
GANZ NOTES ON *THE TOMBS OF ATUAN* (1971) BY URSULA K. LE GUIN

Version: 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22 February 2021

QUOTES

Wikipedia – “Like *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan* is a *bildungsroman*¹ that explores Tenar's growth and identity. Tenar's coming-of-age is closely tied to her exploration of faith and her belief in the Nameless Ones. *The Tombs of Atuan* explores themes of gender and power in the setting of a cult of female priests in service to a patriarchal society, while providing an anthropological view of Kargish culture.

Wikipedia – “A *Bildungsroman* relates the growing up or ‘coming of age’ of a sensitive person who goes in search of answers to life’s questions with the expectation that these will result in gaining experience of the world. The genre evolved from folklore tales of a dunce² or youngest child going out in the world to seek his fortune. Usually in the beginning of the story there is an emotional loss which makes the protagonist leave on his or her journey. In a *Bildungsroman*, the goal is maturity, and the protagonist achieves it gradually and with difficulty. The genre often features a main conflict between the main character and society. Typically, the values of society are gradually accepted by the protagonist and he or she is ultimately accepted into society—the protagonist's mistakes and disappointments are over. In some works, the protagonist is able to reach out and help others after having achieved maturity.”

¹ “bildungsroman” -

² The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**dunce**” – “A person who is slow at learning or of low intelligence; a stupid, dim-witted person; an idiot. (Now the usual sense.) Between the late 18th and mid 20th centuries frequently used of a schoolchild who is singled out for ridicule or disgrace as a punishment for making too many mistakes in his or her work or for minor misbehaviour.”

BILLY JOEL – “AND SO IT GOES” (1990)

Wikipedia – “And So It Goes” is a song written by Billy Joel in 1983, though it was not released until six years later. It appeared as the tenth and final track of his 1989 studio album *Storm Front*. The original 1983 demo was released on the 2005 box set *My Lives*. Joel wrote the song about a doomed relationship with model Elle Macpherson. Their relationship was dramatic, as Macpherson was only a teenager while Joel was reaching his mid-30s. Joel dated Macpherson for a brief time shortly before becoming involved with model Christie Brinkley, who would ultimately become his second wife. The song was inspired by the Scottish ballad “Barbara Allen”, and is unique for Joel as it is written in iambic tetrameter. In the original demo version of “And So It Goes,” Joel sings the melody simply, accompanied by a simple piano backdrop, in a style very reminiscent of a hymn. On the 1989 album version, Joel sings and plays all the instrumentation (piano and synthesizers). The official video is from a live performance in front of a concert audience.

From the Album: *Storm Front*; Release Date: October 17, 1989³

In every heart there is a room
A sanctuary safe and strong
To heal the wounds from lovers past
Until a new one comes along

I spoke to you in cautious tones
You answered me with no pretense
And still I feel I said too much
My silence is my self defense

And every time I’ve held a rose
It seems I only felt the thorns
And so it goes, and so it goes
And so will you soon I suppose

But if my silence made you leave
Then that would be my worst mistake
So I will share this room with you
And you can have this heart to break

³ See: <https://www.billyjoel.com/song/and-so-it-goes-7/>.

And this is why my eyes are closed
It's just as well for all I've seen
And so it goes, and so it goes
And you're the only one who knows

So I would choose to be with you
That's if the choice were mine to make
But you can make decisions too
And you can have this heart to break

And so it goes, and so it goes
And you're the only one who knows

TODAY'S GOSPEL – FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Mark 1 –

The Baptism of Jesus. ⁹^eIt happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. ¹⁰On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. * ¹¹^fAnd a voice came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

^e Mt 3:13–17; Lk 3:21–23; Jn 1:32–33.

* *He saw the heavens ... and the Spirit ... upon him*: indicating divine intervention in fulfillment of promise. Here the descent of the Spirit on Jesus is meant, anointing him for his ministry; cf. Is 11:2; 42:1; 61:1; 63:9. *A voice ... with you I am well pleased*: God's acknowledgment of Jesus as his unique Son, the object of his love. His approval of Jesus is the assurance that Jesus will fulfill his messianic mission of salvation.

