a satisfying conclusion for the reader of *The Tombs of Atuan*, because it suggests that all its main characters have seen some part of the truth, Penthe and Kossil in rejecting the value of organised religion, Arha in believing that it must nevertheless have some basis. It must be said, however, that in spite of the novel’s overt theme of liberation, there are implications at the end at least as grim as those at the start. The hope of future life is gently taken away, for one thing, when Arha sees her mother (whom she does not recognise) in a dream. Her mother comes to her in the quasi-angelic form which she has decided is representative of the souls of the damned, those who are not reborn, even though (according to Kossil) Arha’s mother, as a gods-fearing Karg, would naturally be reincarnated and not be among the damned at all. Still, Kossil is wrong. And it is a further ironic twist that the vision of this lost relation should signal precisely the abandonment of belief in metempsychosis, since it contradicts the old ‘intellectualist’ theory of Herbert Spencer, that the concept of the soul and of religion itself took its rise from seeing dead people in dreams.5 But Ged has no consolation to offer here, any more than he has over the book’s final tragedy, which is that in order to escape Ged has to kill the only person who ever loved Arha in her priestess-life, and whom she continually threatened and tormented in return. Losses are not recovered in Earthsea, and even as the book ends with its vision of flags and sunlight and towers, one may recall Arha’s furious outburst earlier:

5 See Evans-Pritchard 1965: 23–4. Le Guin uses Spencer’s theory more overtly in Hare’s speech in *FS*, chap. 3.
'It doesn’t matter if there’s oceans and dragons and towers and all that, because you’ll never see them again, you’ll never even see the light of the sun. All I know is the dark, the night underground. And that’s all there really is. That’s all there is to know, in the end. The silence, and he dark. You know everything, wizard. But I know one thing – the one true thing!' (TA, chap. 7)

Maybe she spoke truer than she knew. Certainly the story’s last act contains a kind of sacrifice, and Arha’s wish (which is overruled) to be cast out of humanity like the wretched Kargish maroons.

There are, of course, some warmer elements in the story, clustering for the most part round what magic is allowed to appear. By his gift of insight Ged restores Arha’s name, Tenar, to her; and one might think that by doing so he has made himself able to exploit her. But in a neat scene near the end, after they have escaped the earthquake that is ‘the anger of the dark’, we see that Ged does not use magic just to preserve himself. He calls a rabbit to him by using its true name, to show Tenar. But when she suggests eating it – and they are both hungry – he rejects the idea as a breach of trust. Presumably he has felt the same scrupulosity about her. So there are intimations of courage and self-mastery in the book, indeed prominent ones. They cannot, however, conceal the conclusion that while Le Guin felt that early modern anthropologists had not been able to provide satisfactory theories of magic, she could on the whole agree with their models of the genesis of religion. Like Ged, Sir James Frazer thought that ‘religion consists of two elements ... namely, a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them’ (Golden Bough, i. 222). The latter without the former gives us ritualism (Kossil), the former without the latter approximates to Ged’s standpoint, in Frazerian terms a ‘theology’ without a ‘religion’. Frazer found it difficult, in fact, to find real examples of belief coupled with indifference, but there is a further analogue of sorts to Ged in the person of Frazer’s contemporary and fellow agnostic, T.H. Huxley.

In a famous passage he insisted that social progress depended ‘not on imitating the cosmic process ... but on combating it’, a view harsher and more self-reliant than Ged’s, but projecting a similarly moralistic

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6 In his famous Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays (Huxley 1894: 83). As remarked in item 2, above, Huxley was a major influence on Wells, and on later writers, such as – it seems to me – Richard Dawkins, who also tackles the issue of whether belief in evolution can be combined with morality and altruism, and comes up with the same answer. See his The Selfish Gene (Dawkins 1976: chap. 1).
humanism. In this respect at least scientist and magician agree (as Frazer insisted they should). But there is no room in the agreement for those who wish to intercede with the universe, or think there is anything to do with the Nameless Ones except ignore them, or else rob them and run.

