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"I'VE A FEELING WE'RE NOT IN THE FOREST ANYMORE":

A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION OF THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN VIOLENCE, POLITICS AND HUMANITY IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S *THE WORD FOR WORLD IS FOREST*

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ABSTRACT

This work aims, from a primarily philosophical perspective, to analyse the intricate relationship between violence, politics and humanity in Ursula K. Le Guin's novella *The Word for World Is Forest*. The analysis conducted is driven by a polemical intention, seeking to challenge or, at the least, nuance the universally accepted perception of Le Guin's work as 'pacifist', while also highlighting her masterful ability to generate debate and reflection in the readers. This work seeks to put in dialogue the novella's narrative approach with various theoretical perspectives put forth by renowned philosophers, with particular emphasis on Walter Benjamin's and Carl Schmitt's ideas.

KEYWORDS

Carl Schmitt, *The Word for World Is Forest*, Ursula K. Le Guin, violence, Walter Benjamin.

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"Are you ready for the action?
Are you ready for the fight?
Are you ready for the war?
Are you ready to kick out the jams?"

STUPID FUCKING PEOPLE, *Bring Them Down*

INTRODUCTION

On many occasions, the reflective, critical, and/or "prospective" (Moreno 114-329) potential of the literary genre of science-fiction has been emphasized by many critics and authors: the SF genre would constitute an extraordinary cognitive resource for addressing, in a distinctly profound manner, all kinds of ethical, philosophical, anthropological, and/or political issues. As the author of the work under consideration for the present TFG, US author Ursula K. Le Guin, puts it: "science fiction can show us who we are, and where we are, and what choices face us, with unsurpassed clarity, and with a great and troubling beauty" ("Science Fiction" 118). A good example of all these complexities pertaining science-fiction is her novella *The Word for World Is Forest*, first published in 1972.

The story of *The Word for World Is Forest*, "a space-exploration or space-western story combined with the genre of war literature" (Baccolini 45), takes place on a planet called Athshe, which is covered by dense green forests and inhabited by an indigenous human(oid)[1] race called the Athsheans, a peaceful and nature-sensitive people. From the very beginning, *in medias res*, we notice that the tranquillity of the Athsheans is being disrupted by foreign human colonizers arrived from an environmentally ruined Earth of the future, in search of natural resources, mostly wood. These humans, referred to as 'yumens' by the natives, are brutal and ignorant of the traditions and culture of the Athsheans. Violence becomes a constant presence in the story as these humans exploit and enslave the Athsheans, while devastating the planet's soil to cut down the trees of its forests. The Athsheans, being a peaceful people, are to all appearances frightened and powerless in the face of the invaders' brutality. They are subjected to forced labour, humiliated and even mercilessly killed. However, the situation changes when Selver, a young Athshean, suffers a personal trauma, as he

[1] The term's ambiguity is intended to anticipate an issue that will be dealt with later.

witnesses the rape and murder of his wife, and undergoes a profound inner transformation. He decides to rebel and starts to organise a global native resistance against the colonizers. As time passes, his resistance turns into a liberation movement. Selver, once considered weak and submissive, turns into a charismatic and determined leader. He manages to mobilise other Athsheans, who begin to fight for their freedom. The violence reaches a climax when the natives, led by Selver, start actively fighting against the invaders. Guerrilla tactics are used to strike and weaken their forces. The Athsheans prove that they can kill and fight, thus shattering the colonizers' view that regards them as naturally peaceful and docile creatures. The Athsheans' resistance arouses a growing sense of fear and panic among the invaders, their arrogance and dominance being challenged by a race they consider inferior. The violence perpetrated by both sides escalates (including the killing of innocents) but leads the natives to an agreed peace which will later turn into regained independence. The natives' newly discovered resort to violence eventually proves to be effective, but at the same time self-destructive, leaving behind a destroyed world and an alien race that has lost its previous innocence.

Many authors highlight the specificity and particularity of this novella in the general context of Le Guin's work. Jim Jose, for example, considers *The Word for World Is Forest* a sort of *rara avis* in the author's production until 1980, a time when Le Guin wrote two of her most famous science-fiction works, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. He considers this period "remarkably conventional" (183) in "terms of the shape of the narrative structure characteristic of nearly all her novels" (182). The unconventionality of *The Word for World Is Forest* would reside in a change of perspective or focus: in the rest of the novels of that period,

> [t]here is a central character, usually (though not always) a man, who is generally an outsider and through whom the story is told. This central character generally serves as the dominant narrative voice of the story. Not only does he tell the story; it is through him that the reader comes to know the world in question. This central character chooses or is obliged to go on a quest or journey into unfamiliar surroundings in which some form of conflict (either within the central character's own psyche or between that character and others or a bit of both) constitutes the fulcrum around which the narrative is built . . . Ultimately there is a resolution of the conflict in that the central character overcomes the difficulty that prompted the journey in the first place. The reason and will of the central character usually triumph over unthinking and blind social forces (182-183).

In the case of *The Word for World Is Forest*, the 'central' character whose consciousness informs us of the moral conflict unfolding in the story, the anthropologist Raj Lyubov, is certainly decentered, because "Le Guin directs the readers' sympathies not to his difficulties but to those facing the colonized Athsheans" (195). The author, at the same time, sets a third voice at the opposite extreme, that of the evil colonial military officer Davidson.

> In an unapologetic allegory of the situation facing the Vietnamese in their struggles against the technologically superior forces of the US, Le Guin encourages her readers to empathize with the plight of the colonized (i.e., the Vietnamese). But not only are the colonized treated with sympathy and respect; they are depicted as eventually victorious over the colonizers. In addition, the colonizers are depicted as gaining their self-definition through the exercise of arbitrary power, particularly through sex and homicide (195).