^f Ps 2:7.

The Temptation of Jesus.* ¹² At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert,^g ¹³ and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him. ⁴

“**my beloved Son**” – This reminds of what Ogion did for Duny at the source of the river Ar on Gont, when at age 13, Duny’s given name was taken from him by his mother’s sister, and he walked naked through the water to the other side, where he was drawn out by Ogion and given his name, Ged. Jesus in this scene goes through the water and receives privately, from His Father, His name: “Beloved Son”.

Mark 1 – “**The whole Christian gospel could be summed up in this point: that when the living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ.** It sometimes seems impossible, especially to people who have never had this kind of support from their earthly parents, but it’s true: **God looks at us, and says, ‘You are my dear, dear child; I’m delighted with you.’** Try reading that sentence slowly, with your own name at the start, and reflect quietly on God saying that to you, both at your baptism and every day since.”⁵

Mark 1 – “When we do this, we will be equipped, as Jesus was, to be sent out into the desert. Jesus is acting out the great drama of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, Israel’s journey through the wilderness into the promised land. **The road Jesus must tread, precisely because he is God’s dear son, is the road that leads through the dry and dusty paths, through temptation and apparent failure.** So it will be for us as well. If we start the journey imagining that our God is a bully, an angry threatening parent ready to yell at us, slam the door on us, or kick us out into the street because we haven’t quite made the grade, we will fail at the first whisper of

* The same Spirit who descended on Jesus in his baptism now drives him into the desert for forty days. **The result is radical confrontation and temptation by Satan who attempts to frustrate the work of God.** The presence of wild beasts may indicate the horror and danger of the desert regarded as the abode of demons or may reflect the paradise motif of harmony among all creatures; cf. Is 11:6–9. **The presence of ministering angels** to sustain Jesus recalls the angel who guided the Israelites in the desert in the first Exodus (Ex 14:19; 23:20) and the angel who supplied nourishment to Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kgs 19:5–7). The combined forces of good and evil were present to Jesus in the desert. His sustained obedience brings forth the new Israel of God there where Israel’s rebellion had brought death and alienation.

^g Mt 4:1–11; Lk 4:1–13.

⁴ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mk 1:9–13.

⁵ Tom Wright, [Mark for Everyone](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 4–5.

LE GUIN'S "AFTERWORD"

Le Guin wrote an "Afterword", pages 181-187, to the Atheneum edition of *The Tombs of Atuan*. Some quotations from that follow here:

"People often don't believe me when I say that when I wrote *A Wizard of Earthsea* I had no plans beyond that book.... I had no idea at all at that point what a dragonlord or an Archmage were. They sounded good. I could find out what they meant later, when I needed to.... In that book, my job was to get young Ged and his Shadow back together.... After *A Wizard*, I wrote the science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). When that was done, I thought "What next?" and looked around in my mind. There was Ged and his world, Earthsea, vivid and alive, ready to be explored further. And there was that interesting phrase about bringing a ring from the Tombs of Atuan ... Atuan was a Kargish land.... But when I started *The Tombs of Atuan*, I saw it, as well as I can recall, simply as a sequel.... **And a change of gender. Ged would play a part in it, but the person whose story it was would be a girl.** A girl who lived far from the cities of the Archipelago, in a remote desert land. **A girl who could not seek power, as young Ged could, or find training in the use of it as he did, but who had power forced on her.** A girl whose name was not given to her by a kind teacher, but taken from her by a masked executioner.... **The boy Ged, offered wisdom, refused it through his own pride and willfulness; the girl Tenar, given the arbitrary power of a goddess, was taught nothing about living her life as a human being."**

"**The word power has two different meanings.** There is *power to*: strength, gift, skill, art, the mastery of a craft, the authority of knowledge. And there is *power over*: rule, dominion, supremacy, might, mastery of slave, authority over others. Ged was offered both kinds of power. Tenar was offered only one."

