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Daoism and Posthuman Subjectivity in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*

Whether focusing primarily on the influence of ecological or technological dimensions, posthumanist theorists have been consistently concerned with challenging the liberal humanist conception of the human subject as a bounded and autonomous entity. As evident from Donna Haraway's disruption of the human/nature divide via her provocative "cyborg" concept and from N. Katherine Hayles's argument – against fantasies of disembodiment through digital technologies – for the importance of understanding that humans are embedded in and dependent on a complex material world (5), posthumanists continually emphasize the interconnectedness of human subjects with nonhumans. This article engages with the conception of posthuman subjectivity developed within this tradition by Rosi Braidotti, who, in *Posthuman Knowledge*, characterizes it primarily as dynamic, embodied, and relational (11). With this decentring of the human subject, however, comes the risk of a diminished emphasis on human agency at an especially precarious time of anthropogenic environmental crisis.

Literature here plays a valuable role, modelling alternative imaginings of the human subject and illustrating their consequences for notions of agency. Posthumanists already often turn to American literary texts for such models. Throughout *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett repeatedly highlights the writings of Henry David Thoreau as a major influence on her theorization of matter as an active and affective force (xxiv, 2-3, 45-47), while her follow-up book *Influx and Efflux* (2020) engages extensively with the poetry of Walt Whitman to support her proposition of a "process-oriented self – a model of subjectivity consonant with a world of vibrant matter" (xv). Similarly, recognizing the historical role of literature in forming the traditional liberal humanist concept of the bounded human

subject, Pramod K. Nayar looks to late twentieth century literary texts, including several American works of science fiction, for posthumanist reframings of the human as always co-constituted by nonhumans (2). Both Bennett and Nayar view philosophy and literature as collaborators in revising dominant conceptions of the human such that human subjectivity and agency are better understood in interconnection with human and nonhuman others.

Despite recognizing the significance of American literature for developing the posthumanist project, however, critics have not been receptive to the influential role played by various forms of religious thinking in these texts' experiments in posthuman modes of subjectivity. Alongside Thoreau and Whitman, Bennett highlights American writers Wendell Berry and Barry Lopez as teachers of "how to induce an attentiveness to things and their affects" (xiv), but she pays little attention to their use of the religious imagination in doing so, despite the close attention given to all four of these writers in John Gatta's extensive study of "the religious import of American environmental literature" (6). Likewise, whereas Nayar pays close attention to Octavia E. Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin as "posthumanist authors" (129), Butler's imagined religion "Earthseed" in her Parable series is described only in secular terms as a "philosophy of interconnectedness" (143), while Le Guin's well-known influence from Daoism goes entirely unmentioned.¹ This represents a wider disinterest in religion among posthumanist engagements with American literature, one which is especially perplexing considering the wealth of critical attention given to the value of the religious imagination for post-anthropocentric thinking by scholars outside of literary studies (see Sideris; Keller; Bauman).

In this article, I highlight Ursula K. Le Guin as a prominent exemplar of the confluence of religion, posthumanism, and American literature. I begin by arguing that recent interpretations of Le Guin's work as recognizably posthumanist indicate vital overlaps between posthuman theory and the Daoist thought that has long been understood to animate her writing. Next, I attend to *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), her most explicitly Daoist novel, to demonstrate how its protagonist George Orr embodies Daoist thinking and in doing so conforms largely to Braidotti's model of posthuman subjectivity. Finally, I will examine Orr's apparent

passivity in light of re-evaluations of the concept of *wuwei* (non-action) by scholars of Daoism, demonstrating how such a reading of Le Guin's novel suggests an alternative conception of human agency that may inform the continued development of the posthumanist project.