It is precisely this specificity in Le Guin's narrative approach, combined with the fact that the novella was written under the influence of the anger and discomfort induced by the Vietnam War, that has led many critics to declare "that this novel is overly didactic and somewhat wooden in its approach" (195). Charlotte Spivack critic herself, while praising Le Guin's narrative skills, denounced the characters' stereotyping and one-dimensionality (70-71). That has been the prevailing interpretation in criticism, one which condemns the simplistic and propagandistic overall tone of the work. Writer Iban Zaldua, in the epilogue of the Basque version of the novel, highlights some of the reasons why a portion of the critics have overlooked the novella: the simplicity of the plot, the limited growth and depth of the characters, and an excessive Manicheism in the conflict depicted within the story (*Oihan* 217). Ursula K. Le Guin herself "expressed her dissatisfaction with the strident tone of the novella" (Cummins 89).

Le Guin wrote the first version of *The Word for World Is Forest* in London, under the working title of 'The Little Green Men', in 1968. Throughout the 1960s, she actively participated in organizing demonstrations against the atomic bomb, the Vietnam War, and in favour of peace; that year, 1968, was particularly tumultuous (Apalauza 137). In his 1977 introductory note for the novella, Le Guin writes:

> In England that year, a guest and a foreigner . . . 1968 was a bitter year for those who opposed the war. The lies and hypocrisies redoubled: so did the killing. Moreover, it was becoming clear that the ethic which approved the defoliation of forests and grainlands and the murder of noncombatants in the name of "peace"

> was only a corollary of the ethic which permits the despoliation of natural resources for private profit or the GNP, and the murder of the creatures of the Earth in the name of "man." The victory of the ethic of exploitation, in all societies, seemed as inevitable as it was disastrous.
>
> It was from such pressures, internalized, that this story resulted: forced out, in a sense, against my conscious resistance. I have said elsewhere that I never wrote a story more easily, fluently, surely –and with less pleasure.
>
> I knew, because of the compulsive quality of the composition, that it was likely to become a preachment . . . (*Hainish* 755).

It is precisely that widely considered simplistic and one-dimensional anti-war approach that the present work is interested in analysing, subjecting it to a philosophical critique rather than a literary one: thus, the general objective of this TFG will be to assess how concepts such as 'humanity', 'violence' or 'politics' are intertwined in *The Word for World Is Forest*; and this assessment largely intended to be carried out without taking into account the novel's own historical context of creative gestation. At the same time, this work will also seek to evaluate, this time rather controversially, how the author's supposed conscious pacifist assumptions turn somehow against her own intended purpose –the book's story being an "argument against aggression" (*Hainish* xiii)–, as if the appeal to a utopian pacifist society developed in the novel were legitimate only as a wishful intention.

In this respect, the particular mode of science-fiction world-building implemented by Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Word for World Is Forest* –one that, as any proper SF world-building should do, mixes some elements familiar to the reader's world with others completely foreign to it (Bereit 897)– places us in the need to rethink the relationships between, on the one hand, political order and identity and, on the other, the violence, which according to the view that will be presented here, founds such political orders and identities. Therefore, this work is written on the assumption –controversial, as it were– that it is impossible to think of the political field as completely isolated from the exercise, explicit or implicit, of violence; or, as the philosopher Gustavo Bueno put it on the matter of the relationships between the State and War: "aun cuando no afirmamos que el Estado implica necesariamente o analíticamente la Guerra, tampoco nos parece posible negar axiomáticamente que el Estado, mientras siga existiendo, pueda considerarse . . . como separado totalmente de ella" (*La vuelta* 397). Thus, the

task here will be to clarify to what extent Le Guin's narrative approach corroborates or refutes that preliminary assumption.

On the other hand, one might ask whether the novel is written against war in general, as a means of intolerable and unjustifiable political deliberation, or only against some wars in particular, but not against all of them, as some might be regarded as justified defensive responses. In the former case, the novel fails spectacularly; in the latter case, the novel gets it right in posing such a dilemma and allows us to think about this moral and political issue, giving us tools to elaborate our own responses or to become aware of the magnitude of the problem itself. It is precisely in this masterly ambiguity that the dialectical force of Le Guin's literary proposals lies. As Jim Jose reminds us, paraphrasing some of Le Guin's own ideas, the author herself saw her role as providing 'experiments in imagination' for readers, challenging their usual modes of thinking, exploring alternative possibilities and making it dangerous to allow one interpretation to become the only possible interpretation. This process requires a collaboration between the writer and the reader, with the writer aiming to involve the reader in the narrative. The reader's participation is essential to bring the story to life, as an unread story is simply ink on paper, but the responsibility for creating the fictional world rests ultimately with the author, as failure to imagine and shape the narrative can result in a lack of engagement and success with readers (Jose 181).

In a nutshell: the general objective of this academic work will be to open up new avenues of discussion on the legitimacy or validity of the use of violence, based on the 'experiment in imagination' proposed by Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Word for World Is Forest*.

For that purpose, this research on the use of violence will methodologically involve a close reading of *The Word for World Is Forest* as a primary text, with a critical analysis of philosophical theories on violence put forward by important thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt and others. A meticulous reading of the novella, examining its narrative, characters and plot, will allow an understanding on how violence is represented and contextualised within the story. An analysis of how the concepts of humanity, war and politics are constructed, connected and intertwined within the text will follow, where different

elaborations on the theories of violence of the aforementioned philosophers will be inserted. This TFG will try to compare and analyse their ideas in relation to the literary work at hand, looking for points of convergence or divergence and for new perspectives that might emerge. Hopefully, this combined approach of careful reading of the work and critical dialogue with philosophical theories will allow the reader to gain a more comprehensive and multifaceted interpretation of *The Word for World Is Forest*.