"**Because to me fantasy isn't wishful thinking, but a way of reflecting, and reflecting on reality."**

"So I gave Tenar *power over* – dominion, even godhead – but it was gift of which little good could come. The dark side of the world was what she had to learn, as Ged had to learn the darkness in his own heart."

"In *The Tombs of Atuan*, the Old Powers, the Nameless Ones, appear as mysterious, ominous, and yet inactive. Arha/Tenar is their priestess, the greatest of all priestesses, whom the Godking himself is supposed to obey: **But what is her realm? A prison in the desert.** Women guarded by eunuchs. Ancient tombstones, a half-ruined temple, an empty throne. A fearful underground labyrinth where prisoners are left to die of starvation and thirst, where only she can walk the maze, where light must never come. **She rules a dark, empty, useless realm. Her power**

imprisons her.” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (pp. 185-186). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

“She is only able to escape when Ged becomes her prisoner. She, for the first time, exerts her *power to*—her freedom of choice. **She chooses to let him live.** So she gives herself the chance to see that, if she can free him, she can free herself.” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 186). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

“Certainly Arha/Tenar would better satisfy feminist idealists if she did everything all by herself. But the truth as I saw it, and as I established it in the novel, was that she couldn’t. My imagination wouldn’t provide a scenario where she could, because my heart told me incontrovertibly that neither gender could go far without the other. **So, in my story, neither the woman nor the man can get free without the other. Not in that trap. Each has to ask for the other’s help and learn to trust and depend on the other. A large lesson, a new knowledge for both these strong, willful, lonely souls.**” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (pp. 186-187). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

“Rereading the book, more than forty years after I wrote it, I wonder about many of its elements. **It was the first book I wrote with a woman as the true central character.** Tenar’s character and the events of the story came from deep within me, so deep that the subterranean and labyrinthine imagery, and a certain volcanic quality, are hardly to be wondered at. But the darkness, the cruelty, the vengefulness . . . **After all, I could have just let them go free—why did I destroy the whole Place of the Tombs with an earthquake?** It’s a kind of huge suicide, the Nameless Ones annihilating their temple in a vast spasm of rage. **Maybe it was the whole primitive, hateful idea of the feminine as dark, blind, weak, and evil that I saw shaking itself to pieces, imploding, crumbling into wreckage on a desert ground. And I rejoiced to see it fall. I still do.**” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 187). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

Again, what it is about is the affect it had on you as you read it, and as it stays with you and activates your thoughts and feelings.

Yet, what this book is about is **the lives of a lot of people**: Thar and Kossil; Ged; Arha/Tenar; Manan; the two Lost Children abandoned as little children on the island. Who are we to say that the story of one or other of this group is THE story, the most important one?

Wikipedia – “A *Bildungsroman* relates the growing up or *coming of age* of a sensitive person who goes in search of answers to life's questions with the expectation that these will result in gaining experience of the world. The genre evolved from folklore tales of a dunce or youngest child going out in the world to seek his or her fortune. Usually in the beginning of the story there is an emotional loss which makes the protagonist leave on his or her journey. **In a *Bildungsroman*, the goal is maturity, and the protagonist achieves it gradually and with difficulty.** The genre often features a main conflict between the main character and society. Typically, the values of society are gradually accepted by the protagonist and he or she is ultimately accepted into society—the protagonist's mistakes and disappointments are over. In some works, the protagonist is able to reach out and help others after having achieved maturity.”

“When I came back to the Inmost Isles, I went at last to Havnor. I was born on Gont, which lies not far west of your Kargish lands, and I had wandered a good deal since, but I had never been to Havnor. It was time to go there. I saw the white towers, and spoke with the great men, the merchants and the princes and the lords of the ancient domains. **I told them what I had. I told them that if they liked, I would go seek the rest of the ring in the Tombs of Atuan, in order to find the Lost Rune, the key to peace. For we need peace sorely in the world. They were full of praise; and one of them even gave me money to provision my boat. So I learned your tongue, and came to Atuan.**” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 135). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

THE RING OF ERRETH-AKBE

Notice that the Ring, though kept as a treasure in the Treasure Chamber in the Tombs of Atuan, “is not precious looking”. It is important to recognize that it is precious not because of that of which it is made, but because of what it *means*. How often in the history of Religions and Governments, something that is precious because of what it means is then lavished with decoration, with earthly beautification ... which causes it, eventually, to be considered precious for its *decoration* rather than for what it *meant* (“means” has become past tense: “meant”).

