“Hatred was also left outside”

Journeys into the Cold in Le Guin’s *The left hand of darkness*

ABSTRACT In Ursula K. Le Guin’s science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) cold is used on both literal and metaphorical levels as the main character, sent to the planet of Gethen, or Winter, undertakes an inner journey of self-discovery. The first part of the article analyses the novel as a fictional travelogue to establish how the boundaries between Self and Other, between observer and studied, are constructed. Animal imagery, adaptation to the cold and the Gethenians’ androgynous sexuality are aspects in focus. The second part of the article centres more specifically on how the cold functions on several levels in the novel. The harsh climate initially works as a divider between Self and Other, and the central themes of fidelity and betrayal are connected to the cold on both literal and metaphorical levels. However, the essentialising aspects of the cold come to erase these and other binaries and enable the protagonist’s understanding of both himself and the encountered culture.

KEYWORDS boundaries, self, other, cold, winter, travelogue, science fiction

“It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters, in the end” says First Envoy to the Ekumen, Genly Ai,
the main narrator in Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin 2003: 220). Ai spends three years on the planet of Gethen, or Winter as it is also called, and his mission is to incorporate Winter into the eighty-three planet strong Ekumenical Alliance. Due to complicated political machinations he is sent to a labour camp by the Commensals of Orgoreyn, and is helped to escape by Therem Estraven, the former Prime Minister of Karhide, now seen as a traitor. The two embark on a journey across the ice towards Karhide where Ai will be able to contact a spaceship crew in orbit around the planet. Although this objective is reached, Estraven is betrayed and killed. The journey within the journey, Ai’s and Estraven’s trek across the ice, proves to be a learning experience, and it is during their time together Ai learns to understand the Gethenians and form a friendship and bonds of love. In the process, he also comes to understand himself, after the pattern of the heroic journey.

In charting one Earth-born human’s contact with an alien, albeit humanoid, species and an alien world, the novel clearly belongs to the science fiction genre and Le Guin also introduces a few sci-fi elements, such as the ansible (a communication device), mindspeech (telepathic communication) and time-jumping. However, other types of texts are discernible. Fredric Jameson suggests the presence of at least seven genres within the work ranging from political novel to love story (1975: 221). Like Jameson, several critics have focused on the utopian elements produced mainly by the lack of constructed or physical gender roles and the pacifist message, elements which form an important background to the quest for identity of the central characters (Makinen 2001, Lensing 2006). In this article, the division between Self and Other – crucial to how Ai perceives himself and the Gethenians, respectively – is established through a reading of the novel as a fictional travelogue and of Ai as having traits associated with colonial exploration. Ai’s inner journey illustrates the process by which the positions of observer and studied, as well as the possibility of reversing the two are identified. This analysis further enables an understanding of the different functions of the cold in the novel. The harsh climate on Winter functions as both identifier (separating Self from Other), but importantly also as an essentialising factor, erasing cultural binaries and bringing out the characters’ true selves, making possible an understanding between them. The cold thus functions as an extended
metaphor, applicable to the Gethenians and their society, and to the main characters’ inner journeys.

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Travel writing as a genre is characterised by claims of authority and authenticity and the preface to the first chapter of The Left Hand of Darkness establishes that the text is framed as an official document. It is a “[t]ranscript of Ansible Document 01-01101-934-2-Gethen … Report from Genly Ai, First Mobile on Gethen/Winter, Hainish Cycle 93, Eku-
menical Year 1490-97” (1). Although the chapters that follow add different perspectives: an omniscient narrator when retelling legends from the planet, Estraven’s journal entries and a report by a female Investigator, Ai himself has assembled the documentation. James W. Bittner observes that Ai “knows that the truths yielded by any one of these narrative types he has collected will be partial because meaning is genre-bound” (1984: 110). That is, the official report from the Investigator carries a certain weight, while journal entries represent another kind of authenticity and the different voices carry their own, individual authority. However, explanatory footnotes inserted into the sections in which Ai is not a narrator (23, 223), and an appendix (302-4) indicate that Ai exercises some control over the text.1 Ai further claims that he will report things in the same way one tells “a story [because] Truth is a matter of the imagination” (1), and while this pronouncement questions the text as travelogue, there are additional features which instead strengthen such a designation. Whereas the bulk of the text is narrated in the past tense, giving the reader a sense of traditional storytelling, several sections, sometimes appearing in the middle of a past-tense narration and chronicling facts about customs, people and places are narrated using the present tense, in the manner of a travelogue. These features combine to give Ai’s story “an aura of factual accuracy” (Bittner 1984: 110) placing it firmly within the genre of the travel report in which truth claims traditionally abound. 