Posthumanism and Daoism

With its anthropological interest in cultural diversity and its criticisms of destructive environmental practices, Le Guin's fiction exemplifies Braidotti's definition of posthumanism as the convergence of the anti-humanist "critique of the Humanist ideal of 'Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all things" and the post-anthropocentric opposition to "species hierarchy and anthropocentric exceptionalism" (*Posthuman Knowledge* 2). Interpretations of Le Guin's work in relation to the concerns of posthumanist thought have gained traction in recent years. Nayar, for example, draws attention to how Le Guin's experiments in multispecies identity indicate a "rejection of any kind of autonomous subjectivity" in favor of a species cosmopolitan perspective where "empathy and connection – with all forms of life, the ecosystem and the mineral world – [are seen] as the next (necessary) stage of human evolution" (126). In the introduction to their collection *The Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin*, Christopher L. Robinson, Sarah Bouttier, and Pierre-Louis Patoine write that "Le Guin's fiction and non-fiction moreover requires us to redefine what it means to be human, by decentring a traditional, potentially racialized and gendered vision of humans and placing them in a continuum involving animals, technology, and more generally the environment" (4). While not explicitly labelling Le Guin as posthumanist, this description of her project adheres closely to Braidotti's combined critique of universalist humanism and anthropocentrism. Neither of these readings of Le Guin, however, consider the role that Daoism plays in her experiments in posthuman subjectivity.

From her *Earthsea* and *Hainish Cycle* stories to her 1997 rendition of the *Tao Te Ching* [pinyin: *Daodejing*] and beyond, Le Guin's writing is dominated by Daoism. The Daoist ideas animating her most renowned novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974),

have attracted particular scholarly attention (see Mills; Cogell), but the extent of this influence was recognized even by her earliest critics, as in George Edgar Slusser's statement that Daoism "is and has always been the strongest single force behind her work"; Slusser welcomes her use of Daoism as a timely intervention into science fiction, "a literary genre long dominated by a harshly western vision of evolution and technological progress" (3). In encouraging closer attunement to an order beyond that imposed by humans, Le Guin's Daoist perspective is here suggested to be antithetical to the anthropocentric pursuit of human progress at the expense of environmental degradation.

Persistent associations of Daoist practice with passivity, however, lead some critics to see Le Guin's literary use of Daoism as politically ineffective and even as undermining the otherwise radical potential of her work. Where Dena C. Bain celebrates the "basic mythos underlying each of the novels based on the Quietist philosophy of Lao Tzu's Taoism" (223-24), it is precisely this supposed attitude of withdrawal that Fredric Jameson bemoans in Le Guin's "predilection for quietistic heroes and her valorization of an anti-political, anti-activist stance" (226). The problems of encouraging wholesale passivity are certainly apparent for any activist attempt to translate countercultural values into meaningful political change. This is especially clear in respect to the widespread change in perspective advocated by posthumanists in a contemporary context characterized by social injustice and ecological disaster. Yet, this characterization of Daoism is limited and rooted in popular misconception. Gib Prettyman argues that Jameson is "mistaken to consider [Le Guin's] Daoism an insignificant framework and to assume that it implies only static balance, ahistorical mysticism, and contemplative passivity" (72). Prettyman emphasizes the "real political work" carried out by Le Guin's engagement with Daoism through combating egoism and anthropocentrism (57), thereby suggesting more radical outcomes than a false equivalence with quietism would suggest.

In seeing in Daoist thought only a withdrawal from efforts at social transformation and a normative attempt at reconciliation with a "Nature" understood in terms of stasis or equilibrium, critics tend to overlook the ways in which Le Guin's Daoism might contribute to the posthumanist

project. In fact, much of the confusion around Daoism's emphasis on attunement with nature can be attributed to a mistaken conflation of the Romantic idea of reified "Nature," rightfully critiqued by contemporary ecocritical scholars like Timothy Morton, with the multivalent concept of nature in classical Chinese thought. As Eric S. Nelson explains, the Daoist sense of "nature" should be understood in relation to the concept of *ziran* as processual, self-organizing, and relational, a reality "that is interpreted between the poles of a fluid anarchic chaos and a hierarchically fixed and structured order": an intersecting and informative concept, *wanwu* "refers to the myriad things (non-human as well as human) in their specificity [...], equality and parity, and interconnectedness in an interthingly [...] relational whole" (10). This complex constellation of meanings clearly demonstrates a far less reductive sense of nature than the still-influential Romantic idea of an idealized domain wholly separate from human social activity. In its dynamic and interconnected unfolding, the understanding of "nature" that informs Daoism corresponds more closely with posthumanism's ontology of non-reductive or vital materiality, an ontology that undermines constructions of human subjectivity as isolated from other humans and nonhumans.

