In a recent *Locus* interview, Ursula K. Le Guin says that she wrote *Tales from Earthsea* and *The Other Wind* because it became more important to find out who the dragons really are, and what the relationship of dragon to human is . . . Dragons and wildness and death are all connected in some obscure way in my imagination. But dragons are also life (5).

Life and death—more of Le Guin’s famous dualities? But what of wildness? These creatures are initially presented in *A Wizard of Earthsea* as beings with language and thought, beings whose native tongue is Old or True Speech, the Language of Making, the speech wizards use in their Art-Magic. Yet, they *are* great beasts, whose fire ravages and destroys. In Tehanu we learn that dragons and humans were once “one people, one race, winged, and speaking the True Language. . .But in time nothing can be without becoming” (11). Change is the one constant. Some of the dragon-people stayed in the west choosing wildness, flight, and freedom while others sailed east, choosing knowledge and treasure building, learning, making, and shaping.

Or, as I am going to argue: dragons chose to be Nature; humans chose to be a part of nature. We made the Emersonian choice of the active and connected.
life; dragons chose to be the act, to be True Speech. It is this choice that evolves in the Earthsea cycle, as does our knowledge and understanding of Earthsea, its magic, and its peoples—both humans and dragons. As Le Guin herself learns who dragons are and how they are connected to humans, so do her readers.

I chose the word “Emersonian” deliberately as I am going to examine Le Guin’s dragons as Nature in an Emersonian context and thus establish a link between the Sage of Concord and his perceptions of Nature and Le Guin’s fire-breathing beasts. Building on and using the argument that I have made elsewhere, in Communities of the Heart, I am going to look at Le Guin as Emerson’s spiritual heir, as much as are Thoreau, Fuller, Whitman, and C. S. Peirce. First, I will examine Emerson’s notions of Nature, and that of the active life, and then explore dragons as a persistent myth and symbol, especially in Western culture. I will then bring these examinations to bear on Le Guin’s Earthsea dragons and humans, their connections, and the choice each made, with particular attention to the later Earthsea books, Tehanu, the novella “Dragonfly” in Tales from Earthsea, and The Other Wind. It is my argument that to make the Emersonian choice is to choose to be human, which is a risky choice, and a choice informed by dragons and the choices they made. Furthermore, as Le Guin has argued throughout her fiction, this is an ethical, a moral choice.

The connection between the American Romantics or Transcendentalists and Nature is a familiar one. “Nature is as celebrated a part of American Romanticism as is the self and has acquired mystical overtones as a source of truth” (Rochelle 112). According to Emerson, in his famous essay “Nature,” Nature and Soul compose the universe. But what does that mean? Yes, it is “space, the air, the river, the leaf” (Emerson, Selected Essays, “Nature” 36) but for Emerson, Nature is also emblem and a tool for the use of the human mind. Emerson provides a list of these uses—“Commodity, Beauty, Language, and Discipline” (40)—and it is the latter three I want to look at here, especially the last two. “A noble want of man is served by nature, namely the love of Beauty . . . [The] mountain, the tree, the animal, gives us delight in and of themselves” (42). The beauty of Nature also reveals the presence of the “spiritual element,” as “Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue” (45). Nature is particularly useful as emblem through language for Emerson. He asserts that “words are signs of natural facts” and “particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts . . . Nature is a symbol of the spirit” (48). Indeed “the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind” (53). Thus, Nature becomes a way to the truth, “a discipline of the understanding in intellectual truths” (55), and a way to connect everything to everything, to a “Unity that . . . lies under the undermost garment of Nature . . . “(60). Or, as Paul Boller asserts in American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860: An Intellectual Inquiry, for Emerson Nature was a “source of material abundance, aesthetic pleasure, and scientific truth.” Every natural phenomenon is a source of “moral and spiritual training”

418
The Emersonian Choice

(68) and ultimately, Nature is “the objectification of the Universal Spirit” (77). These moral and ethical teachings become “the real value of nature,” as it becomes a tool, a way to connect to this Spirit (Porte 61).