“Maybe you will. Very well. What is it, the Ring of Erreth-Akbe? **Well, you can see that it's not precious looking, and it's not even a ring. It's too big. An arm-ring, perhaps, yet it seems too small for that. No man knows who it was made for.** Elfarran the Fair wore it once, before the Isle of Soléa was lost beneath the sea; and it was old when she wore it. And at last it came into the hands of Erreth-Akbe. . . . **The metal is hard silver, pierced with nine holes. There's a design like waves scratched on the outside, and**

nine Runes⁷ of Power on the inside. The half you have bears four runes and a bit of another; and mine likewise. **The break came right across that one symbol, and destroyed it. It is what's been called, since then, the Lost Rune.** The other eight are known to Mages: *Pirr* that protects from madness and from wind and fire, *Ges* that gives endurance, and so on. But the broken rune was the one that bound the lands. **It was the Bond-Rune, the sign of dominion, the sign of peace.** No king could rule well if he did not rule beneath that sign. No one knows how it was written. Since it was lost there have been no great kings in Havnor. There have been princes and tyrants, and wars and quarreling among all the lands of Earthsea. [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (pp. 132-133). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

“I didn’t know it for what it was, no more than she did. **The greatest gift of this age of the world,** and it was given by a poor old foolish woman in sealskins to a silly lout⁸ who stuffed it into his pocket and said ‘Thanks!’ and sailed off.... [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 134). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

“Listen, Tenar!” he said. **“I came here a thief, an enemy, armed against you; and you showed me mercy, and trusted me. And I have trusted you from the first time I saw your face, for one moment in the cave beneath the Tombs, beautiful in darkness. You have proved your trust in me. I have made no return. I will give you what I have to give. My true name is Ged. And this is yours to keep.”** He had risen, and he held out to her a semicircle of pierced and carven silver. “Let the ring be rejoined,” he said. [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (pp. 138-139). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

WHEN SHE SAID THAT, THE man named Ged put his hand over hers that held the broken talisman. She looked up startled, and saw him flushed with life and triumph, smiling. ***She was dismayed and frightened of him. “You have set us both free,” he said. “Alone, no one wins freedom.*** Come, let’s waste no time while we still have time! Hold it out again, for a little.” **She had closed her fingers over the pieces of silver, but at his request she held them out again on her hand, the broken edges touching.** [Le Guin,

⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**rune**” – “Any of the letters or characters of the earliest Germanic alphabet, used esp. (in various forms) by the Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons; a similar character or mark believed to have mysterious or magical powers. Also: any letter or character of a non-Germanic alphabet resembling a Germanic rune. The original runic alphabet dates from at least the 2nd or 3rd cent. a.d., and was formed by modifying the letters of the Roman or Greek alphabet so as to facilitate carving them on wood or stone.”

⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**lout**” – “An awkward ill-mannered fellow; a bumpkin, clown.”

Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 140). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

THE TITLE OF THE BOOK

It is striking that Le Guin should name this novel after **the Tombs** – a dead, collapsing, dry, labyrinthian, empty place – rather than after the girl Tenar/Arha. From the opening lines the novel makes it clear whom this novel is principally about: *her*. Or, why not name it after the relationship of Tenar/Arha and Sparrowhawk/Ged? Or, why not name it after the (broken and lost) Ring of Erreth-Akbe?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**tomb**” – “A place of burial; an excavation, chamber, vault, or other space used for the interment of the dead; a grave.” But also, “**A monument constructed to cover or mark a burial place, or as a memorial to the dead;** (formerly also) †a tombstone erected over a grave (*obsolete*).”