ANALYSIS

"Policy was no longer static": Politics as an anti-utopian sphere of deliberation

As Jose puts it, Ursula K. Le Guin "came to the conclusion that the representation of utopias, almost without exception, could be characterized as Euclidean, European, and masculine" (183). To put it in other words: this representation is based on Euclidean reasoning, a type of reasoning that ignores particularities and assumes that the future and the non-European world are subject to European exploration and control; moreover, these utopias often emphasize Western technological progress and present a macho perspective, neglecting women's experiences and knowledge (183-185). Thus, in an attempt to corroborate the failure of such a type of representation and traditional utopian discourse, Le Guin sought to present utopia in her narratives no longer as a 'ready-made entity', but rather as a dynamic realm of deliberation in which dialogue, conflict resolution and the recognition of difference must predominate[2]. An idea of utopia that serves as a tool for criticism that promotes human fulfillment, and, additionally, fosters democracy as a dynamic process that embraces differences while negotiating between opposing views (Baccolini 43). "[U]topia not as the space to be ultimately reached but, rather, as the process that must be undertaken" (42). Such is the case, among other narratives in Le Guin's production, for *The Word for World Is Forest*.

The novella is part of the Hainish cycle, a general history of the Hain, an original race that spread its seed across the galaxy, creating a variety of human species with radically different cultural variations and ethnographic histories. In the sequence of events developed in several of Le Guin's novels and short stories, one encounters three different narrative stages: firstly, a galaxy-spanning empire, the League of All Worlds; secondly, its decline under the invasion of the Shing; and, finally, the emergence of the Ekumen (Bernardo and Graham 19). The events in the novella belong to the first narrative stage. The League of All

[2] Given the increasing critical sophistication in classifications, Leguinian utopias could be framed under the notion of 'critical utopia', "a utopia that critiques both contemporary society and also itself. It presents an imperfect ideal that is open-ended, contested, and in process. It articulates not a blueprint but a horizon and an orientation" (Barnhill 489).

Worlds[3] plays a significant role in the story. During the succession of events recounted in the novella, the planet Athshe is incorporated into the orbit of interplanetary political relations through the technological incorporation of the ansible, a communication device that enables the instantaneous transmission of information over immense distances, overcoming the limitations imposed by the speed of light. Due to the incorporation of this technological device, the invaders are now held responsible for their actions, and changes in the legitimizing discourses of power on the planet are also being produced, as the character Lyubov himself puts it in the novel: "[a] decision by the League of Worlds might now lead overnight to the colony's being limited to one Land, or forbidden to cut trees, or encouraged to kill natives–no telling" (*Hainish* 68). Eventually, the League seems to sanction the native defensive violence against the invaders as legitimate. Here resonate the words of philosopher Walter Benjamin regarding war violence, a violence which the author regarded as a clear example of the juridical nature inherent in all violence:

> Indeed, the word "peace", in the sense in which it is the correlative to the word "war" . . ., denotes this a priori, necessary sanctioning, regardless of all other legal conditions, of every victory. This sanction consists precisely in recognizing the new conditions as a new "law", quite regardless of whether they need *de facto* any guarantee of their continuation. If, therefore, conclusions can be drawn from military violence, as being primordial and paradigmatic of all violence used for natural ends, there is a lawmaking character inherent in all such violence ("Critique" 240).

Therefore, it would seem that it is precisely through the use of violence that the Athsheans enter the game of political relations and are regarded as a creative force of law to be taken into account in a new equilibrium of forces: in the peace following a war, the new relationships are recognized as new law. In fact, and always from Walter Benjamin's perspective, there is invariably an implicit juridical character of creation in all violence: "All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity" (243).

In any case, it should be noted that the ultimate sovereignty of the Athsheans is extremely fragile and, paraphrasing Benjamin's earlier quote, it

[3] This League of All Worlds somehow brings back echoes of the historical League of Nations.

does not contain any *de facto* guarantee of its continuation. This sovereignty is facilitated by the conscious political decision of the League to isolate them, an isolation that Selver intelligently understands as provisional and non-eternal, given the military superiority of the powers from which the natives are being isolated. Here a parallel can be observed with real political relations since the beginning of the Cold War, where the threat of total annihilation, facilitated by the use of nuclear weapons, is perpetually present. Still, the fact that, as Hannah Arendt pointed out in her article "On Violence", "[t]he technical development of the implements of violence has . . . reached the point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict" (105) is a fact that favours the future isolation and independence of the Athsheans, although total annihilation could *de facto* occur at any moment. Selver then realizes that his leadership and subsequent victory have not brought about a *paradise regained*, but rather a kind of utopia that is no longer such, due to its own instability and because the regained Athshean sovereignty now depends not only on internal forces within the planet but also on external forces. The loss of the unchallenged completeness of his people when confronted with the outside world finally reveals to him that the world is not limited to the *forest* anymore.

