



FROM THERE TO THERE:
SOME THOUGHTS ON POETRY
AND MAP-MAKING

URSULA K LE GUIN • *So Far So Good*

Copper Canyon Press, 2025

SO MAYER & SARAH SHIN • *The Word for World:*

The Maps of Ursula K Le Guin

Spiral House Editions, 2025

On 15 January 2018, a week before she died, Ursula K Le Guin sent her final manuscript of poems for copyediting. Published posthumously by Copper Canyon Press, the poems in *So Far So Good* – reissued in 2025 by Spiral House, an imprint of Silver Press – are sparse and economical, precise in their descriptions and assured in their simplicity. Bearing the influence of her long engagement with Taoism and Zen philosophy, Le Guin's last poems articulate the world with a matter-of-factness that reveals a mind attuned to paying very close attention. 'The bird that says tzeep says tzeep,' she writes plainly in 'McCoy Creek: Wind', present to the subtle changes taking place around her as the poem hushes to a close, 'the basalt ridges [...] silent / as the air is silent when / the wind for a moment ceases'. Throughout *So Far So Good*, this sharpened sensitivity allows Le Guin to keep time with the alterations and

adjustments of a 'soft and restless' landscape 'making every moment movement' ('the winds of may'), to document her environment in real time, as it happens, 'A season's slant of light noticed only / in August on the golden knolls,' the moon now 'full and half and full and gone again / just as it pleased' ('It Used to Be').

Le Guin's aliveness to the present moment conveys a sense of deep chronology, 'The valley oak above the barn, / dying a huge branch at a time,' standing 'in calm mortality, content / with the warm light that has fed its leaves [...] for five hundred rainy seasons' ('July'). '[L]et these bits of ash and bone / rejoin the earth they always were,' Le Guin writes in 'On Second Hill', the poem's microcosmic and macrocosmic scales interchangeable with one another, the poet occupying two timeframes at once, suspended, ash-like, in the present while living 'In the Ninth Decade', as her final run of poems is titled. 'No need of Como now, or unseen long- / dreamed-of Sicily,' reads 'All Abroad', towards the end of this collection:

or to behold once more
except in dreams the Hebrides,
when every morning opens on a shore
more foreign than any morning used to seem.

Le Guin's mortality is figured as a final voyage. 'The world may be as it used to be', the poem continues, 'but I am altered', age transforming the familiar into something 'half known, half strange', a new topography. 'Ay, but to die, and go we know not where,' cries the imprisoned Claudio in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, fearful of the destination – Le Guin's 'shore / more foreign than any morning used to seem', death's *terra incognita*.

A month after the publication of *So Far So Good*, Spiral House released a second title on Le Guin. Published to coincide with an exhibition at London's Architectural Association, *The Word for World: The Maps of Ursula K Le Guin* presents a selection of the author's hand-drawn maps, imaginary places that served as the foundation for her fantasy and speculative fiction. Edited by So Mayer and Sarah Shin, the illustrations are interspersed with essays and reflections on the role of maps in Le Guin's practice, inviting the reader to consider how looking at

imaginary worlds might ‘enable us to reenvision our own’. While *The Word for World* is focused mainly on her fiction, one wonders, encountering these volumes published back-to-back, what map-making might have to do with Le Guin’s poetry, or poetry in general.

Maps are inherently selective. At the same time, they stake a claim at objectivity, at telling a form of the truth, conveying accuracy, even knowledge. One thinks of Borges’s cartographers in his story ‘On Exactitude in Science’, published in 1946, who map a nameless empire at a scale of 1:1, their finished product covering the landscape like a tablecloth. Or of the sailors in Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), who are delighted when the captain produces ‘a large map representing the sea,’ ‘A map they could all understand’:

‘Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
But we’ve got our brave Captain to thank
(So the crew would protest) ‘that he’s bought *us* the best –
A perfect and absolute blank!’

Le Guin’s maps often seem to take the ‘perfect and absolute blank’ of the sea as their starting point. In her introduction to *The Books of Earthsea* (2018) – a compendium edition of her Earthsea Cycle – she describes the process of drawing and naming every island in her famous archipelago, working at first ‘on a very large sheet – probably butcher paper, which I had rolls of for my kids’. ‘Its use to me was practical,’ Le Guin says of the Earthsea map. ‘A navigator needs a chart.’