In recent years, scholars have begun to advocate greater engagement by posthumanist critics with Daoism. Nathan Eric Dickman finds in Zhuangzi – whose self-titled work, alongside Laozi's *Daodejing*, is one of the key texts of Daoism – a powerful resource for posthumanism's "critique of anthropocentric notions of humanity and subjectivity" (4). Emphasizing the similarities between Braidotti's theorization of the relational, processual posthuman subject and Zhuangzi's critique of anthropocentric conceptions that separate humanity from the rest of nature, Dickman makes the provocative claim that "posthumanism includes a lot that is just Zhuangzi in entrenched Western terminology" (2-3). In addition to Dickman's examples, an indication of the *Zhuangzi's* celebration of processual subjectivity can be found in the following passage:

This human form is merely a circumstance that has been met with, just something stumbled into, but those who have become humans take delight in it nonetheless. Now the human form during its time undergoes ten thousand

transformations, never stopping for an instant – so the joys it brings must be beyond calculation! (56)

Such non-hierarchical descriptions of the human within a dynamic and interpenetrating world demonstrate the strongly post-anthropocentric perspective of Daoist thought that supports Dickman's argument for paying greater attention to religious traditions that offer corroboration to posthumanist theory (6).

The considerable correspondences between Daoist thought and posthumanist theory are elucidated by Sebastian Hsien-hao Liao, who declares that "Daoism has since long ago pronounced the major tenets of posthumanist thinking. It may even help radicalize posthumanism" (64). Liao provides a brief but thorough comparative study, paying particular attention to the resonances of Daoist ideas with the Deleuzian concepts that inform posthumanism. Posthumanist theorists, especially those associated with Braidotti, engage extensively with the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Liao takes such concepts that relate to ontology, subjectivation, and ethics in turn. Pointing out that it is "almost commonsense that Daoism is a philosophy of immanence which prioritizes difference and becoming" (66), Liao makes connections between the "univocal and immanent" ontology of Deleuzian posthumanism and Daoism's notion of "*qi*... or vital force" which acts as a "common foundation underlying the human subject and all other things" (64; 66). Deleuzian concepts like "body without organs," "rhizomatic flights" and "haeccity," each of which approach an understanding of subjectivity as de-essentialized and processual in connection to the plane of immanence (65), are also likened to Daoist techniques and ideas such as "sitting into oblivion," "roaming joyfully" and the "true man" (or *zhen-ren*) (66-67). The purpose of this comparative work, according to Liao, is to mobilize Daoist thought to contribute to the posthumanist development of a transversal ethics appropriate for our global Anthropocene predicament, that is, "an ethics that can re-align the relationship between the human and the non-human" (64).

Recognizing resonances between Daoism and posthumanism allows us to better understand the value of Le Guin's speculative engagement with

the former. Amy Kit-Sze Chan sets a precedent for the present study in using Deleuzian concepts to interpret Le Guin's deployment of Daoism's "yin principle" throughout her novels (126-27). Chan finds a productive consonance between the Daoist *yin* and Deleuze's "body without organs," the latter defined as "a non-formed, non-organized, or destratified body that is in a state of constant flux" as well as "a process that is directed toward a course of continual becoming and not geared towards any teleological point of completion" (132). If "a body is *yang*, and a BwO is *yin*" (135), then Le Guin's use of the *yin* principle – usually associated with the feminine, the dark, and the passive (Baldrian-Hussein 1164) – to portray her characters' attitudes in novels like *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Word for World Is Forest* has relevance for conceptions of subjectivity in terms of processual becoming in relation to others rather than as a simple quietist withdrawal. As noted, critics who affirm the value of Le Guin's fiction for post-anthropocentric thought tend not to address the prominence of Daoism in her work. This reflects the typical neglect of religion in posthumanist readings of American literature. Where Le Guin's writings might seem to offer an accessible route into recognizing the value of the religious imagination for posthumanism, associations made throughout Le Guin scholarship between Daoism and passivity appear to have dissuaded critics from following this line of inquiry. To begin to redress this interpretation, the next section demonstrates how her novel *The Lathe of Heaven* indicates the confluence of Daoist and posthumanist modes of subjectivity.