In a final scene, three years after the victory and the final loss of innocence, Selver receives the emissary Leppenon, on a mission to evacuate the last surviving colonists. In the conversation, Selver appears cordial but reserved, displaying a somewhat distrustful attitude. Selver seems to act in terms of political strategy, withholding the information that the emissary requests. Le Guin masterfully leaves the reader in doubt as to whether the Athsheans have returned to their pre-confrontation practices that explicitly rejected violence, or if, on the contrary, after abandoning the statehood and political centralization driven by the war, they have begun to engage in power relations in violent terms. In other words, the reader is unaware of whether they have started killing each other or not. Le Guin gives the reader the same strategically calculated response that the emissary Leppenon receives. Ultimately, Selver provides a *political* answer, withholding information, as he does not entirely trust his interlocutor('s world). This reminds us of the words of Thomas Hobbes stating that even in times of

relative peace among individuals, those in positions of sovereign authority are constantly wary and prepared for conflict:

> [Y]et in all times, Kings, and persons of Soveraigne authority, because of their Independency, are in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their Forts, Garrisons, and Guns upon the Frontiers of their Kingdomes; and continuall Spyes upon their neighbours; which is a posture of War (131).

***"What is, is"*: Divine, pure violence as a *de facto* agent of political change**

One of the most significant traits of Ursula K. Le Guin's narrative is that there is always a sort of isomorphism between the structure and the content. In Jim Jose's words:

> there is a congruence . . . between the narrative structure(s) –i.e., the means of representation– and the narrative content –i.e., what is represented. For Le Guin, the narrative structure has to reinforce the content. This dimension of Le Guin's work is as much political as it is literary (181).

The narrative technique employed by Le Guin in *The Word for World Is Forest* is that of an external omniscient narrator. The novella consists of eight chapters, in which the author "alternates the focal character and point of view from chapter to chapter; Davidson's three chapters are 1, 4, 7; Lyubov's are 3 and 5; Selver's are 2, 6, 8" (Cummins 90). Le Guin, at the same time, limits the narrator's omniscience in the chapters focused on the invading characters, making these chapters look more like interior monologues (90). The arrangement of the chapters seems to express, on the one hand, "the isolation of each character" (90), but, on the other, it also seems to resemble a sort of linear dialogue/dispute which, mediated by Lyubov, moves from Davidson to Selver as the two main confronting extremes. This tangled interplay, as Jim Jose puts it, "between the general and particular" (180) is of the outmost importance when unravelling the (political) meaning embedded within *The Word for World Is Forest*.

Another important aspect to be pointed out is the way Le Guin seems to connect the process of her writing of the novella with the notion of the *unconscious*, this aspect being relevant to the argumentation to be carried out in this chapter. Thus, in the 2016 introduction to the complete edition of the Hainish

Cycle, the author states the following about her characterization of the Athshean culture:

> [t]he powers of Athsean dreaming, its existence as the life-technique of a whole people, can be categorized only as fantasy. But the powers of the unconscious mind, the uses of dream, are central elements of twentieth-century psychology, and there the novel was and is on solid speculative ground (*Hainish* xiii).

And about the creation of the character Davidson, in her 1977 introduction to the novella, the author says:

> . . . Davidson is, though not uncomplex, pure; he is purely evil –and I don't, consciously, believe purely evil people exist. But my unconscious has other opinions. It looked into itself and produced, from itself, Captain Davidson (*Hainish* xiii).

The author's correlation between what was previously mentioned as 'the two main confronting extremes' in the novel and the *unconscious* can be seen, within the scope of this analysis, as indicative of an *antidiscursive* essence –and thus, one might argue, a *sacred* presence as well– in Le Guin's narrative approach.

Thus, the author presents Athshean culture as a kind of idyllic Arcadia devoid of violence and, consequently, with minimal regard for legal and judicial practice. Before the arrival of the invaders, the natives lived, according to the story, in perfect stability, balance, and harmony with nature. This 'alluded-to' utopia is rhetorically and strategically positioned outside the confines of the discourse, partly because Le Guin places it beyond the temporal boundaries of the narrative, but also, as this current work argues, because such a utopian ideal proves to be impracticable, not due to being unbearable but rather unattainable and/or physically impossible within the realm of real political practice.

Le Guin provides the initial glimpse into Athshean culture through Captain Don Davidson's biased and derogatory perspective. In his eyes, the indigenous inhabitants of the planet are inferior and primitive beings who deserve nothing but disdain and violence. The anthropologist Lyubov's version appears to be more aligned with reality, but it carries a certain sense of stagnation: "They're a static, stable, uniform society. They have no history. Perfectly integrated, and wholly

unprogressive. You might say that like the forest they live in, they've attained a climax state" (*Hainish* 39). At the same time, the anthropologist portrays the native techniques of non-aggression as a sort of artistic sublimation of physical violence. The chapters about Selver, in which the employed narrative technique is that of a fully-fledged external omniscient narrator, give a vivid impression of a collective (un)consciousness materializing (Watson 232). This stands in stark contrast to the chapters centred on Davidson, which seem to be an expression of a 'strong' self; the bridging character, Lyubov, would thus exhibit a 'weak' self.

The belligerent Davidson, therefore, emerges as the complete antithesis of the peaceful indigenous world and culture. It is precisely his presence, fuelled by his lack of understanding and empathy, that triggers the cycle of violence. "Davidson is a caricature of the macho who embraces the Western disregard for native populations in the way of progress" (Baccolini 45). The invasion of the planet "has created the opportunity for him to display violence" (Bijnen 13), a violence that is presented as intrinsic and inseparable from his own psyche, and exerted in all aspects (verbally, sexually, physically). Even as he loses his own area of power and influence, he remains relentless in exerting it. It is in this regard that this character's portrayal can be perceived as 'stable', just as the native culture was initially 'stable'.