The main narrator, the “I” as signalled by one of the connotations to his name, proclaims at the beginning of the novel that he needs alternative voices, because as an outside subject studying a civilisation he cannot fully understand he is unable to report truthfully: “I see and judge as an alien” (5).2 The disparity of his sources which he is
quick to acknowledge (1-2) draws attention to the multifaceted nature of the reality he faces, and the necessity of other perspectives to complete the picture. However, Ai’s view of himself as an alien needs to be seen in relation to the fact that he, by his own admission, successfully blends in with the Gethenians. “I had never had any trouble passing as a native, if I wanted to” he says, “among all the Karhidish dialects my accent went unnoticed, and my sexual anomalies were hidden by the heavy clothing” (56). He has depilated his facial hair, pretends his nose has been broken to explain its unusual shape, and is in most respects similar to the Gethenians. In a later chapter, Estraven says that: “One must know him to know him alien” (154). That is, to the uninitiated or to passing acquaintances, Ai’s ‘alienness’ is not apparent, but as friendships form, the boundaries between known and unknown which Ai himself experiences so acutely become discernible. Once identified, these boundaries also become possible to traverse.

Ai’s motives as well as his descriptions of both people and places can be situated within the colonial tradition and more specifically within the narrative mode of the anti-conquest. When asked the reasons for the Ekumen’s desire to make Winter into an ally he says: “Material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight” (34). Adhering to the “Law of Cultural Embargo” (136) he is restricted from imposing too much of his own knowledge on the encountered culture and can only use himself and a minimum of technological inventions to prove his points. The trope of the “anti-conquest” illuminating “strategies of representation” used by European travellers “to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” has been analysed by Mary Louise Pratt in connection with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel writing (1997: 7). She states that: “Only through a guilty act of conquest (invasion) can the innocent act of the anti-conquest (seeing) be carried out” (66). Ai is by design the only Terran on Winter. As he phrases it: “One alien is a curiosity, two are an invasion” (208). He semantically distances himself from the ‘guilty act’ and reverts the gaze (he is the studied, ‘a curiosity’) while it is clear that he, too, is there to observe, to ‘see’. His insistence on the sentimental objectives of the journey, ‘increase of knowledge’ and ‘the greater glory of God’, further aligns him with the
antihero and the mode of the anti-conquest. However, these seemingly innocent objectives must be seen in relation to ‘material profit’ as well as to the judgemental way he views people and customs, asserting, as it were, Terran cultural hegemony.

The colonial dichotomies between Self and Other and between human and animal, prevalent in countless colonial narratives, are clearly established in the first chapter, and are in themselves suggestive of the cultural hegemony Ai wishes to uphold, as well as his particular way of seeing the encountered people. “Can one read a cat’s face, a seal’s, an otter’s?” Ai asks himself. “Some Gethenians I thought, are like such animals, with deep bright eyes that do not change expressions when you speak” (15). The difference between human and animal is established with the Terran culture as the one whose values are the norm and the lack of a response suggests the Gethenians’ inability to comprehend things or react in an ‘appropriate’ way. One individual is described as a primordial “wild animal, a great strange creature who looks straight at you out of his eternal present” (71) and while this characterisation adds an awe-inspiring aspect to the animal imagery designating the Other, it is also indicative of the fact that the Terran temporal system, another cultural construct used as the norm, is non-applicable.3

The Other as occupying an earlier stage of human development is another colonial convention Ai incorporates in his observations and translates to the planet itself. The lack of knowledge and modernity is not only presented as something negative, however. Instead, the eco-friendliness of Winter is stressed. “Winter hasn’t achieved in thirty centuries what Terra once achieved in thirty decades” Ai notes, but “[n]either has Winter ever paid the price that Terra paid” (99). The extent of the damage done to Terra is not clear, but the ecological and human ethics are emphasised also by the fact that the Gethenians do not wage war on each other, thus avoiding other forms of destruction. “They behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women” Ai reports. “They did not behave like men, or ants” (49). The animal aspects of the Gethenians’ peacefulness are here favourably compared to femininity. Significantly, the animal imagery is applied also to the masculine Self, and warfare is associated with the mindless, military behaviour found in parts of the insect world.