Emerson takes the idea of nature as a source of moral teaching further in “The American Scholar” in which he calls for an active life, a real attempt to connect to this “Universal Spirit.” “The one thing in the world of value is the active soul” (88-89). Scholars are not to be “recluses” in “ivory towers”—Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential . . . Life is the dictionary of the scholar” (91, 93). He must be educated by “nature, by books, by action.” He is “Man Thinking,” whose duties are “to cheer, to raise, to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances” (95). In other words, Emerson is calling for a scholar to be connected to and part of his world—to life itself, a life of participation in which one’s actions have meaning and purpose. If this happens, “A Nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself to be inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men” (105). Thus, by implication, Emerson is not speaking just to the scholar, but to men—and women—to choose an active, engaged life, one rooted in Nature, but one of meaningful purpose. Emerson, however, was not one to test out his ideas. The best-known attempt to follow the consequences of an Emersonian choice was that of his most famous disciple, Thoreau. He took Emerson’s advice to heart and retreated to Walden Pond, to become “Man Thinking,” or as Thoreau says in Walden:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. (81-82)

Emerson, according to Larzer Ziff, in his introduction to Selected Essays, “sought a new relation to nature” (17), as Thoreau attempted to do in Walden. Emerson believed, Ziff asserts that

Once upon a time, man was instinct with nature and was an inseparable part of it. But with the growth of his understanding—known mythically as the fall of man—he separated from and looked on nature as a reality foreign to his soul. He attempted a partial reunion with nature when he searched for its laws so that he can manipulate it, but his thoughts he now regards as one thing and nature’s mindless processes as another. (17)

Certainly Le Guin is someone who advocates a Thoreau-like simplicity for living within nature. Furthermore her utopian/dystopian thought experiments can be seen as the work of an active, engaged “Emersonian” mind, but what, one
may wonder, does all this have to do with dragons? After all, Le Guin’s dragons are certainly not “mindless.” Before examining Earthsea’s dragons in an Emersonian context, I want to first look at dragons as cultural symbol, as archetype. According to Michael Levy, Le Guin’s “dragons are a “symbolically moving targets that become more complex and more idiosyncratic” as the Earthsea cycle has progressed (quoted in Lindow, 33). Le Guin herself, in Earthsea Revisioned, argues that “These are the dragons of a new world, America, and the visionary forms of an old woman’s mind” (22). Archetypes, yes, but not “rigid,” rather “as a vital potentiality,” as something fluid, in motion (22).

As symbols, dragons have been in motion for a long time and across many cultures. Peter Hogarth, in Dragons, asserts that “a thousand years ago dragons were such familiar creatures that what they looked like and how they behaved was common knowledge to every man, woman, and child” (12). Their appearance in myth is far older than a thousand years. In Babylonia’s creation epic, there is Tiamat, a “monstrous being” with a ‘scaly serpentine body’ and “horns on her head” (15). And a case could be made for a draconian connection to Eden’s serpent as well. Hogarth suggests that a dragon “usually symbolizes evil or primeval chaos” (17) and any hero’s victory over such a beast was a triumph of good over evil. As Le Guin’s Earthsea is clearly more evocative of the medieval world of the West, I shall only note in passing the far more benign dragons in India who “[played] a vital role in the supply of life-sustaining water” (45) and the Chinese dragons who were “generally well-disposed toward humans” (50). Not so, of course, in Europe, where, “omens of catastrophe,” they brought fire and destruction and the “sight of one usually heralded storms, earthquakes, bloodshed, and desolation” (118).

Like their lesser kin, serpents, dragons are associated with all four of the ancient medieval elements: earth, fire, water, and air. Serpents are “most intimately associated with the earth,” and it is from the earth they seem to escape. For dragons such escapes are often associated with the fire of volcanoes, the fire breathed by European dragons. The motion of a snake is rhythmic, like waves, and snakes are often found in water—the very water that can quench that fiery breath.