The movement of the first two books of the trilogy is then on the whole downwards, into a deepening gloom, and towards us, towards familiarity. It is continued and even accelerated in the last book, The Farthest Shore, which describes what things are like when the magic starts to run out. Earthsea begins to resemble America in the aftermath of Vietnam: exhausted, distrustful, uncertain. This is conveyed in a series of interviews with wizards who have lost their power, and who try, not to seek help, but to justify themselves to Ged, now grown old, and his young companion Arren. The first one they meet is a woman, once an illusionist, who has turned instead to being a saleswoman and employing in that trade the more familiar arts of distraction and hyperbole. She has, in short, become a conjuror, and defends herself dourly:

‘You can puzzle a man’s mind with the flashing of mirrors, and with words, and with other tricks I won’t tell you … But it was tricks, fooleries … So I turned to this trade, and maybe all the silks aren’t silks nor all the fleeces Gontish, but all the same they’ll wear –they’ll wear! They’re real, and not mere lies and air’. (FS, chap. 3)

She has a point, even a business-ethic; but her equation of magic with mumbo-jumbo has robbed the world of beauty. She distinguishes herself sharply, furthermore, from the drug-takers who now for the first time appear in Earthsea, but when Ged speaks to one of these he insists similarly that eating hazia helps you because ‘you forget the names, you let the forms of things go, you go straight to the reality’ (FS, chap. 3). There is something ominous about the ‘reality’ both speakers oppose to ‘names’ and ‘words’; one remembers the subjection of ‘words’ to ‘matter’ discussed earlier. The point is sharpened by a third experience on the silk isle of Lorbanery, where the inhabitants insist that magic has never existed, and that things are the same as ever, but where the workmanship has become notoriously ‘shoddy’, economics is rearing its ugly head, and a ‘generation gap’ appears to have been invented. In the end, even the innocent Raft-folk who never touch inhabited islands are affected, as their chanters fail to carry through the ritual dance of Sun return; their forgetting the old songs represents the breach of tradition, the failure of authority, which has been, in some sense, the inheritance of the Western world since the mid-nineteenth century. Earthsea, in a word, has grown secularised; and we recognise the condition.
The root of the process is told us many times, and is entirely predictable from the two preceding books. It is the fear of death, the voice that cries (so Ged puts it), ‘let the world rot so long as I can live’. But the fear of death has been on or near Ged since the first few pages of *A Wizard of Earthsea*. The new if related factor in *The Farthest Shore* is more precisely the hope, of life. A wizard has arisen who is able, for the first time, to go through the land of the dead and out the other side, to return to the world after his own death. His example, and the promise it offers, give those who know of it a new hope; but their preoccupation with that hope makes them fear the future more and love the present less, while their wish to preserve themselves is inherently destructive of the Equilibrium through which name-magic works. Besides, the breach that the wizard has made is imagined as a hole through which the magic of the living world runs out, so that the change affects even the ignorant.7

There is, to a modern reader, something almost blasphemous in these statements about the dangers of eternal life. In the final confrontation near the exit from the dead land, the reborn wizard boasts:

‘I had the courage to die, to find what you cowards could never find – the way back from death. I opened the door that had been shut since the beginning of time ... Alone of all men in all time I am Lord of the Two Lands’. (*FS*, chap. 12)

Opener of gates, conqueror of death, promiser of life – one can hardly avoid thinking of Christ, the One who Harrowed Hell. Probably one has been thinking of Him since the dark lord first appeared, holding out ‘a tiny flame no larger than a pearl, held it out to Arren, offering life’ (*FS*, chap. 3). And yet in Earthsea the one who brings the promise is a destroyer; the Christian of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, who flees from his family with his hands over his ears, shouting ‘Life, life, eternal life!’, now reappears as the wizards who abandon their trade and turn the world to shoddiness and gloom. The gifts of magic and of religion could hardly be more fiercely opposed. Yet the weakening of magic in Earthsea resembles the weakening of religion here. For there is a consistent image which underlies *The Farthest Shore*, and which seems to be taken from another book about the failure (and reattainment) of belief, Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. There the morbid, sensual, ghost-haunted roué Svidrigaylov propounds his personal theory of eternity. Raskolnikov has