The difference between Self and Other is nowhere greater than
where sexuality is concerned, and it makes the Othering process problematic. “Cultural shock” Ai reports, “was nothing compared to the biological shock I suffered as a human male among human beings who were, five-sixths of the time, hermaphroditic neuters” (48). As his time-specific comment makes clear, the Gethenians’ asexuality is not permanent. Once a month they go into kemmer, a state in which they become sexually active and either male or female, but the randomness of this gendering and their mostly unspecific gender belonging disagrees with everything Ai knows. Mona Fayad argues that “[b]ecause the androgynes elude the eye of the observer, they become ‘the dark continent’ that is inaccessible to the colonizing masculine eye that seeks to reshape them” (1997: 64). Ai is a ‘human male,’ they are ‘human beings,’ that is, they are similar enough in their humanity to make him expect similarities, such as cultural gendered patterns which could be used to reinforce a difference between Self and Other or in this case between male and female. The lack of these similarities and the Gethenians’ asexuality in this way initially constitute sites of resistance to the Othering which takes place in Ai’s narrative, and this ‘dark continent’ of their personalities becomes the breeding ground for distrust.

Ai’s early relationship with Estraven is marked by his inability to understand the androgynous aspect and to categorically fix the Prime Minister in an assigned role as the Other. Ai reports:

I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. (12, emphases added)

The interactions between Ai and the Gethenians become problematic, not only because of his inability to set aside his own perspective, but because of language, as the added emphases indicate. Ong Tot Oppong, the first Investigator sent to observe Winter before Ai’s arrival, demonstrates an awareness of this problem and adds: “I must say ‘he,’ for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine” (94-5). In this way, “it” may be less suited to describe
the Gethenians since they are human and actually contain both a male and a female side. Justine Larbalestier makes the succinct observation that Ai’s “use of ‘it’ keeps the Gethenians at arm’s length. His use of ‘he’ keeps this world of Others in the realm of the same” (2002: 103). That is, as a strategy to make the unknown familiar, and as such less frightening, Ai linguistically turns the Gethenians into males, the Terran gender category he is most familiar with.

Categorising people in terms of binaries does not mean an understanding of the opposite sex, however, and this is made clear when Therem Estraven during their time on the ice asks Ai about women. Ai notes that one’s biological sex is “the heaviest single factor in one’s life [...] determin[ing] one’s expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners” but comes to the conclusion that he “can’t tell [Estraven] what women are like” (234-5). Larbalestier argues that “[w]omen are the Other which shadows the text” (2002: 99) and as this conversation takes place when Ai’s journey towards self-discovery is well under way, he realises that the Other is not necessarily Estraven, the androgen, but the women he can never understand on his home planet because of the constructed and performative categories that have kept men and women apart.

The male and female aspects of the same person are progressively regarded by Ai as one way out of the binary thinking, and contrary to what the Investigator believes (94), duality is revealed to be an integral part of Gethenian society. The very title of the novel comes from a Handdara poem in which the importance of the double nature of all things is stressed:

Light is the left hand of darkness
And darkness the right hand of light.
Two are one, life and death, lying
Together like lovers in kemmer,
Like hands joined together,
Like the end and the way. (233-4, original italics)

After being read the poem, Ai muses: “‘You’re isolated, and undivided. Perhaps you are as obsessed with wholeness as we are with dualism.’” Estraven answers: “‘We are dualists too. Duality is an essential, isn’t it? So long as there is myself and the other’” (234, original italics). Ai’s com-
prehension of the dualistic nature of the Gethenians increases, which leads to questions concerning his own identity. He comes to realise the possibilities of crossing the boundaries between male and female, between Self and Other, within himself.

The opportunities which become available when gender ceases to be a defining factor has naturally appealed to critics and given rise to feminist and utopian readings (Jameson 1975: 226, Lefanu 1989: 137). In 1976, Le Guin claimed that gender is a minor theme compared to that of “betrayal and fidelity.” She further stated that one of the most prominent “symbols is an extended metaphor of winter, of ice, snow, cold: the winter journey” a metaphor which is intimately connected to both fidelity and betrayal (Le Guin 1992: 8). The harsh climate of Winter is indeed represented in various ways and serves different functions throughout the text, not only to the journey within the journey, producing fidelity to and understanding of both Self and Other, but also to illustrate how characters are defined by their reactions to the cold and how the climate comes to represent or erase important binaries. The binary of male and female is one of the constructions which will crumble in the cold, which illustrates that the gender theme works parallel to the themes of betrayal and fidelity, something Le Guin also notes in a revision of her article (1992: 8).