The Man in the Middle of the Graph

The first of Le Guin's novels to seemingly stand apart from either the fantasy Earthsea Cycle or the future history works set in her Hainish universe, *The Lathe of Heaven* is also the first to take place on Earth, more specifically in Portland, Oregon, in the early twenty-first century. The world of the novel is ravaged by global warming, war, and economic inequality. And yet it is a world that is especially changeable. The primary character, George Orr, discovers that his dreams can transform reality, an ability that Orr finds horrifying since he cannot control the consequences of these changes. After

abusing prescription drugs in an attempt to stop dreaming entirely, he is forced by law to attend therapy sessions with psychiatrist William Haber, who uses a hypnotic technique to guide Orr's "effective dreaming" towards social goods like ending racial inequality and overpopulation. Haber's actions initially appear well meaning but he quickly becomes seduced by the possibilities of this power for perfecting human society. Charlotte Spivack describes *Lathe* as "the most explicitly Taoist work in the Le Guin canon" (60), and the novel's Daoist elements come to the fore in Orr's opposition to the megalomaniac humanism of Haber.

The first description of Orr's character comes from Haber's own initial impression: "Unaggressive, placid, milquetoast, repressed, conventional. The most valuable period of relationship with a patient, Haber often said, is the first ten seconds" (Le Guin, *Lathe* 6). Haber continues to think of Orr in terms of this preliminary diagnosis, oscillating between paternalism and outright contempt. While explaining to Orr the machine-assisted hypnotic procedure that will be used to induce a dreaming state, Haber reflects that "[t]here was an acceptant, passive quality about him that seemed feminine, or even childish. Haber recognized in himself a protective/bullying reaction toward this physically slight and compliant man. To dominate, to patronize him was so easy as to be almost irresistible" (17). By positioning Orr in such terms, Haber reveals his opposing identification as a man of action. Haber is an oneirologist, a dream specialist intent on controlling the irrationality of dreams towards progressive ends. Over time, he proceeds from directing Orr to stop the incessant Portland rain to grander displays of ameliorative power like ending racism through implementing the ideal universalist solution: turning every human's skin the same shade of gray. Near the end of the novel, after the elimination of many more social and environmental issues, Haber exclaims, "Progress, George! We've made more progress in six weeks than humanity made in six hundred thousand years!" (146). At this point, Haber has almost achieved his ultimate aim: to replicate the electrical rhythms of Orr's dreaming brain so that Haber can more efficiently use the power by himself "for the good of all," so that "this world will be like heaven, and men will be like gods!" (138).

The opposition between Orr's and Haber's dispositions acts as the primary structuring principle of Le Guin's novel, as is well noted by critics.

Spivack writes that “George the dreamer is in every way the opposite of Dr. Haber the psychiatric dream specialist. Whereas George is the perfect, passive Taoist hero, Haber is a Faustian figure, driven by a ruthless ambition for power” (61). Jameson, on the other hand, politicizes “the temperamental opposition between the Tao-like passivity of Orr and the obsession of Haber with apparently reforming and ameliorative projects of all kinds,” seeing in this contrast Le Guin’s opposition to the “imperializing liberalism which is the dominant ideology of the United States today” (227). Both critics describe Orr’s resistance to Haber’s will to power as markedly Daoist, an interpretation consistently encouraged by the novel.

Haber himself recognizes Orr as a kind of unknowing Daoist subject: “You’re of a peculiarly passive outlook for a man brought up in the Judaeo-Christian-Rationalist West. A sort of natural Buddhist. Have you studied the Eastern mysticisms, George?’ The last question, with its obvious answer, was an open sneer” (*Lathe* 81). Though displaced here in favor of Buddhism, Daoism is certainly one of the “Eastern mysticisms” to which Haber alludes, and Le Guin’s repeated use of quotations from the *Zhuangzi* as chapter epigraphs only reinforces this association. Haber later quantifies Orr’s composure through the results of various personality tests: “Where there’s an opposed pair, a polarity, you’re in the middle; where there’s a scale, you’re at the balance point... you’re the man in the middle of the graph”; dismissing as mysticism his colleague’s interpretation of these equilibrious results as denoting “a peculiar state of poise, of self-harmony,” Haber uses them to all but deny Orr’s subjecthood: “You cancel out so thoroughly that, in a sense, nothing is left” (137). In the eyes of the zealous Haber, Orr’s passive, Daoist-like being is equivalent to no being at all.