Although Chinese dragons are wingless (but not necessarily flightless), the western evolution of dragon wings makes them creatures of the air (Sax, 230-31). Since, as Emerson would argue, “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (“Nature,” 48), apparently, they are often emblematic of evil. It was the job of saints, as well as heroes, to slay such beasts, to kill such evil. In the Book of Revelations, the “seven-headed dragon of the Apocalypse” is “not just evil, but the persecutor of the true Church by its fire” (Hogarth, 100). That this malign image of dragons persists was evident in 2002, when the abysmal movie, Reign of Fire, hit the silver screen. Dragons return to ravage the Earth and bring down civilization as we know it, bringing fire and death and destruc-
tion. The film is set in England—the home of St. George, where else? Only a few humans survive in desperate strongholds when a new hero arrives, riding over the hills with armored cavalry and a beautiful woman who looks suspiciously like a princess.

Yet along with all of this dark and malevolent imagery, Western dragons are often presented as wise and intelligent. The heraldic dragon, appearing in a coat of arms, represents “strength, fierceness, invincibility” (160). Clearly, as symbols, they are more ambiguous than might first appear. Paul Newman, in *The Hill of the Dragon: An Enquiry into the Nature of Dragon Legends*, contends that “On the symbolic side [the dragon has] been interpreted as a monster of chaos, an emblem of feminine depravity, a synonym for the life-giving powers of water and earth, a dispenser of dangerous wisdom, [and] a personification of the element Mercury”—clearly “an infinitely complex monster” (253).

Such are Le Guin’s dragons, a “combination of good and evil,” who are “objects of adoration and reverence,” and of fear (Sant, 126). In *Earthsea Revised*, Le Guin describes them as “archetypes, yes, mindforms, a way of knowing” (21). In the first three books of the cycle, she describes dragons as “above all, wildness. What is not owned” (22). So it is when we first encounter them in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. They speak the language of magic, “the Hardic tongue of Earthsea, or the Old Speech from which it grew.” But this language, Old Speech, is not only that of dragons and mages, it is the language of creation that Segoy spoke when he “made the islands of the world . . .” (47) which suggests something of an equivalency again with dragons and Nature. Unlike the Western medieval dragons, however, Le Guin’s have kinship only “with wind and fire and they do not fight willingly over the sea” (89). Ged, the title character of *Wizard*, knows this and is able to use the knowledge against the Dragon of Pendor and its offspring, the latter being like animals, unable to speak and without “dragon-cunning,” not yet “powerful and guileful in a sorcery like and unlike the sorcery of men . . .” (89).

For the most part Le Guin’s dragons are more than mindless beasts, having a wild intelligence that is emblematic of Nature’s force and power. When in *The Tombs of Atuan*, Arha—not yet Tenar—asks Ged in the tombs to explain what it means to be a dragonlord, as he claims to be, he tells her it is “One whom the dragons will speak with,” and they speak in the language men use to make magic. It is not a question of control: “Dragons have no masters” (85), but indeed as “dragons live a thousand years . . . They are worth talking to . . . “(86). Ged describes them as creatures of the air, which “fly on their great wings in spirals . . . like a storming of yellow leaves in autumn” (86). Thus, they are wise, ancient, intelligent, but of the air, of the natural world, like autumn leaves. Arren, Ged’s companion in *The Farthest Shore*, echoes this description when he sees dragons in flight on their sea journey in the
Warren G. Rochelle

*Lookfar.* He also notes that one can take delight in their beauty, in true Emersonian fashion:

Arren saw the dragons soaring and circling on the morning wind, and his heart leapt with them, with a joy, a joy of fulfillment that was like pain. All the glory of mortality was in that flight. Their beauty was made up of terrible strength, utter wildness, and the grace of reason. For these were thinking creatures, with speech and ancient wisdom: in the patterns of their flight there was a fierce willed concord. (147)

It is in *Tehanu*, the fourth book of the *Earthsea* cycle, that the connection between dragons and humans is clearly made and the choice made plain. It is also in *Tehanu* that a connection is made between women and dragons as well. Tenar tells Therru (who later takes the name Tehanu), the story of the human-dragon connection, one she learned from the old mage, Ogion, who learned it from the Woman of Kemay, whom, it seems, was a dragon: “In that first moment, he told me, it was no woman he saw at all in the doorway, but a blaze and glory of fire, and a glitter of gold scales and talons . . .” (12). The story goes something like this:

In the beginning dragons and humans “were all one people, one race, winged and speaking the True Language. They were beautiful, and strong, and wise, and free.” Some became more in “love with flight and wildness” and “Others of the dragon-people came to care little for flight, but gathered up treasure, wealth, things made, things learned . . . And they came to fear the wild ones, who might come and destroy their dear hoard . . . The wild ones feared nothing. They learned nothing . . . the flightless ones trapped them as animals and killed them” (12). Eventually there were two peoples, the humans “filling up the Inner Isles” and the dragons, “always fewer and wilder, scattered by their endless, mindless greed, [lived in] the far islands of the Western Reach” (13). The wizards kept the use of the True Language of Making, and some remained, dragon and human, who remembered what had happened, with human minds and dragon hearts. Thus, the Emersonian choice was first made: dragons chose to be; humans chose to make.

Wizards kept the use of the True Language of Making, and in every generation a few are born who are both dragon and human, remembering their common language and lineage with human minds and dragon hearts. Therru, the abused child, who is taken in by Tenar as her own, is one who will come to remember that she is both. It is she who spots in the far distance, Kaleassin, the Eldest, bringing Ged to Gont, to Tenar. When the great creature lands, Tenar remembers “that men must not look into a dragon’s eyes, but that is nothing to her” (40). As Le Guin points out in *Earthsea Revisioned*, “she’s not a man, is she? She and the dragon look at each other, eye to eye and they know who they are. They recognize each other” (22). Tenar can do this because “she chose
freedom over power. Her insignificance is her wildness. What she is and does in ‘beneath notice’—invisible to the men who own and control, the men in power” (23)

She and the dragon recognize each other as Other, and they recognize each other’s power. Women and dragons are alike.

Therru also has been made Other by abuse. Any chance of having a normal life was snatched away from her when she was sexually abused, beaten, and thrown in the fire. Late in the story, Therru calls Kalessin to help Tenar and Ged when they are in the clutches of Erisen and his men, and he puts them to the fire. Kalessin, who is still “wildness,” now is not just “seen as dangerous beauty, but as dangerous anger.”

As Le Guin suggests, this fire. . . runs right through the book. It meets the fire of human rage, the cruel anger of the weak. . .[and] it meets that fire and consumes it, for “a wrong that cannot be repaired must be transcended.” There is no way to repair or undo what was done to the child, and so there must be a way to go on from there. (23)

There must be a way to change and the dragon brings it:

So the dragon is subversion, revolution, change—a going beyond the old order in which men were taught to own and dominate and women were taught to collude with them: the order of oppression. It is the wildness of the spirit and of the earth, uprising against misrule.

And it rejects gender.

. . . the dragon defies gender entirely. There are male and female dragons in the earlier books, but I don’t know if Kalessin, the Eldest, is male or female or both or something else. I choose not to know. (23-24)

Here is Emerson’s Spirit, albeit somewhat wilder than he would have imagined, yet as vital and as important as he might have imagined it. Here is Nature, in its raw, untamed beauty, and here is Nature as moral instructor, both in the body of the dragon. Dragons signal change, the coming of the destruction of the “artificial order of repression.” As Le Guin concludes, the “dragon is the stranger, the other, the not-human: a wild spirit which escapes and destroys the artificial order of oppression” (25). It is also what we know, what we have imagined, “a speaking spirit, wise, winged, which imagines a new order of freedom” (25-26). It has brought choice.

This choice is made evident in “Dragonfly,” one of the stories in Tales from Earthsea. The title character is the daughter of a once-rich family in decline on the island of Way who wants to go to Roke, to the wizards’ school and enter the Great House and study and learn. But only men go there. Assisted by Ivory, a man who was expelled from the school, she eventually gets there, disguised by
“Ivory’s spell of semblance” and is let in by the Doorkeeper. The Doorkeeper, of course, sees through Ivory’s weak magic and lets her in, knowing she is a woman—and the spell drops away, once she is inside. Thus the Doorkeeper has chosen, in essence, to be more human, to begin the making of a world in which both men and women have access to knowledge. The Doorkeeper’s choice rocks the school, as Dragonfly—now using her true name, Irian—does. She proves to be more than a woman; she is also dragon, “a flare of red flame in the dusk air, a gleam of red-gold scales, of vast wings,” and destroys the Summoner, the one mage who would resist the changes she brings (263). Irian leaves to be with her true people, and the mages are left to reopen the doors to their house, to make the risky choice of being fully human.

