

Wolfe on _The Dying Earth_

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 30 Jul 2001

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Adam Stephanides — 30 Jul 2001, 23:46

I recently checked a collection of essays on Jack Vance, which was published last year in Britain, out of the library. One of the essays is by Gene Wolfe, entitled "The Living Earth." In this essay Wolfe discusses each of the stories in _The Dying Earth_, describing the special virtues of each.

In addition to being of interest to Vance fans, this essay reveals a good deal about Wolfe's own aesthetics. Of most relevance to TBOTNS, perhaps, is his discussion of "T'sais." After summarizing the story, Wolfe says: "That, of course, is not a plot. It is an outing, an expedition, a picnic, if you will. But not a plot. From the lack, the story gains immeasurably." Wolfe goes on to discuss how in the preceding stories we immediately grasp the plot, and hence are more interested in the incidental details than in the plot. "In 'T'sais' we are off the map. Here there be not dragonflies but dragons. Because the story is unplotted, anything can happen, and we wait with baited breath to see what happens next. Besides, we _are_ T'sais. We don't want to [be the protagonists of the earlier stories]. What we want (and we want it terribly) is to do what T'sais does: we want to wander across the Dying Earth with protective runes on our wrists and enchanted swords at our sides. 'Turjan' is fiction; 'Mazirian' is better fiction; 'T'sais' is life and Heaven." (89)

There are a number of other items in the book of interest to Vanceans, including a ten-page autobiographical sketch by Vance himself, essays by Tom Shippey, David Langford and Dan Simmons, and what looks to this non-expert to be a comprehensive bibliography. The book is _Jack Vance: Critical Appreciations and a Bibliography_, ed. A. E. Cunningham (Boston Spa & London: The British Library, 2000). I don't know if there's a US edition; there's no ISBN apparent.

--Adam