ARHA / TENAR

The child got up and descended the four stairs laboriously. When she stood at the bottom, the two tall priestesses put on her a black robe and hood and mantle, and turned her around again to face the steps, the dark stain, the throne. “O let the Nameless Ones behold the girl given to them, who is verily the one born ever nameless. Let them accept her life and the years of her life until her death, which is also theirs. Let them find her acceptable. Let her be eaten!” Other voices, shrill and harsh as trumpets, replied: “She is eaten! She is eaten!” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 3). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

It is a fascinating name. Actually, she has two names: “Arha” – the “Eaten One” and “Nameless” as are those she was born to serve.

The child said nothing. Manan slowly turned around and went away. The glimmer died from the high cell walls. **The little girl, who had no name anymore but Arha, the Eaten One, lay on her back looking steadily at the dark.** [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 6). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

What strikes me about “**the Eaten One**” is that it is a perfect, passive participle of the verb “to eat.” The “**perfect**” means that it was done and completely done (no more eating to be done);

the “**passive**” means that it was imposed on her without her active consent – she had no control over when she was born, on the same day that the previous Priestess died in Atuan. She never had the chance to volunteer to become Priestess once they found her and knew that she was the One. Notice how later in the story she asked Manan to tell her whether her mom protested her being taken to Atuan. And she learns that her mom had tried the ruse of putting berry juice all over her baby-body and saying that she was diseased. The ruse failed.

What interests me is that Tenar/Arha was given a name by the Nameless Ones that reports to everyone that **something was done to the little girl** (chosen; eaten; given to the Nameless Ones) and that nothing remains of Tenar (as food is “gone” when we have eaten it). **Who Tenar/Arha IS is what someone or others *did* to her** – ritualizing victimhood. They “honor” this little girl the title High Priestess, but it is really just their name for SCAPEGOAT – a sacrifice of an innocent to the Dark Powers.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**scapegoat**” (see Leviticus 16 on the “scapegoat” ritual) – “One who is blamed or punished for the sins of others.”

But the real power of the name Arha is its association with *the voracious appetites of the Nameless Ones*, whose vast *emptiness* of Being would consume a living girl reducing the gift of her to an entrée that is now consumed, digested, taken-in leaving no trace of her *otherness*.

I remember as a boy hearing adults say, women say when grabbing and holding close a precious baby – “I could just *eat* you!” Even as a boy, I remember finding this an odd, unsettling expression. Yet I also remember what I felt as a boy, the older sibling of younger siblings. I remember being remonstrated with by mom when I was squeezing a younger sibling too tightly – “Ricky, you have to be careful. Don’t hold him/her too tightly.” The issue for me was that I felt such love in me that I was *trying to erase any barrier to closeness* with that sibling; I want to be *that* close. But what I was after had nothing to do with my wanting to make my sibling disappear and to become only me (like food). **The very love that I felt had to do with my sibling’s *otherness*, and how I felt that was precious.**

And as to the title “Nameless” – A person who does not have a name is given a name by whoever other person chooses to name her.

THE SHADOWED LAND

Recall how the “nameless” entity in the first novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, was Ged’s shadow – the shadow that having been rejected, ignored, and having been run from for so long had become a *gebbeth*. Ged spends most of that novel seeking to discover his shadow’s name. While in this novel, *The Tombs of Atuan*, Tenar has her name ritually taken from her, her true name

“eaten” and no more. She does not *find* her name through searching for it; it is *given* to her by Ged in the tombs.

“I will do as you say,” he said gently. “I’ll bring food and water when I can. There won’t be much. Water enough, but not much food for a while; I’m getting hungry, do you see? But enough to stay alive on. I may not be able to come back for a day or two days, perhaps even longer. I must get Kossil off the track. **But I will come. I promise. Here’s the flask. Hoard it, I can’t come back soon. But I will come back.**” He raised his face to her. *His expression was strange. “Take care, Tenar,” he said.* [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 114). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

“I am Tenar,” she said, not aloud, and she shook with cold, and terror, and exultation, there under the open, sun-washed sky. “I have my name back. I am Tenar!” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (pp. 116-117). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

“I am so hungry. . . . How did he know? How did he know my name? . . . Oh, I’ve got to go eat, I’m so hungry. . . .” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 117). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

THE RELIGION OF THE KARGAD LANDS

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**religion**” [as in what we call “organized or formal religion”] – “Belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship; such a belief as part of a system defining a code of living, esp. as a means of achieving spiritual or material improvement.”