A striking aspect of the Earthsea map is how believable it feels. Each island seems located with a genuine precision, one that extends not only to the various inlets and coastlines but to the naming of the islands and the distances between them; there is something of the Outer Hebrides to Earthsea, or the highly fragmented Åland archipelago off the coast of Finland. If Le Guin’s maps convey a sense of reality, however, this seems more than a coincidence. ‘You certainly have to have maps,’ she suggested in an interview of 1982, emphasising the importance of creating a liveable, breathable, traversable world for the sake of one’s characters and readers alike: ‘You have to know how far it is from there to there’. One gets the impression, reading interviews

and introductions, that Le Guin could travel Earthsea in her mind, that she could navigate the archipelago quite happily from memory. It comes as no surprise to find that she would claim to have *discovered* rather than *created* these environments.



Ursula K. Le Guin, *Central & Western Earthsea, For a Wizard of Earthsea*, c.1967 (detail). Ink on paper. Courtesy of University of Oregon Libraries & the Ursula K. Le Guin Foundation.

‘Maps acted as a tool to create specificity and consistency within Ursula’s inventions,’ writes Theo Downes-Le Guin, the author’s son, ‘a realism for places that aren’t real.’ ‘My mother worked hard to make her unrealities realistic,’ he continues, ‘harder than many literary fiction writers work to make their realism realistic.’ As Le Guin herself suggests of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, ‘Whether it’s real Dublin or invented Dublin, it’s got to be right. Whether it’s really there and other people can walk it, or whether you’re building it for them to walk in the mind, it’s got to be absolutely solid.’

We discover something of the ‘absolutely solid’ at work in Le Guin’s poetry, particularly when she is writing of the places she knew best – Napa Valley in California (where she spent much of her childhood) and the beautiful, not-quite-alien landscapes of the Pacific Northwest. ‘I celebrate sagebrush, / scrub-oak, digger pine, juniper,’ reads a poem

from *Late in the Day* (2016), Le Guin's penultimate collection, 'the despised and rejected / or grudgingly accepted / because nothing else grows here' ('Western Outlaws'). There is a cartographic quality to this mode of description, a systematic documenting of the world and its component parts, a measuring 'from there to there'. 'The center is not where the center is', begins 'Amazed', a poem from *Hard Words* (1981), 'but where I will be when I follow / the lines of stones that wind about a center / that is not there / but there,' Le Guin's riddling syntax drawing out the 'maze' concealed within the poem's title, hidden in plain sight. 'Amazed' ends with a play on words – a nod to Emerson's 'transparent eye-ball' – that poses a question about whether we are independent of the world around us or somehow shaped, even *produced*, by it. 'I am not I / but eye,' the poet writes, as though the self and what it sees were no longer distinguishable.

Reading Le Guin puts me in mind of Elizabeth Bishop's poem about Robinson Crusoe – 'Crusoe in England' – in which the castaway meticulously catalogues his island. 'The island had one kind of everything', he remembers, 'one tree snail, [...] one variety of tree, [...] one kind of berry, a dark red,' at one point climbing to the top of the highest volcano to get a better sense of the terrain: 'None of the books has ever got it right.' In Bishop's poem, Crusoe becomes so accustomed to mapping the landscape that he sometimes dreams 'of other islands / stretching away from mine, infinities / of islands, islands spawning islands' on which he is forced to live, one by one, 'registering their flora, / their fauna, their geography,' an endless, nightmarish existence, producing an infinite catalogue that would feel at home in one of Borges's stories. By the end of the poem, Crusoe, too, feels somehow *made* by his environment, as though islands had become a part of his being. 'My blood was full of them,' he notes; even 'my brain / bred islands.'

In her novel *Always Coming Home* (1985), Le Guin describes the Kesh, a fictional people who inhabit California in the distant future. The Kesh are map-makers, though the maps they draw are 'talismanic', depicting places they know well not for navigational purposes but for spiritual and symbolic ones. 'The larger maps were remarkably accurate, considering that their function was mostly aesthetic or poetic,' Le Guin

writes, 'but then, accuracy was considered a fundamental element or quality of poetry'.

For all the accuracy of maps, their claim to objectivity is an illusion. Even the famous projection of the Earth produced by Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator in the 1560s – a staple of classrooms and atlases everywhere – does not reflect the land mass of the globe as accurately as we think, shrinking certain territories in favour of North America and Europe, falsifying details to improve the map's navigational properties, improving it for sea travel. Borges's 1:1 map, accurate to the extreme, is rendered pitifully useless, lying in 'Tattered Ruins', its last remaining scraps 'inhabited by Animals and Beggars'. 'No map can show everything,' Denis Wood states in *The Power of Maps* (1992); 'Could it, it would no more than reproduce the world, which, without the map, we already have. It is only its selection from the world's overwhelming richness that justifies the map, [...] that distinguishes the map from the world it represents.'