As previously stated, Le Guin acknowledged the character's lack of complexity: Davidson embodies resentment, distrust, racism, narcissism, egotism (bordering on solipsism), and unwavering voluntarism; firmly entrenched in his own beliefs, he considers his version of rationality the only valid one; a relentless conspirator, he even disregards the obligation to follow orders; he consistently employs derogatory language towards nearly everyone who is not himself... everything about him is exceedingly flat, extreme and one-dimensional. It is precisely due to this oversimplification that Davidson emerges as a real and tangible threat in the novel's plot: he triggers, enables and provides an opportunity for the natives' violent defense mechanism.

At the same time, the reader becomes aware of his underlying weakness: while he, *ad intra*, is capable of realistically and intelligently describing power dynamics within the colony, his narrow political perspective prevents him from

recognizing the Athsheans, *ad extra*, as a potential source of danger, and that because he restricts his perception of political relationships to those involving individuals he himself deems human. Consequently, throughout the novella's plot, he consistently overlooks the potential magnitude of the conflict he's igniting: he disregards the overwhelming numerical superiority of the native population; when directly confronted by Selver, he fails to anticipate the resentment he can provoke; and, even when faced with the natives during their first attack on an invader's outpost, he hesitates to attribute them the responsibility –astonishingly, he confronts them, gun in hand, blurting out in pidgin: "Answer now: hurry-up-quick! No answer, then I burn-up first one, then one, then one, see? This fire, who start it?" (*Hainish* 14) In brief: Le Guin depicts Davidson as a *purely evil* character who also proves to be strategically inept.

In this overarching narrative context, the attribution of the category of 'god' to certain characters, namely Selver and Davidson, as well as to an inanimate technological entity, the ansible, holds a high significance. This happens in the following manner: Selver is initially revered as a 'god' within his own culture, and he, in turn, confers this status upon Davidson, who, somewhat inadvertently, bestows it upon the ansible. In the case of the two human characters, Selver and Davidson, this attribution is directly linked to the use of violence. The use of the term 'god', at the same time, evokes a sense of sacredness and a certain connection to a mythical or mythological background.

The divine status attributed to Selver must be understood within the fictional context of Athshean culture. Athsheans share a deep and intimate connection with the realm of dreams. They possess the remarkable ability to consciously enter this unconscious domain, where their dreams not only bring healing but also provide invaluable guidance for their actions. Dreams hold a sacred place in the Athshean belief system, serving as a profound form of communication. Through their dreams, Athsheans receive teachings, spiritual guidance, and profound insights. Furthermore, dreams are regarded by them as a powerful tool for making decisions and resolving conflicts. In this context, individuals skilled in the interpretation of dreams are revered as 'divine' figures among the Athsheans. The Athshean term for 'god', *sha'ab*, is also used to refer to a 'translator', reflecting the pivotal role these 'gods' play in their society by

interpreting and translating dreams into actions. This concept is expressed in the novella through anthropologist Lyubov's perspective:

> Sha'ab meant god, or numinous entity, or powerful being; it also meant . . . translator.
>
> . . . If a god was a translator, what did he translate? Selver was indeed a gifted interpreter, but that gift had found expression only through the fortuity of a truly foreign language having been brought into his world. Was a sha'ab one who translated the language of dream . . . into the everyday speech? But all Dreamers could do that. Might he then be one who could translate into waking life the central experience of vision: one serving as a link between the two realities, considered by the Athsheans as equal, the dream-time and the world-time, whose connections, though vital, are obscure. A link: one who could speak aloud the perceptions of the subconscious. To 'speak' that tongue is to act. To do a new thing. To change or to be changed, radically, from the root. For the root is the dream.
>
> And the translator is the god. Selver had brought a new word into the language of his people. He had done a new deed. The word, the deed, murder. Only a god could lead so great newcomer as Death across the bridge between the worlds (*Hainish* 66-67).

The *new thing* that Selver brings and leads his fellow people to perceive him as a *sha'ab* or god is that he interprets his own experiences and dreams to mean that it is justified for the Athsheans to kill and ultimately employ that deadly violence against the planet's invaders. The origin of Selver's experiences becomes a gnawing doubt for Lyubov and, consequently, for the reader of the novella:

> But had he learned to kill his fellowmen among his own dreams of outrage and bereavement, or from the undreamed-of actions of the strangers? Was he speaking his own language, or was he speaking Captain Davidson's? That which seemed to rise from the root of his own suffering and express his own changed being, might in fact be an infection, a foreign plague, which would not make a new people of his race, but would destroy them (67).

Lyubov ultimately seems to lean towards the hypothesis that the natives of the planet resort to violence due to external influence, suggesting that the Athsheans are not inherently or *naturally* inclined towards violence. From his perspective, it is the colonizers who disrupt the mental equilibrium of Selver and his people. However, Lyubov fails to grasp the transformation of Selver. As a liberal-minded scientist, he perceives the indigenous cultural shift as a sort of aberration, something external and foreign to the static system conceived by his own anthropological practice. However, from Selver's perspective, this change

integrates perfectly into the realm of beliefs, knowledges, and moral convictions of his own culture. Selver experiences his transformation as an inevitable destiny: although it occurs after Davidson's murder and rape of his wife (who, it may be assumed, speaks to him in dreams afterwards), it is precisely from the moral conviction that killing others is not inherently human that Selver decides to make the leap from the personal to the political. In fact, he resorts to personal violence only once throughout the plot, only in his direct confrontation with Davidson. After that confrontation, Selver never seeks personal revenge against the captain, and the violence exerted by the Athsheans is consistently political and executed in purely strategic terms. The ultimate goal of this political violence is to punish transgression and restore the previous moral order. The reasonable doubt here is whether such a *regressum* is possible or, even further, whether the initial *paradise lost* to be *regained* is nothing more than a theoretical ideation existing solely within the literary framework of the novella. It could be said that the resort to violence makes the Athshean culture, above all else, plausible and realistic. Le Guin's narrative arguably employs elements of the sacred, the mythical, and the unconscious, as only within that non-discursive sphere can a completely peaceful human society be integrated –one that exists completely outside any political relationships and ultimately detached from reality.