When taken from Orr’s own perspective, a far more positive rendering of his Daoist sensibility emerges:

a sense of well-being came into him, a certainty that things were all right, and that he was in the middle of things. Self is universe. He would not be allowed to be isolated, to be stranded. He was back where he belonged. He felt an equanimity, a perfect certainty as to where he was and where everything else was. This feeling did not come to him as blissful or mystical, but simply as normal. It was the way he generally had felt, except in times of crisis, of agony;

it was the mood of his childhood and all the best and profoundest hours of his boyhood and maturity; it was his natural mode of being. (143)

Orr's sense of serenity comes not from a blissful experience of non-being but from his feeling of being inextricably embedded within the world, and here he differs most from Haber's continued intrusions into a world treated as a separate object to be manipulated. Despite the connotations of "Self is universe" with undifferentiated metaphysical unity, a later passage indicates a more individuated and relational understanding: "I'm a part of [the world]. Not separate from it. I walk on the ground and the ground's walked on by me, I breathe the air and change it, I am entirely interconnected with the world" (155). Orr's recognition of his capacity to meaningfully affect and be affected by the world to which he belongs resonates with Braidotti's definition of posthuman subjectivity as "materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational" (*Posthuman Knowledge* 11). As with Dickman's and Liao's claims about the close similarities between the two modes of thought, Orr's embedded and relational Daoist sensibility lends itself well to a posthumanist reading, especially in relation to their shared resistance to the oppositional logic of universalist humanism represented by the domineering Haber.

As noted earlier, Le Guin's fiction has attracted some attention for its posthumanist themes, though without provoking much extended analysis. Interestingly, Christopher L. Robinson brings attention to parallels between Le Guin's characterization in her short story "Ether, OR" and Braidotti's theorization of nomadic subjectivity in the revised edition of her *Nomadic Subjects* (2011). Robinson highlights Le Guin's experimental use of narrative as a way of counteracting the loss of coherence that is acknowledged by Braidotti to follow from a more dynamic and multifaceted sense of identity (34; 44). Robinson, however, does not engage with Braidotti's later work on the posthuman, which marks a development of her nomadic thought in post-anthropocentric directions in response to the challenges of the Anthropocene. Nor does he attend to the Daoist aspect of Le Guin's fiction. In contrast to the anthropocentrism of Haber – who has inscribed into the foyer of his center of power Alexander Pope's line "THE PROPER STUDY OF MANKIND IS MAN" (*Lathe* 135) – Orr articulates a world of vibrant matter:

“Everything dreams. The play of form, of being, is the dreaming of substance. Rocks have their dreams, and the earth changes... But when the mind becomes conscious, when the rate of evolution speeds up, then you have to be careful. Careful of the world. You must learn the way. You must learn the skills, the art, the limits. A conscious mind must be part of the whole, intentionally and carefully – as the rock is part of the whole unconsciously.” (167)

This description of nonhuman agency and its implications for the art or “way” of human life coheres with Nelson’s definition of Daoist praxis as aspiring towards attunement with a world of myriad, shifting perspectives (55; 66). It aligns with the post-anthropocentric vital materialism characteristic of Braidotti’s posthuman theory. To go beyond simply showing, by way of comparative analysis, how Daoism *reflects* posthumanist thinking in Le Guin’s work, the next section demonstrates how Le Guin’s deployment of Daoism in *The Lathe of Heaven* might also *inflect* the development of posthumanist theory by addressing more fully the problem of passivity in the novel and its implications for posthuman forms of agency.