The animal imagery establishing differences between Gethenians and Terrans also features the dichotomy between hot and cold features. The Gethenians are likened to “Arctic birds” and their manners and customs (such as their habit not to heat their houses) are in line with this “physiological weatherproofing” (28). Ai extends the animal imagery to himself, likening himself to “a tropical bird” and claims to be “cold one way outdoors and cold another way indoors, ceaselessly and more or less thoroughly cold” (28-9). As a Terran he is not adapted to the harsh climate and realises, it seems for the first time, that there are different kinds of cold and different levels of exposure to it.6

Ai’s vulnerability to the cold is concretely exemplified as he, along with other prisoners, is taken to a labour camp (or Farm, as they are also called). He reports, looking out of the window of the van: “My breath had made a little ice-bridge between my lips and the mesh. I had to break this bridge with my fingers before I could turn away” (171). In this way, the cold itself captures him and even if Ai is able to easily free himself, the analogy is extended. Estraven comments that
“[t]hey did not kill people on their Farms: they let hunger and winter and despair do their murders for them” (188). The responsibility for the prisoners’ deaths is shifted from people to the cold, and the climate is also on more consistent duty at the Farm as “[i]n winter, they use winter itself to guard it” (195). But the cold also produces a sense of humanity, illustrated through the prisoners protecting each other from the cold, and through their recognition that some are less adapted to it than others. Each night in the van, Ai and two other prisoners are moved towards the centre of the group in a gesture of communal kindness. “We did not struggle for the warm place, we simply were in it each night” Ai says. “It is a terrible thing, this kindness that human beings do not lose. Terrible, because when we are finally naked in the dark and cold, it is all we have” (170). This is one of the first instances in which the cold is described as reducing everything unnecessary, leaving only the essentials within each being. The Gethenians’ sexuality, their ‘neuter’ state, which has previously constituted the main obstacle in Ai’s understanding of them, give way to their humanity, the common denominator in this exposed situation. The ‘terrible’ aspect of the reduction is indicative of Ai’s growing realisation that the boundaries between Self and Other, crucial to his mental ordering of Winter, become blurred, leading him to question aspects of his own identity.

The cold functions in another, more benevolent, way to Estraven who has made plans to help Ai escape from Farm. “[T]he snow I had waited for was falling” he finally reports (187). To him, the snow becomes a means of camouflage; hidden in drifts and with movements obscured, Estraven can set the plan in motion. In this sense, and progressively through the ensuing chapters, the attitude to the cold changes. As Ai, wrapped in furs in a tent is “as well hidden as winter and wilderness could hide him” (193) the cold finally takes on the shape of a saviour rather than as a controlling and punishing device.

The personification of the cold echoes the first Investigator’s description of the climate as a reason for the peacefulness of the Gethenians.

The weather of Winter is so relentless, so near the limit of tolerability even to them with all their cold-adaptations, that perhaps they use up their fighting spirit fighting the cold. The marginal
peoples, the races that just get by, are rarely the warriors. And in the end, the dominant factor in Gethenian life is not sex or any other human thing: it is their environment, their cold world. Here man has a crueller enemy even than himself. (96).”

Contradictorily, the Investigator claims that it is not a human trait which poses problems for the Gethenians while simultaneously personifying the cold herself, making it into a human entity as she designates it an “enemy.” This personification is sustained as she closes her report: “I really don’t see how anyone could put much stock in victory or glory after he had spent a winter on Winter, and seen the face of the Ice” (97). On the journey across the glacier, Estraven describes a similar personification of the Ice, this time by giving it an ability to communicate: “There is nothing the Ice says, but Ice” (231). The capital letter in Ice seems to suggest a human presence and its authority is unquestionable. Similarly, when the travellers are isolated in the tent because of bad weather, the blizzard gains a voice. Ai reports that it “yelled at us, a three-day-long, wordless, hateful yell from unbreathing lungs. ‘It’ll drive me to screaming back’ I said to Estraven in mindspeech, and he, with the hesitant formality which marked his rapport: ‘No use. It will not listen’” (268, original italics). Again, the cold takes the form of a human threat, but one which will not respond and cannot be prevailed upon.