In the novella, the Athsheans' recourse to violence and war also takes the form of a *de facto* necessity, an inescapable fate. As Hannah Arendt eloquently states, "[i]t is a secret from nobody that [war] is most likely to arise . . . where the old adage 'There is no alternative to victory' retains a high degree of plausibility" (108). Consequently, the natives find themselves compelled to engage in military confrontation when confronted with a tangible existential dilemma: the stark choice between victory or death.

At this point, one can once again invoke the concepts employed by Walter Benjamin in his 1921 essay "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" ("Critique of Violence") regarding the philosopher's notion of 'divine' or 'pure' violence. According to Benjamin's conception, this form of violence is not tied to the exercise of law, as it is a violence that simply *acts*:

> La violencia pura no se vincula ya con el derecho que establece o con el que mantiene, sino que deshace el vínculo: rompe la línea existente entre violencia y

> derecho. Es una violencia que, por tanto, no se ejecuta, sino que, simplemente, *actúa* (*Crítica* 53).

In philosopher Slavoj Žižek's words, "'[d]ivine violence' stands for . . . brutal intrusions of justice beyond law" (151). In the novel, this form of violence assumes the shape of *divine* intervention, serving as a *political* response to an accumulation of personal injustices: "[s]omewhere, in the sphere of the 'divine', perhaps these injustices are not forgotten. They are accumulated, the wrongs are registered, the tension grows more and more unbearable, till divine violence explodes in retaliatory destructive rage" (152). This notion of violence evokes the apocalyptic imagery of Judgment Day, where debts and resentments accumulate. This feature is acknowledged, among others, by Barnhill:

> If there was an apocalypse, it was in the merciless violence perpetrated by the Athsheans against their oppressors . . . Unlike the horrors that they had endured, their butchery of the Terrans was a *cultural* cataclysm (491).

This 'divine' violence is simultaneously an abrupt, out-of-nowhere, unexpected violence, somewhat 'unconscious', to borrow Ursula K. Le Guin's expression, something ineffable (or 'self-referential') that ultimately exhibits a "resistance to meaning" (Žižek 153). This violence is bloody and implacable in nature, but never cruel: it is not carried out against solitary and defenceless enemies, not even when in the novella that enemy happens to be Davidson.

Undoubtedly, this form of pure violence cannot be tolerated within the confines of the *status quo*, depicted in the novel through the regulations imposed by the invaders on the indigenous population, including the oppressive concept of Voluntary Autochthonous Labor that subjugates some of the Athsheans. The reason this violence cannot coexist with these regulations is not due to inherent incompatibility, but rather because it exists entirely outside their framework, ultimately challenging their very existence (*Crítica* 54-55).

Curiously enough, this divine, pure violence is not only exercised by the natives, but also by Davidson who, as mentioned earlier, also operates outside the boundaries of the law. Both forms of violence are then *anomic*; they possess distinct characteristics, though: native violence is collective, unindividualistic,

non-egoic, while Davidson's violence is supremacist, voluntaristic and individualistic, egotistic.

Le Guin's recourse to divinity in this context also suggests inevitable and factual events, destinies: for Selver, there is no possible way to escape killing; Davidson's violence remains an ever-present, inescapable, non-negotiable threat; and the ansible, which Davidson frequently refers to as a 'tin god', represents a technological intrusion that *de facto* alters political dynamics. In these circumstances, both Selver and Davidson (as well as Lyubov) seem to falter in their (self-)understanding, as if they were overwhelmed by the transformative forces at play, which seem to be imposed upon them rather than consciously decided upon. In fact, Walter Benjamin's conception of divine violence aligns with this notion, emphasizing that it is not a result of conscious decision-making (*Crítica* 59).

This is the way Selver himself expresses this notion of fate, as he reflects upon it towards the conclusion of the novella:

> Sometimes a god comes . . . He brings a new way to do a thing, or a new thing to be done. A new kind of singing, or a new kind of death. He brings this across the bridge between the dream-time and the world-time. When he has done this, it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream, to hold them inside the dream with walls and pretenses. That is insanity. What is, is (*Hainish* 103).

***"It would be better if I had never known you"*: The political enemy**

On a different note, and in this case, controversially in the extreme, this TFG argues for the possibility that some aspects of *The Word for World Is Forest*'s plot could be used as an argument –almost certainly against the author's own intentions– in support of some of the theses put forth by the German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt, specifically in favour of the Schmittian assumption that politics is above all a field of physical struggle and military confrontation and not exclusively or primarily a space for deliberation through discussion and/or negotiation, in the liberal sense. According to Schmitt, politics is a realm of struggle, a struggle, specifically, between friends and enemies. This distinction between *friend* and *enemy* is concrete and real, not metaphorical or

symbolic. Liberal thinking mistakenly transforms the enemy into an economic competitor or intellectual adversary, overlooking the importance of the state. The state, as the ultimate authority, is inseparable from the political. Liberal pluralism fails to address this, but, according to Schmitt, there must be a politically oriented association –the state itself– with the power to define the enemy, ultimately functioning as a genuinely sovereign power (Neocleous 14).