Wuwei as Posthuman Praxis

The Lathe of Heaven has been criticized for encouraging an ultimately quietist politics, supposedly emphasizing withdrawal rather than activism. As with Jameson’s concerns about Le Guin’s passive heroes, Sean McCann and Michael Szalay charge *Lathe* with privileging “a passive aesthetic sensibility” over “illegitimate effort[s] to transform the world through instrumental means” (445). In fact, they argue, “from Le Guin’s perspective, any concerted and organized form of action commits the cardinal sin of presuming to change the world” (463). McCann and Szalay view Le Guin’s novel as typical of contemporary countercultural and New Left resistance to traditional methods of political organization. After all, “Haber does eliminate the many ills on which he set his sights,” including overpopulation, ecological imbalance, and cancer; in contrast, Orr’s resistance to these outcomes is seen to be “consistent with the widely shared sense that technocratic solutions to social problems were invariably

misguided" (446). Orr is portrayed here as hopelessly naïve in his suspicion of and resistance to societal change. Yet McCann and Szalay conveniently leave out the fact that overpopulation is eliminated through Orr dreaming up a new world in which six billion people had been killed by a plague. Furthermore, in quoting Haber's list of accomplishments, they use ellipsis to omit his proud statement that he and Orr have "[e]liminated the risk of species deterioration and the fostering of deleterious gene stocks" (Le Guin, *Lathe* 146). Haber, by now essentially ruler of the world, achieves this by commanding that "the incurables, the gene-damaged who degrade the species" (140) be arrested and euthanized, to Orr's horror. What McCann and Szalay present as Le Guin's opposition to reformist projects in general is really an opposition to the extension of rational utilitarian thinking to genocide and eugenics.

Still, Orr's apparent passivity may be read as an overcorrection to Haber's perverse exercise of power, and in this sense it seems problematic for the posthumanist project. In emphasizing nonhuman agencies, posthuman theory already risks minimizing human agency at a time of environmental crisis when the consequences of human action are crucially important. If Orr's Daoist subjectivity involves relinquishing agency entirely, then wariness by posthumanists would be justified. It is clear enough why Orr's embodiment of Daoism may seem to prioritize a retreat into self-care over active engagement with the world. Haber accuses Orr of naivety, asking "isn't that man's very purpose on earth – to do things, change things, run things, make a better world?" Orr responds as follows:

"Things don't have purposes, as if the universe were a machine, where every part has a useful function. What's the function of a galaxy? I don't know if our life has a purpose and I don't see that it matters. What does matter is that we're a part. Like a thread in a cloth or a grass-blade in a field. It *is* and we *are*. What we do is like wind blowing on the grass." (81)

Orr's anti-teleological counterargument is certainly evocative, but the critical charge of quietism – in the sense of an abandonment of the will in favor of mysticism and, consequently, passive withdrawal from worldly affairs – is understandable. Spivack recognizes and celebrates Orr's attitude as exemplary of "the Taoist ideal of letting things alone," also described

as “the doctrine of inaction” (6-7), or *wuwei*. Considering posthumanist efforts to avoid diminishing the role of human agency entirely, this popular interpretation of *wuwei* as straightforward “inaction” seems the most significant obstacle to posthumanist engagements with Daoism.

Against this interpretation, the prominent scholar of Daoism James Miller explains that *wuwei* “can be translated literally as non-action, but in fact means ‘action as non-action,’ that is, ‘actions that appear or are felt as almost nothing. [...] All too often this type of action is misunderstood as ‘letting be’ whereas in fact this ‘action as non-action’ is really a form of spiritual technology by means of which humans cultivate their own natures and the nature around them” (171). *Wuwei* is here described in more active terms as a form of responsible action oriented towards the mutual flourishing of humans and nonhumans. This is much like the understanding of *wuwei* advocated by Nelson who, reinterpreting early Daoism in the context of contemporary environmentalism, emphasizes the religion’s potential contribution to activist ways of thinking. Nelson argues that while *wuwei* “has been construed to imply worldly indifference and neutrality, detachment and separation, or a minimalistic relation to the happenings of the world,” the concept “is more appropriately interpreted [...] as non-calculative, non-coercive or non-dominating, responsive action” (12). This form of action, as relational responsiveness oriented towards nourishing the life of the world that shapes human lives (24-25), is based on the understanding that “humans can live in better or worse ways in relation to the nature that they are and the enviroing nature with which they persistently interact” (31). Defined as “responsive attunement” (12), *wuwei* “is not minimal in the sense of not caring, yet entails a therapeutic minimalism of ‘doing less’ that contests and disrupts the maximalism of relentless aggressive intervention, commodification, and overproduction and consumption characteristic of existing capitalist societies and political economies” (69). In Nelson’s study, we find an interpretation of *wuwei* far removed from interpretations, both admired and derided by Le Guin’s critics, of non-interference or inaction. The relevance of Nelson’s reading for understanding Orr’s Daoist subjectivity – and for thinking about posthuman re-evaluations of agency – is made clearer when keeping in mind Le Guin’s own definition, in a footnote to her version of