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just said, ‘I do not believe in a future life’ – a statement that holds no terrors. But Svidrigaylov replies:

‘And what if there are only spiders there, or something of the sort ... We’re always thinking of eternity as an idea that cannot be understood, something immense. But why must it be? What if, instead of all this, you suddenly find just a little room there, something like a village bathhouse, grimy and spiders in every corner, and that’s all eternity is’.8

Raskolnikov rejects the idea as horrible and unjust. How can you tell, asks Svidrigaylov. ‘I, you know, would certainly have made it so deliberately!’ Ged’s enemy seems close to Svidrigaylov, especially in that both have an abnormal terror of death; and his promise of eternity is inextricably spidery. His use-name, to begin with (he has forgotten his true name), is Cob, the old English word for spider. And when Arren dreams, he dreams of being in a dry, dusty, ruined house, full of cobwebs that fill his mouth and nose; the worst part of his dream is realising that the ruin is the Great House of the wizards of Roke. After Ged is wounded, Arren’s paralysis of the will is like being wrapped in fine threads, and he thinks ‘veils of cobweb’ are spun over the sky. When the witch of Lorbanery confesses her failure of power, she says that the words and names have run out of her and down the hole in the world, ‘by little strings like spiderwebs out of my eyes and mouth’. The action begins with the Master Patterner of Roke watching a lesser patterner, a spider. There are many other contributory references. All suggest the entrapment of life in something powerful yet tenuous: if Cob has his way, both the lands of the dead and of the living will become like Svidrigaylov’s bathhouse: dry, dusty, covered by his personal web.

In both works, faith (whether in magic and Equilibrium or in Christianity and eternal life), is wrecked by doubt, a parallel which ought to clear Le Guin of the charge of wilful blasphemy. She is implying, not that Christianity leads to morbidity, but rather that the present inability of many to believe in any supernatural power lays them open to fear and selfishness and a greedy clutching at hope which spoils even the present life that one can be sure of.

Her striking presentation of the land of the dead, so alien to either Christian or Classical concepts, seems also to have a root in the great lapse of faith of the late nineteenth century. For in The Farthest Shore

8 Cited here from the 1951 Penguin translation by David Magarshack, 305.
Ged and Arren have actually to pass through this country, and see it as a strange analogue of the land of the living: people, streets, houses, markets, movement – but no emotion. Arren saw ‘the mother and child who had died together, and they were in the dark land together; but the child did not run, nor did it cry, and the mother did not hold it, nor even look at it. And those who had died for love passed each other in the streets’ (FS, chap. 12). The last sentence offers no eternal cure for the pathos of parting we so often see in Earthsea. But it is also strongly reminiscent of the A.E. Housman poem so popular in the 1880s and 1890s:

In the nation that is not
Nothing stands that stood before;
There revenges are forgot,
And the hater hates no more;
Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside;
And the bridegroom all night through
Never turns him to the bride.9

To be dead = not to be: that is Housman’s faith, and Earthsea’s orthodoxy. Cob’s blasphemy is to try to cure that stable situation, from the ignoble motive of fear and with the joyless and desiccated result already indicated. Yet one hardly likes to blame him, for the dead land is a dreadful image, and it seems only natural to shrink from it, as indeed many others have done in the trilogy beforehand – Ged trying to recall the dead, the Kargs inventing reincarnation as a protection. Le Guin has no trouble in convincing us that loss of faith is unfortunate, nor that joy in life is a proper goal. What is difficult is persuading us that the latter can co-exist with the former, or (to put it in the symbols of her trilogy) that magic is worthwhile even when it promises no immortality. The solution, for the last time, turns on an objective realisation, about names.