How could the plot of Le Guin's novella then prove Carl Schmitt’s assertion that "[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy" (26)? Taking this idea into the novella’s plot, and given that, according to Schmitt, the decision on who the enemy is proves to be fundamental, it is through this decision that the natives of Athshe incorporate themselves into the realm of the political. By deciding who is a friend and who is an enemy, the true nature of their own association (as a *state*) becomes clear and distinct, only in confrontation with the invader. Such political identity thus arises in the novella precisely due to the war itself, as prior to it, such an identity did not exist: “[t]here were more languages than lands, and each with a different dialect for every town that spoke it; there were infinite ramifications of manners, morals, customs, crafts” (*Hainish* 24).

According to Schmitt, this differentiating process of identity requires eliminating heterogeneity *ad intra*, creating homogeneity, and fostering heterogeneity *ad extra*. In this way, the German jurist flatly rejected the liberal formal conception that all human beings are equal insomuch as they are human beings (Neocleous 15). This aspect of Schmitt's theory is reflected in the novel by the natives’ killing of all the newly arrived women on the planet (over 200 of them). Through this act of mass extermination of innocent victims, the Athsheans completely get rid of any future possibility of having to accept any kind of native (‘Athshe-born’) heterogeneity within their sovereign territory, given the real and concrete capacity of women for sexual reproduction[4].

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[4] It would have been more than adequate to devote a chapter to the close examination of gender dynamics within the novella. One crucial aspect to scrutinize would have been the complete objectification of these women from Earth within the novel’s plot. From the very beginning, this “shipload of women” (*Hainish* 3) is explicitly treated as nothing more than animals, as human cattle. This feminine presence emerges as a means of domination, manifested through sexual control over women and the exploitation of their reproductive capabilities to further colonization. The natives, recognizing these women as potentially effective instruments,

Another aspect of the novella to be considered, in relation to Schmitt's theory, is the way Le Guin builds the relationship between the native Selver and the anthropologist Lyubov. After a period of genuine friendship between them, following the outbreak of war, Lyubov must be rejected by Selver, in Schmittian terminology, as a *public enemy of the State*, in the Latin sense of enemy as *hostis*. This rejection equates him to the cruel and ruthless Davidson, who also becomes an enemy to Selver in the Latin sense of *inimicus*, or personal enemy. Significantly enough, after the disappearance of the war context, this hostility does not entail Davidson's physical elimination. In the words of Carl Schmitt himself:

> The enemy is not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not the private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship. The enemy is *hostis*, not *inimicus* in the broader sense (28).

Lyubov responds to Selver's rejection in a confused manner, as he incorrectly interprets the new situation in terms of personal relationships rather than political relationships. He confuses the personal with the political: "Selver is my friend" (*Hainish* 66). Despite inadvertently playing a crucial role in the transformation of the natives by exchanging cultural experiences with Selver and ultimately even saving his life, Lyubov turns out to be a politically inept and ineffective character, and unable to understand the situation beyond his own ethical framework. He is also unable to notice that it is, among other things, the act of colonization of which he himself is a part of, even in its kindest form of 'cultural exchange', that enables and in part gives rise to the native rebellion; in other words, he refuses to see that it is precisely through this act of colonization that the Athsheans give up the supposed virtues of their prior *state of nature*. Lyubov ultimately fails to admit that his position is more than that of a mere observer, and that he himself has provided the discursive link that inevitably leads to war. He also fails to see the military significance of the fieldwork he conducts,

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strategically and mercilessly exterminate them. Another significant aspect worthy of analysis would have been the near absence of female characters as catalysts for change within the storyline.

and only acknowledges it from a scientific anthropological perspective. To what extent –it may be asked– is Lyubov another accomplice to injustice?

"Can't keep us down, we're Men": **Humanity as a political framework**

Ursula K. Le Guin employs her writing, particularly in the Hainish Cycle, as a sort of laboratory where, through her 'experiments in imagination', our notions of 'identity' can undergo deep examination and revaluation. Thus, her literary works can often be seen as a kind of dynamic 'melting pot' in which concepts such as race, ethnicity, gender, class or species are set in motion. In doing so, Le Guin prompts her readers to reflect on the profound impact that cultural prejudices have on their approaches and perceptions towards other peoples and individuals (Apalauza 134).

In *The Word for World Is Forest*, the concept of 'mankind' is analytically put to the test and questioned: to what extent is there convergence among the different versions of humanity present in the novel? Le Guin appears to emphasize the intricate nature of the subject and the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition of humanity through the diverse perspectives and lack of consensus among the characters. The novella treads a fine line between inter-species and interhuman relationships, while also acknowledging the charged discourse around race within the colonizing society. However, the primary discursive dilemma in which the novella operates is one of constant uncertainty among the characters regarding what qualifies an individual as 'human', as it seems that being categorized as such is what grants full political agency. For instance, Davidson's character moves within this uncertainty, because, on the one hand, he explicitly rejects anything not originating from Earth as being able to be considered 'human':

> "When I say Earth, . . . I mean people. Men . . . I like to see things in perspective, from the top down, and the top, so far, is humans. We're here, now; and so this world's going to go our way. Like it or not, it's a fact you have to face; it happens to be the way things are . . ." (*Hainish* 5).