While accuracy may well be 'a fundamental element or quality of poetry', poetry does not attempt to reproduce the world. Instead, as Wood suggests of map-making, poetry draws selections from the 'overwhelming richness' of experience, shaping it for others. 'To chart the external world is to reveal ourselves,' writes Peter Turchi in *Maps of the Imagination* (2004):

We believe we're mapping our knowledge, but in fact we're mapping what we want – and what we want others – to believe. In this way, every map is a reflection of the individual or group that creates it. By 'reading' a map, by studying it, we share, however temporarily, those beliefs.

If a poem, like a map, 'is a reflection of the individual [...] that creates it,' what would it mean for us to share its system of beliefs?

I'm reminded of an anecdote recycled by the American photographer Stephen Shore in his memoir *Modern Instances* (2022), describing the peculiar 'evolution of European ignorance about Africa'. During the fifteenth century, European maps of Africa were (naturally) inaccurate, at least as far as distances and measurements were concerned. These

maps, however, did contain 'quite a lot of information about the interior, based essentially on second- or third-hand travelers' reports', showing Timbuktu, the River Niger, and other reliable details, albeit alongside untrue information, 'like regions inhabited by men with their mouths in their stomachs'. While these documents relied on the speculative and anecdotal, they proved, in one sense, to be more accurate than maps produced centuries later; as the accuracy of the coastline and its measurements increased, so the interior was emptied, reflective of the colonial value placed on ports and passages but also of the fact that an insistence on precision can obscure knowledge of other kinds. 'The weird mythological creatures were gone, but so were the real cities and rivers,' writes the economist Paul Krugman, from whom Stephen Shore is borrowing. 'In a way, Europeans had become more ignorant about Africa than they had been before.'

Until the development of digital mapping technologies, maps tended to be static and unchanging, depicting an arbitrary selection of the facts in (mostly) two dimensions. 'A static map cannot describe change, and every place is in constant change,' writes Rebecca Solnit in a passage from *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (2010), worth quoting at length:

I map your garden. A swarm of bees arrives, or a wind blows the petals off the flowers. You plant an apricot sapling or fell a shattered spruce; the season or even just the light changes. Now it is a different garden, and the map is out of date; another map is required; and another; yet another, to show where the marriage proposal, the later marital battle, the formative skinning of a knee or sting of a bee or first memory, and the hours of time lost to sheer pleasure and reverie took place.

Though a map cannot describe the process of experiencing space – of living *in* and *with* and *through* it and remembering it later – perhaps a map-like poem can.

Le Guin's best poems, to my mind, offer something like a living map, a careful study of a place that seems to move and alter as she notes it down; they not only describe landscapes – 'registering their flora, / their fauna, their geography', like Bishop's Crusoe – but also manage to articulate a sense of how it feels to be alive in them, landscapes active in

the mind and body, changing us and being changed. Her poems model how 'To witness fully,' as Le Guin writes in 'Contemplation at McCoy Creek', 'and be thus / the altar of the thing witnessed.'

'A painting, a poem, a piece of music are thought to fix something for us,' suggests Lavinia Greenlaw in *The Vast Extent* (2024), but 'Maybe what they offer is the opposite, an activation out of our fixed present-tense selves'; 'not description but action, not vision but voyage.' As a novelist, Le Guin's success is to invite this kind of 'activation', to enable us to 'reenvision' our own world by imagining alternatives. 'Fiction is invention, but it is not lies,' she suggested to an audience in 2013:

It moves on a different level of reality from either fact-finding or lying [...] Imagination, even in its wildest flights, is not detached from reality: imagination acknowledges reality, starts from it, and returns to it to enrich it.

The same is true of the best poetry, which, like a map, is not 'detached from reality' but 'returns to it to enrich it'. 'Science describes accurately from outside,' writes Le Guin in her foreword to *Late in the Day*, 'poetry describes accurately from inside. Science explicates, poetry implicates.'

Maybe one way to 'share, however temporarily,' the beliefs of a poem, is to have our world enriched by it, 'half known, half strange,' to learn to see through different eyes – different *Is*. After all, writes the American poet Douglas Crase, 'The idea [is] not for you to be made more significant by things. That would be specist. The idea is for things to be made more significant through you.' Poetry extends infinite *yous* in our direction, allowing us to access as many subjectivities as there are poets; for the duration of a given poem, perhaps longer, we witness the world *through* them, a form of 're-vision'.