It is significant that Cob (like Arha) has forgotten his true name, but that Ged, who says he can remember it, never restores it to him. The failed wizards whom Ged interrogates insist steadily that to be reborn you have to give up your name, but that it does not matter because ‘A name isn’t real’. Blasphemy again, by Earthsea standards, but, as always with Le Guin, even the worst characters are not simply wrong. They are right to say that names and new life are mutually exclusive. For the simplest way to describe the shades in the land of the dead is to say that

9 Poem 12 in A.E. Housman, The Shropshire Lad (1887), ll. 9–16.
they are names, which go there and must stay there. Whether one should say they are only names is doubtful, and one has an almost insoluble problem in translating such statements into our own terms. Perhaps one should say that a man’s name is his self, his sense that he is who he is; once the man is dead this never returns. This means that those who take Cob’s promise are deceived. What they get is eternal consciousness, but consciousness without personality. Which is worse, to be an unreal name/shadow, or a nameless awareness? The metaphysics are hard to solve. Ged’s final insistence, however, is that human beings are indeed dual, as people have long thought, but not by being bodies and souls, rather bodies and names. Of the hero Erreth-Akbe, he says, that though his image has been summoned by Cob it was still ‘but a shadow and a name’. When he died, his name descended to the shadowland, but the essential part of him remained in the real world:

There he is the earth and sunlight, the leaves of trees, the eagle’s flight. He is alive. And all who ever died, live; they are reborn, and have no end, nor will there ever be an end. All save you. For you would not have death. You lost death, you lost life, in order to save yourself. Yourself! (FS, chap. 12)

It is ironic that Ged in the end proposes a Kargish doctrine of reincarnation. But one should note its limitations. Ged says only that dead men return to their elements; he does not say they will be reborn as persons, or reborn with memory, or reborn in any process of justice. He says no more than any agnostic can accept, but strives to make it a positive affirmation.

We are on our own; living is a process not a state; reality is to be endured not changed: precepts of this nature underlie the Earthsea trilogy. Of course, it is not the business of literature to hutch such moral nuggets, nor of criticism to dig for them, and especially not when dealing with books as full of the sense of place and individuality and difference as Le Guin’s. Nevertheless, it has to be said that these three books clearly aim at having some of the qualities of parable as well as of narrative, and that the parables are repeatedly summed up by statements within the books themselves. Mages appear to think in contrasts. ‘To light a candle is to cast a shadow’, says one; ‘to speak, one must be silent’, says another; ‘There must be darkness to see the stars’, says Ged, ‘the dance is always danced … above the terrible abyss’. In their gnomic and metaphorical quality such remarks are alien to modern speech; and yet they turn out to be distinctively modern when properly understood, the last one, for example, relying strongly on our rediscovery of the
importance of social ritual (the dance), and our new awareness of the extent of time and space (the abyss). A reader may start on *A Wizard of Earthsea* for its spells and dragons and medieval, or rather pre-medieval, trappings; we would be imperceptive, however, if we failed to realise before long – however dim the realisation – that we were reading not just a parable, but a parable for our times.

It is tempting to lead on and declare that Le Guin is a ‘mythopoeic’ writer (an adjective many critics find easy to apply to fantasy in general). The truth, though, seems to be that she is at least as much of an iconoclast, a myth-breaker not a myth-maker. She rejects resurrection and eternal life; she refutes ‘cathartic’ and ‘intellectualist’ versions of anthropology alike; her relationship with Sir James Frazer in particular is one of correction too grave for parody, and extending to ‘The Perils of the Soul’ and ‘The Magic Art’ and even ‘The Evolution of Kings’, his subtitles all alike. As was said at the start, she demands of us that we reconsider even our basic vocabulary, with insistent redefinitions of ‘magic’, ‘soul’, ‘name’, ‘alive’ and many other semantic fields and lexical items. One might end by remarking that novelty is blended with familiarity even in the myth that underlies the history of Earthsea itself, the oldest song of The Creation of Êa that is sung by Ged’s companions in at least two critical moments. ‘Only in silence the word’, it goes, ‘only in dark the light’. By the end of the trilogy we realise that this is more than just a rephrasing of our own Genesis as given by St John. Le Guin takes ‘In the beginning, was the Word’ more seriously and more literally than do many modern theologians; but her respect for ancient texts includes no great regard for the mythic structures that have been built on them.
SF and Politics