To choose again, and what to choose, are the issues of *The Other Wind*. Lebannen—Arren in *The Farthest Shore*—has reigned as King for fifteen years. Eight years have passed since Irian disturbed the order of things on Roke. Ged and Tenar have grown old on Gont. Therru—Tehanu—is a young woman. The dragons have returned to harass humans, burning houses and crops, scattering beasts, and they have returned to the volcano, Mount Andanden, which was “a most sacred place to the dragons where they came to drink fire from the earth in ancient days” (95). The King goes to Gont seeking Tehanu’s help with the dragons. When she calls out “Medeu!”—sister, brother—in the Old Speech, her kinship with dragons is apparent and the dragons listen, stop and speak to her (108).

This meeting as brought a new awareness of the place of humans, the reality of humans. At the council the King has called to consider the dragon problem, Onyx, a wizard, reminds them the dragons are not “mindless” beasts: “They speak the Language of the Making, in the knowledge of which our art and power lies. They are beasts as we are beasts. Men are animals that speak” (141). Once again Nature, in the form of the dragons, has instructed. Tehanu calls to Irian—now Orm Irian, a great dragon—to come to the King’s Council and speak for the dragons. When Irian arrives, she brings word that Kalessin has explained to the other dragons that their madness has been caused by a great evil, now a generation in the past.

Cob, the evil wizard whom Ged fought in the land of the dead in *The Farthest Shore*, stole speech from the dragons. As Kalessin told his people: “You let evil turn you into evil. You have been mad, but so long as the winds blow from the east you can never be what you were, free from both good and evil” (151). Kalessin entreats the other dragons to choose freedom, fire and wind, the west. Humans have chosen the east, water and earth, and the yoke of good and evil. There will be no more born both dragon and human, he says, “for the balance changes” (152). Finally it is revealed that long in the past humans stole part of the dragon realm in an ill-conceived attempt at immortality. The stolen space became the Drylands of death. In the end the wall between Earthsea and the
Drylands is destroyed and Tehanu transforms, becoming dragon and leaving the world. The choice is made again. The dragons go free, to fly on the other wind; humans remain behind to the choice they made: “The knowledge of good and evil” (233). Tenar returns home to tell Ged that “There are no dragons left in Havnor or the western islands” (246).

And Ged responds, “The world was broken and made whole” (246).

Emerson believed Nature to be a way to the truth—that, indeed, it was emblematic of the truth, of Spirit, and that, as such, it was a tool for the human mind. Le Guin’s dragons, as wildness, as the Old Speech, the language of creation, and thus Nature, must be, then, a way to the truth. They are actually two ways, it seems. First, they offer a truth of how to exist, to live: on the air, with fire, without doing, just being. Second, this truth does not invalidate the human way of existence: to do, to know good and evil. This way is just as true. Emerson might have argued that this choice was the Fall, and that, prior to the choice, Nature and humankind were inseparable. The human choice, to know good and evil separated them from Nature. For Earthsea’s dragons, it is much the same, but it began with freedom and flight and the wind and fire. The mages kept the knowledge of the Old Speech that let them manipulate Nature—and in doing so, eventually brought evil to creatures that were neither good nor evil; they just were. Dragons are, humans do. We use Nature, we manipulate it, we learn from it: it is indeed a “source of material abundance, aesthetic pleasure, and scientific truth” (Boller 68).

And this is the choice Emerson calls for—the active life, the participatory life—a full human life, one with risks and dangers because it includes knowledge. But this knowledge is what makes us human—and to be fully and truly human, to be free, resonates throughout Le Guin’s fiction. And in Earthsea, it is the dragons who teach us this. They also go beyond Emerson, as they are emblematic of the offer of freedom, of change, the end of oppression. No, we cannot go with them to fly the other wind, but we can accept freedom for all humans; we can make that choice. We can, as Le Guin has made clear we must in both the Earthsea cycle and the stories in her Hainish universe, make the ethical choice: to do right, to do and be good. To be fully human.

Works Cited


“Ursula K. Le Guin: A Return to Earthsea.” *Locus* 47.3 (September 2001): 4-5.