Long, long before Tenar became Arha, the Religion of the Old Powers became hollow, no life in it, a reliquary of dead artifacts, nameless people (such as Arha), and labyrinth-theology from which there is no escape. This Religion had among the Kargad people, those who paid any attention to the Religion, become simply part of the *collective consciousness* – a mere *convention*; no depth or meaning worth pursuing.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**convention**”, and entry #10 – “A rule or practice based upon general consent, or accepted and upheld by society at large; an arbitrary rule or practice recognised as valid in any particular art or study; a conventionalism.”

One of the most revealing expressions of the utter hollowness of the Kargad Religion of the Nameless Ones is this:

The black line of priestesses, four by four, wound down the Hill of the Tombs, and as they went they began softly to chant. The tune was on three notes only, **and the word that was repeated over and over was a word so old it had lost its meaning, like a signpost still standing when the road is gone. Over and over they chanted the empty word.** All that day of the Remaking of the Priestess was filled with the low chanting of women's voices, **a dry unceasing drone.** [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (pp. 4-5). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

And then from Kossil, the High Priestess of the God-King:

"They [the Nameless Ones] are old," Kossil's voice said, not loud, a whistling thread of sound out of the depths of the cowl. **"They are old. Their worship is forgotten, save in this one place. Their power is gone. They are only shadows. They have no power anymore.** [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 119). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

She made patterns with the little bones of mice on the marble stair, her head bowed, her mind active and yet as if stupefied. **Who am I? she asked herself, and got no answer.** [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 120). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

THE OLD POWERS

The text refers to these by different names: the Old Powers, the Dark Powers, the Nameless Ones. But whence these Powers came is too ancient for us to know, too early in the story of the world and of humanity. It is about *the mystery of iniquity*.

The Nameless Ones had hold of me already, bewildering my mind. And since then I have grown only weaker and stupider. **One must not submit to them, one must resist, keep one's spirit always strong and certain. I learned that a long time ago. But it's hard to do, here, where they are so strong. They are not gods, Tenar. But they are stronger than any man.**" [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (pp. 136-137). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

"They would not let us get out. Ever." "Perhaps not. Yet it's worth trying. You have knowledge, and I have skill, and between us we have . . ." He paused. "We have the Ring of Erreth-Akbe." "Yes, that. **But I thought also of another thing between us. Call**

it *trust*. . . . That is one of its names. It is a very great thing. Though each of us alone is weak, having that we are strong, stronger than the Powers of the Dark.” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Tombs of Atuan* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 2) (p. 138). Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle Edition.]

An important insight about these “sins” is that we do not *commit* them, as we do particular sinful acts. These particularly deadly Sins are WHO WE ARE rather than WHAT WE DO. So, a person does not “commit pride”; rather one is pride-full, such that all of his or her actions, good or bad, are “tinged” with pride – with competitiveness and self-inflation. A spiritually sensitive person, desirous of being a better person, will notice this, be bewildered by it – that even his or her “good” actions are “tinged” with pridefulness.

Dennis Sansom, “Deadly Sins and the Demonic” (Spring 2018) - “A deadly sin is a *vice*,⁹ a perverse way of living that not only harms human life, it imperils it.” **In other words, a “deadly sin” is deadly *because it is*, not because someone tells you it is.** Thus, a “deadly sin” is not about “rules” or “laws” – such that one can “break” rules or laws - but about *a kind of person* any one of us can become, whom C.S. Lewis in *The Space Trilogy* calls “bent” people.

Dennis Sansom, “Deadly Sins and the Demonic” (Spring 2018), p. 63 – “They can be called *capital vices*. The word *capitis* (from which the English translation “deadly” comes) refers to the head. That is, vices begin in people’s head, in their thinking, in their aims and intentions. They corrupt human life because they involve perverse aims.”