The novel’s central binary of reliability and deception, who to rely on and who to distrust, is also made apparent through climate-related metaphors. The winter which is just starting as Ai reaches the city of Mishnory is described as “unrelenting.” The climate, the “cold, sleet, ice, wind, rain, snow, cold, cold inside, cold outside, cold to the bone and the marrow of the bone” is connected to loneliness and isolation as Ai is in a place and in a position in which he can trust no one. In Mishnory, the buildings are “vague, their facades streaked, dewed, smeared. There was something fluid, insubstantial, in the very heaviness of this city...” This lack of definition translates to the inhabitants of the city who are also “a little vague, a little, just a little bit unreal [...] It was ... as if they did not cast shadows” (146-7). Tellingly, Estraven who has come to Orgoreyn to warn Ai, is described as “the only thing alive in all Mishnory” as he is concrete against “the even, vague gray-white of the snow” (133). Again, the climate works as an essentialising factor.
Estraven’s androgynous nature, the initial reason for distrust, becomes less relevant than his concreteness, his ability to leave shadows in these shadowless surroundings.

The binary of reliability and deception returns in significant ways on the journey within the journey, with snow and ice as both literal phenomena and as metaphors. The landscape on the glacier is a painful monochrome at first: “blinding and horizonless to the utmost north, a white, a white the eyes could not look on” (219). The white on white becomes dangerous as the travellers cannot properly judge what areas are safe: “[T]he sky white, the air white, no visible sun, no shadow: and the snow itself, the Ice, disappeared from under our feet” (243). Therem Estraven calls this condition “the Unshadow” (261) and the lack of concreteness parallels the situation in Mishnory since the travellers “need the shadows, in order to walk” (267). The absence of shadows further come to represent the lack of duality and Ai draws the Terran symbol of yin and yang, connecting it to the titular poem: “Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow” (267). Yet again, Estraven comes to represent the needed concreteness, and trust is this time not hindered but rather enabled by his inherent gender duality. The male and female aspects of his being are compared to dark and light, and to the possibility of casting a shadow, of being able to continue the journey. Metaphorically, then, snow and ice enable Ai’s further understanding of that ‘dark continent’ previously constituting Gethenian sexuality.

The process of reaching a full understanding is slow, however, and Ai is still incapable as he is “locked in [his] virility” to completely feel at ease with Estraven’s androgynous nature. He describes Estraven as being “built more like a woman than a man, more fat than muscle” and when pulling the sled together across the frozen wastes compares them to “a stallion in harness with a mule” (218). In this comparison, Ai retains his own male sexuality, while Estraven becomes the sterile mule. Some days into the walk, Estraven goes into the kemmer phase and androgyny (or ‘sterility’ in Ai’s view) gives way to a temporary sexual gendering. The isolation of the wilderness then works to enable a further understanding between the characters. Estraven says:

up here on the Ice each of us is singular, isolate, I as cut off from those like me, from my society and its rules, as he from his. There
is no world full of other Gethenians here to explain and support my existence. We are equals a last, equal, alien, alone. (232)

Each society is constructed by its categories and definitions, even the androgynous society of Winter, but these constructions only carry meaning within the culture which has created them. In this sense, the isolation of the glacier works as the ultimate equalising force when reducing both travellers to nothing more than that, travellers.

The glacial cold and the isolation of the wilderness also work to bring out the characters’ true selves. Comparing how extremes have been used in science fiction, Jameson argues that heat is often used to illustrate the “dissolution of the body into the outside world, a loss of that clean separation from clothes and external objects that gives you your autonomy.” The jungle in these narratives becomes an “immense and alien organism” which threatens to engulf the character travelling through it. In contrast, the cold on Winter is “a symbolic affirmation of the autonomy of the organism, and a fantasy realization of some virtually total disengagement of the body from its environment” (Jameson 1975: 221-2)

The essentialising aspect of Winter’s climate which has hitherto worked to establish common ground can in this way also work to reveal the characters’ inner selves and the contradictions inherent in these. Watching Estraven sleep, Ai concludes that: “I saw him now defenseless and half-naked in a colder light, and for the first time saw him as he was” (200). The strong and resourceful Estraven is revealed as having weaknesses just as Ai, ill equipped for the climate, is revealed to be unusually strong (227-8). The collapse of binaries and the resolution of contradictions are in this way produced by the cold itself and become illustrative of the inner journeys of both characters.

