

What the El?!?

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 23 Aug 2001

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Nigel Price — 23 Aug 2001, 17:22

Thanks to Mantis for beating the Illinois county bounds, and to Joshua for useful information on the Chicago area and the background to Holly Hollander's adventures. I very nearly asked, "What is the El, then?", but just managed to stop myself in time. I assume that it's an Elevated Railway or something of the kind. (I think that Fritz Leiber mentions it in his mini-autobiography, the splendidly entitled, "Not much disorder and not so early sex: an autobiographic essay." He lived near it at some stage in his young life, if I recall.)

Thanks, too, to Dan'I, for the encouraging words. You're absolutely right to warn about the horrifying and revolting bits in the Night's Dawn trilogy, and its theological incorrectness. I really liked the whisky priest, Father Elwes, and enjoyed his (absolutely predictable!) change of heart and spirited recovery, exorcism and extemporary orphanage included. (Patera Silk, also an occasional exorcist, would have been proud of him.) His conversation with the bishop when he finally gets to Tranquillity is really disappointing, though. He says something along the lines of, "Well, of course, Christianity is really all about believing in yourself, isn't it?" The bishop nods in agreement, and you think, well, no, actually, that isn't what it's about. Pretty well the opposite, in fact.

As for the entropic hell of The Dark Continuum and the paradise worlds of the Kiint, one couldn't really take them seriously, though the former was horribly chilling (as it were) and the latter would be a nice place to visit for a holiday. (Have to be better than bloomin' Disneyland Paris. Please, just don't ask. It's all too painful...)

Here, though, is an interesting hierarchy of universes, reminiscent in many ways of Wolfe's cabalistic concatenation of worlds in TBotNS, but altogether less subtle. Wolfe makes the point in UotNS that Yesod and Briah exist at different energy levels. The Brook Madregot flows "down hill" from Yesod to Briah as energy seeks a lower state. (Thank you, Mantis - again.) Hamilton's different universes are also at different energy levels, and he makes great of play of the fact. This is the source of power for the dead, who still retain an open link with the higher energy state of the beyond even when they enter our universe by possessing a living being. Conversely, it's the reason why The Dark Continuum poses such difficulties for Valisk and its inhabitants. The Dark Continuum is the bottom of the hill, energetically, the place where all the energy flows to and dissipates in entropy.

(Urth is often described as a place where entropy has gone a long way towards running its course. Radioactive elements have degenerated into harmless metals, mineral resources are exhausted and the sun is slowly dying. The icy future Severian glimpses from the Last House awaits the world if someone cannot bring the New Sun...)

As in Wolfe, Hamilton's different dimensions at some level evoke Christian spiritual states or places, specifically here, heaven and hell, although it has to be said that in Hamilton, the evocation is fairly playful, and at times wilfully daft. I especially enjoyed the nice throwaway reference to "The Prisoner" TV series. The Kiint's former human agents, retired to the book's

heaven-analogue, stubbornly insist on calling their sunny but remote xenoc retirement home "The Village".

I have to admit that neither the gore nor the theological silliness stopped me enjoying Hamilton's books. They're definitely prime examples of Dan's Type 2 kind of novel.

If I ever get time to finish and send in my other submission to the list, the one with "Ion" in the title somewhere, I'll try to tackle the subject of Platonism and hierarchies. Don't hold me to it, though. Things are getting busy once more, and I may just disappear for another year or so...

Nigel

A long way from Illinois