In this regard, I think of the NAMELESS POWERS and associate them with the DEADLY SINS in the sense expressed above. They are “nameless” because a person who operates under the influence of one or other of the Capital Sins cannot perceive their presence in him or her! In fact, a person acting under the influence of a Capital Sin will likely consider himself or herself as a living example of the opposite virtue! Thus, a prideful person will experience himself or herself as mostly *humble*.

Can a person confess (as in the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Confession/Penance) a Capital Sin? No, because a person “commit” oneself, as one’s very self were a sin able to be committed! A person should not confess that, say, “I am gluttonous, or I am prideful, or I am envious or slothful.”

What is crucial with respect to the Sacrament is that a person not try to confess Capital Sins, as if he or she could commit them. No, to do this in the Confession is actually a dodge, a way of

⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “*vice*” – “A habit or practice of an immoral, degrading, or wicked nature.”

avoiding having to own up to one's particular sinful action that, as a pattern, may reveal the presence of a Capital Sin and its influence, its hold on the person.

THE DEADLY SINS – The deadly, or capital, sins are now usually listed as seven: **pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust**. Traditionally they have been classified as sins, **not because they necessarily involve conscious and voluntary choices, but because they are basic tendencies toward evil, dangerous sources of sin, and habits of vice**. The list suggests a complex of emotions, attitudes, desires, and ways of acting which pervert good, useful impulses and which stand in the way of love for God, self, and others. Though called “deadly,” these sins have not been viewed as inevitably “mortal,” especially when considered apart from the character and motivations of their subjects. At its best, the spiritual tradition's reflection on the deadly sins has been situated positively within the context of the possibility of conversion from sin to virtue.¹⁰

SEVEN DEADLY SINS - They are: (1) *pride; (2) covetousness; (3) lust; (4) envy; (5) gluttony; (6) anger; (7) sloth (*accidie').¹¹ In order to get a feel for these, now contrast them with the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are seven: **Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit**. They are: (1) wisdom; (2) understanding; (3) counsel; (4) fortitude; (5) knowledge; (6) piety; (7) fear of the Lord. The list is taken from Is. 11:2 (*Vulgate text, which adds *pietas* to the six in the AV and RV).¹²

In the same way, **one does not “commit” a virtue**, such as “committing” justice or temperance. A virtue is WHO A PERSON IS – a steady-state excellence of character.

VIRTUE – “A virtue is an excellent trait of character. It is a **disposition**¹³, well entrenched in its possessor—**something that, as we say, goes all the way down**, unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways. **To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of**

¹⁰ Michael Downey, [The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 248.

¹¹ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., [The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church](#) (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1499.

AV *Authorized Version [i.e. King James Version, 1611] of the Bible.

RV [English] Revised Version (NT, 1881; OT, 1885; Apocrypha, 1895)

¹² F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., [The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church](#) (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1499.

¹³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**disposition**” – “The action of setting in order, or condition of being set in order; arrangement, order; relative position of the parts or elements of a whole.”

person with a certain complex mindset. A significant aspect of this mindset is the wholehearted acceptance of a distinctive range of considerations as reasons for action. An honest person cannot be identified simply as one who, for example, practices honest dealing and does not cheat. If such actions are done merely because the agent thinks that honesty is the best policy, or because they fear being caught out, rather than through recognising “To do otherwise would be dishonest” as the relevant reason, they are not the actions of an honest person. An honest person cannot be identified simply as one who, for example, tells the truth because it is the truth, for one can have the virtue of honesty without being tactless or indiscreet. The honest person recognises “That would be a lie” as a strong (though perhaps not overriding) reason for not making certain statements in certain circumstances, and gives due, but not overriding, weight to “That would be the truth” as a reason for making them.” [*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the article on “Virtue Ethics” (2018) by Hursthouse & Pettigrove)

THE DEADLY SINS

George P. Evans - It has now become common to consider the capital sins not only as personal vices affecting individuals but also as social evils with corporate fault, manifestations, and effects. There has been increasing sympathy for the position that corporate, cultural, and national climates can foster sinful attitudes.¹⁴