the *Daodejing*, of “doing without doing” as “power that is not force” (21), rather than a total relinquishment of power or agency.

Interpreting *wuwei* as “responsive attunement” better characterizes Orr’s comportment than “inaction,” as can be seen in his opposition to Haber’s egotistic worldview. Haber attempts to justify his actions to Orr through a particular kind of process ontology that views the world as separate and without value except for human ends:

“You are afraid of *losing your balance*. But change need not unbalance you; life’s not a static object, after all. It’s a process. There’s no holding still. Intellectually you know that, but emotionally you refuse it. Nothing remains the same from one moment to the next, you can’t step in the same river twice. Life – evolution – the whole universe of space/time, matter/energy – existence itself – is essentially *change*.” (*Lathe* 138)

For Haber, impermanence means that anything goes when it comes to crafting a perfect society. Orr disagrees:

“We’re in the world, not against it. It doesn’t work to try to stand outside things and run them, that way. It just doesn’t work, it goes against life. There is a way but you have to follow it. The world *is*, no matter how we think it ought to be. You have to be with it. You have to let it be.” (139)

McCann and Szalay read this passage as advocating “a therapeutic acceptance of reality itself” which refuses *any* attempt to change the existing world (446). Yet they, like Haber, misinterpret Orr’s notion of being as static rather than recognizing its processual, Daoist sense. As Nelson argues, *wuwei* means “being responsively attuned in interacting with the transformations of the world” (62). Orr shares with Haber a process ontology but differs in that he considers himself to be relational with the world rather than autonomous and transcendent over it. In his deep sense of embeddedness, Orr is not opposed to change itself but rather to attitudes and actions that presume mastery over the rest of the world. Ultimately, the charge of passivity does not hold up given that Orr, though overpowered by Haber, spends the entire narrative refusing to yield to the

latter's demands, until finally taking action – “in the right way at the right time” (172) – to stop Haber dreaming the world out of existence.

The Daoist understanding of responsible action modelled in *Lathe* is highly relevant for posthumanist re-evaluations of human agency in recognition of relationality. Posthumanist critiques of the autonomous agency imagined by liberal humanism invite the charge that they present in its place only a dilution of agency that leads ultimately to inaction. In contrast to associations of Le Guin's characters with passivity of this kind, Le Guin's literary formulation of Daoist subjectivity may be read as complicating this apparently binary opposition of action versus inaction, instead encouraging responsive action within an interconnected web of relations. This alternative reading of *wuwei* therefore offers a Daoist model for posthuman praxis: embodied by Orr, *wuwei* counters the anthropocentric framework of agency that guides Haber's will to power, and in doing so it demonstrates its value as a spiritual technology that encourages a non-coercive and ecologically sensitive relationship with the rest of the world.

Given that Le Guin's speculative fiction already attracts critical attention for its models of posthuman subjectivity, this analysis demonstrates that the Daoist elements of her work deserve greater and more serious attention than they have so far received. More than this, it indicates the need for a more receptive attitude towards religion, when critics of posthumanism engage with American literary texts. Posthumanism aims to reframe subjectivity and agency in alignment with interconnection and away from notions of human exceptionalism that have brought about environmental crisis. In pursuit of this project, models of subjectivity influenced by the heterogeneous and often heterodox strands of religious thought animating much American literature offer powerful resources for combating the anthropocentric hubris epitomized by *The Lathe of Heaven's* arch-humanist William Haber.

Notes

¹ Throughout this article, I transliterate Chinese terms using the pinyin romanization system, rather than the Wade-Giles system which renders Daoism as “Taoism.” Where other scholars use the latter system, I preserve their transliteration.

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