These realisations notwithstanding, the cold continues to divide them as Estraven is dependent on it for his comfort, while Ai cannot even fathom it: “The coldness of it [all] was perpetually incredible. Every morning I had to believe it all over again” he says (241). He is repeatedly frostbitten and has to rely on Estraven to massage the blood back into his skin. At one point one of his eyes freezes and Estraven “thaw[s] it open with breath and tongue” (243). The psychological closeness which they begin to experience is thus paralleled by a physical closeness, produced by Ai’s vulnerability, and the distrust between
them dissipates. When closing the tent flaps at night, Ai says that “[d]eath and cold were elsewhere, outside. Hatred was also left outside” (245). The shared space of the tent becomes a symbol of their existence outside society and the animosity between them is revealed as only having a place outside their isolation, in a place and time where binaries still hold. Finally, Ai comes to the following conclusion:

I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. [...] But it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came. (248-9)

Ai has reached the destination of his inner journey and formed an understanding of the Other. Significantly, however, this understanding is predicated not on becoming similar, but retaining while still accepting differences. There is not victory here, in the sense of persuading the Other to change or accept a certain world view. There is no conquest in the traditional sense, which is just what the Investigator predicted: to “win” means very little after having “spent a winter on Winter, and seen the face of the Ice” (97).

The end of the journey within the journey is followed by a re-entry into society, which proves fatal for Estraven and establishes that Ai’s outside view has shifted and that he now looks at his own culture from within Winter’s. This change of perspective is unsettling to him and the animal imagery previously applied to the Gethenians is now transferred to Ai’s own people as he meets with the spaceship crew he has been able to contact. Even their sexuality is seen as abnormal. Ai says that

they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer. (296)

In his reactions there is an echo of another fictional traveller’s:
Gulliver’s responses to humanity on his return from the land of the Houyhnhnms. The once known becomes strange, and established behaviours become barbarous once the inner journey has been completed.

Throughout the fictional travelogue, Ai has struggled to erect and enforce boundaries between Self and Other by privileging his own cultural categories and constructs. The journey within the journey and the extreme cold of Winter both work to erase these boundaries, the journey by becoming an exploration of the travellers’ own selves and the cold by essentialising existence, stripping away the cultural markers of what is known and what is alien. Duality, revealed to be central to both Gethenians and Terrans, in this way becomes a central trope enabling both trust and reliability, and the boundaries between Self and Other finally crumble in the cold.

NOTES

1 Even Le Guin, albeit tongue-in-cheek, establishes the authority of Ai, as she in her 1976 introduction states that he has “used up my ink and my type writer ribbon” (Introduction, n. p.).

2 In a thorough online analysis of the novel, Rebecca Rass draws attention to the multiple meanings of the central character’s name. “His name, Ai, discloses his three roles in the narrative: as I, the narrator who sees everything from his own limited point of view; as Eye, the observer who learns to see into people and events; and as Ai, a cry of pain.” (n. p.) Since Ai is an alien to the Gethenians, and since he uses sophisticated and to them unknown equipment, a fourth possible association to his name could be AI – Artificial Intelligence.

3 On Winter it is “always the Year One” (2).

4 The use of pronouns is a problematic aspect which Le Guin has addressed in her article “Is Gender Necessary? Redux”. In a 1976 version of the article she acknowledges the critique of her novel based on the fact “that the Gethenians seem like men instead of menwomen” putting this down, mainly, to her choice of pronoun, but that she “do[es] not consider this really very important”. However, in a revised version of the article from 1987 she states that she “now consider[s] it very important” and that she in a screenplay of the novel has “invented pronouns” to address the issue (Le Guin 1992: 14-15).

5 The Handdara is a religious Gethenian cult whose members specialise in foretelling.

6 The centrality of the climate and its variations works on basic semantic levels as well. “[T]hey have by my count sixty-two words for the various kinds, states,
ages, and qualities of snow; fallen snow, that is. There is another set of words for the varieties of snowfall; another for ice; a set of twenty or more that define what the temperature range is, how strong a wind blows, and what kind of precipitation is occurring, all together” (168-9).

7 As Fayad has noted, the Investigator’s theory is indicative of “the imperialist enterprise of the Ekumen” since “[s]he relegates the Gethenians to the margins (where is the center?) implying misleadingly that theirs is a mere survival level existence” (66).

8 The first recounted legend is called “The Place Inside the Blizzard” and this legend and others closely parallel events in the main story line. The recounted myths also feature Ice in a humanised form.

REFERENCES