That discursive framework, embodied vividly in Davidson's rhetoric, serves to justify and rationalize the exploitation and annihilation of the indigenous

population. Paradoxically enough, he defends this stance during a conversation with the racialised character Oknanawi, as they discuss the enslavement of the Athsheans: "Right, but this isn't slavery . . . Slaves are humans. When you raise cows, you call that slavery? No. And it works" (*Hainish* 8). Nevertheless, on the other hand, there exists a certain implicit recognition from Davidson (as well as other members of the colony) in the fact that they don't refrain from engaging in sexual relations with native women. Within the aforementioned ideological framework, such sexual engagements would be considered morally unacceptable and an unequivocal aberration, unless these women were somehow acknowledged as possessing a certain degree of humanity. One could argue that it is this sexual violence perpetrated by Davidson, as he rapes Selver's wife, that ignites the spark of the war conflict that ultimately leads to the explicit recognition of the native people's humanity. It is through this military confrontation, which serves as a foundational and primal form of political interaction, that the Athsheans manage to integrate themselves into the realm of political dynamics and, therefore, into the orbit of 'humanity'.

Therefore, the recognition of the native inhabitants of Athshe as humans by their invaders does not hinge upon a theoretical deliberation, regardless of whether such a deliberation is approached from a spiritualistic or a paleontological-Darwinian perspective (Bueno, *Zapatero* 109-117). In the first sense, Davidson seems to be aligned with the Cartesian tradition of regarding animals as mere automatons devoid of a soul or spirit: "they don't feel pain like humans . . . You think hitting one is like hitting a kid, sort of. Believe me, it's more like hitting a robot for all they feel it" (*Hainish* 8); in the second sense, Le Guin's narrative approach seems to compel the reader to perceive the natives, corporeally and materially, as little green furry monkey-creatures living in a jungle-like environment: more as 'humanoids' than 'humans'.

From that purely theoretical standpoint, the quandary appears to be undecidable. That's why the Athsheans set it out in the novel from a moral perspective. As Selver himself states, "[t]hey are men, men, like us, men" (*Hainish* 85). In other words: who meets the requirements of a moral definition of what it means to be human? The native response is that only they themselves

appear to fulfil such moral requirements, as observed in this passage from the novella:

> "The world is always new," said Coro Mena, "however old its roots. Selver, how is it with these creatures, then? They look like men and talk like men, are they not men?"
>
> "I don't know. Do men kill men, except in madness? Does any beast kill its own kind? Only the insects. These yumens kill us as lightly as we kill snakes. The one who taught me said that they kill one another, in quarrels, and also in groups, like ants fighting. I haven't seen that. But I know they don't spare one who asks life. They will strike a bowed neck, I have seen it! There is a wish to kill in them, and therefore I saw fit to put them to death." (*Hainish* 22)

In this sense, paradoxically enough, given the notion that what is authentically human entails refraining from mutual killing, the physical elimination of the invaders is justified. Selver exhibits no apparent doubt regarding the invaders' biological humanity; his hesitation resides primarily within the domain of a prescriptive ethology centred around morality. The only means to reinstate genuine human harmony, 'Athshean peace', is through engaging in warfare against the invaders' claims, which, albeit expressed in different terms, also seek to establish 'peace'.

In both cases, the different notions on humanity act as justifying ideologies: for the invaders, their ideology rationalizes colonization, exploitation, and extermination; for the natives, it justifies resorting to armed violence. Acknowledging the ideological nature of both stances undermines any pretence of universal theoretical validity. Neither native peace nor colonial peace can be considered, as philosopher Gustavo Bueno might have argued, universal order or peace, in general, but rather particular stances that collide within the political sphere precisely due to their claims to universality (*La vuelta* 410). That collision occurs not on the plane of ideas but on the battlefield itself: there, the question at hand is not so much about who is morally right, but rather about who wields the ultimate power to impose their will. The question, in the end, is not about who *is* right, but about who *has* the right.

CONCLUSIONS

In most cases, and rightly so, Ursula K. Le Guin’s thought and literary work have been understood as a profound critique of violence as a valid means of conflict resolution. In this way, the author was primarily a tireless explorer of peaceful alternatives to solve social and political problems, always emphasizing the importance of dialogue, mutual understanding and empathy as tools to overcome our differences and build more harmonious societies.

This work has not aimed to refute this almost universally accepted approach; rather, it has sought to nuance it by turning to the novella *The Word for World Is Forest*, a work that seems to have not received the same critical attention as others such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* or *The Dispossessed*. It is also surprising how little attention the topic addressed in this work, the legitimacy of using violence as a means to resolve conflicts, has received from Le Guin-specialized criticism. The intention here has not been, by any means, to fill that gap, but rather to open up that line of examination.

Indeed, it is difficult to interpret *The Word for World Is Forest* unambiguously as ‘pacifist’. The author herself, in her own words, wrote it in a somewhat feverish state, guided by the anger produced by the historical context she was surrounded by. It is as if the author tried to present herself as writing the work against her own convictions and personality. The reflections presented in this TFG broadly demonstrate how the use of violence in the narrative of *The Word for World Is Forest* ultimately becomes effective and politically operative, without neglecting the underlying notion of ‘just war’ that the uprising of the natives carries. It also does not seem that the author *explicitly* included violence as one of the legitimate tools in political deliberation, something that, as this work shows, she does *implicitly* in this novella.

Nevertheless, Le Guin's narrative mastery, even when connected to her ‘unconscious’ as it seems to be the case, does not allow us to draw unequivocal and definitive interpretative conclusions. Thus, it is very difficult to provide simple and direct answers to the array of questions unfolded in the introduction.

Precisely in this impossibility of providing unique answers to the dilemmas that are posed lies the strength of Le Guin's storytelling.

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