PRIDE – The sin of *pride* is widely viewed as the “root of all the other sins” (Eccl 9:15). It is marked by a **self-aggrandizement** that clouds not only God’s sovereignty and others’ worth but also an appreciation of one’s true self. Distinct from healthy self-esteem and from a justifiable pride in one’s own God-given talents and achievements, **the sin of pride often involves disregard or contempt for ideas and judgments other than one’s own.** A chief aspect of pride is *vainglory*, which comprises the inordinate effort to show one’s own excellence and the insatiable need for approval.¹⁵

ENVY – *Envy*, rooted ordinarily in a radical difficulty in trusting that God loves one uniquely and personally, **moves the self-doubting person to covet what others seem to be or have.** *There is sadness or displeasure at the spiritual or temporal good of another.* For many people, envy threatens if an atmosphere of competitiveness and comparison degenerates into an **environment of stifling jealousy.** Then the good of another becomes an evil to oneself,

¹⁴ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 251.

¹⁵ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 249. This specific entry on “Deadly Sins” written by George P. Evans.

inasmuch as it seems to lessen one's own excellence. From envy can follow hatred and resentment, calumny and detraction.¹⁶

ANGER – *Anger* diverts a good capacity for strong action destructively toward self and others, when **that action should be used constructively to attack evil and to serve good**. This sin often shows clear social consequences. “From anger,” wrote Gregory the Great, “are produced strifes, swelling of mind, insults, clamor, indignation, blasphemies.” The sin of anger must be distinguished from a “holy wrath,” anger which attacks evil bravely and which can be virtuous and praiseworthy. Different personality types experience and express anger differently. It can explode or seethe. Unbridled anger can lead to vengeful actions that are disproportionate to the injury or insult suffered.¹⁷

SLOTH – The sin of *sloth*, not to be reduced to bodily laziness, usually shows in **the inertia of a deadened spirit**. This sin combines two related sins separately mentioned on some early lists: *acedia*, lack of care for duties and obligations to God, which gives rise not only to rancor, passivity, and sluggishness but also to restless activity and aggression; and *tristitia*, melancholy, weariness, or dissatisfaction. Nowadays factors engendering sloth will include insufficient or poorly used leisure time, **narrow horizons of worldview**, overly high expectations, aversion to love that demands sacrifice, and dependence on counterfeit satisfactions for life's deepest yearnings.¹⁸

AVARICE – *Avarice* (greed) is an insatiable or inordinate longing for the possession of something. **In a complex, competitive society, avarice can be especially alluring. It shows itself when trust in God is so fragile that worldly supports are grasped too tightly in order to ensure security for an uncertain future.** Love of possessions in themselves or for purely selfish reasons leads to self-absorbing preoccupations. Avarice also embraces shame at receiving charity from others and inability to give to others without experiencing self-deprivation. This sin can masquerade as healthy frugality and independence.¹⁹

GLUTTONY – *Gluttony* is typically associated with excessive eating and drinking, but it is not limited to these. Indulging the body at the expense of the mind and the soul, it can sap energy as it partakes of two closely related sins, avarice and lust. **More broadly described, gluttony**

¹⁶ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 249–250.

¹⁷ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 250.

¹⁸ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 250.

¹⁹ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 250.

entails excessive and narrowing absorption in the immediate appetitive pleasures of the self, and it may show in insatiable desire for any activity. Culpable gluttony may be difficult to distinguish from the sickness of addiction. True gluttony is related to acts that arise when choice is free, when one may decide whether to indulge or abstain. **Recent considerations of the sin of gluttony have raised issues of world hunger and sharing of goods, excessive care for personal appearance, and even dangers of overindulgence in exercise and dieting.**²⁰

LUST – *Lust*, an excessive desire for sexual pleasure, threatens a striving for calm, gentle self-control. The sin of lust often develops when there is a lack of human wholeness, **a pace of life that is hectic**, and a lack of respect for self or others. The challenge of chaste living involves not only acknowledging that genital sexual drives and affections are normal and spontaneous but also channeling energies into appropriate levels of interest and occupation.²¹

²⁰ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 250.

²¹ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 251.