

2. There is an old question of whether life imitates art or art imitates life. Actually I think it is clear that both are true to some extent. Art is less and less interested in imitating life as it become more and more abstract. That could be because we have

THE MT VOID

Page 2

cameras for really realistic art these days and also because really realistic painting is a slow and detailed process. Impressionism is really the art of saving yourself a lot of effort sweating the details and having people impressed by how well you can get away with it.

But it seems true that also life imitates art. There is the old question of whether we are becoming a violent society because that is how we represent ourselves in film. People look at what they see in the big and small screen and try to imitate it in real life. This could be some ninnul seeing Beavis and Butthead play with matches and do the same thing himself. Or it could be Adolf Hitler seeing the destruction at the beginning of the film T_h_i_n_g_s_T_o_C_o_m_e and saying he needs to be able to create the same effect in real life. That is a true story, at least if an issue of Ripley's "Believe It or Not" is to be believed. (Hitler also really liked the film M_e_t_r_o_p_o_l_i_s according to Fritz Lang's biography and according to Trivial Pursuit his favorite film was K_i_n_g_K_o_n_g. Apparently he was a real fan of fantasy films, an historical insight you rarely see in the history books. That's just a slight digression.)

So life does imitate art. But in an odd cessation of the laws of causality, prehistoric life seems to also imitate contemporary art. It used to be that paleontologists laughed at dinosaur movies because the dinosaurs shown were just too big. Not only did they out-scale any of the fossils that had been found, they were bigger than any fossils that ever would be found. After all there are theoretical limits to how big you can have a reptile before it becomes structurally unsound. And the dinosaurs in films are just too darn big. And they started telling us how big a reptile can get.

Well naturally, just a short time later they discovered the remains

of flying reptiles that were impossibly large. They called them Rodans after the monster in a Japanese sci-fi movie. What we think of a gentle sauropods started turning uncooperative. Both seismosaurus and supersaurus, subsequently discovered, go beyond the theoretical size limits of reptiles. Now the people who used to trumpet loudly about size limitations on dinosaurs are just quietly waiting to see what else will be discovered. Mother Nature does not like having limitations put on what she can do. They haven't found any two-hundred-foot-tall Godzillas (four hundred feet feet in the English-language version) and probably never will, but nobody is really sure what the limits are anymore.

The latest is that Spielberg's J_u_r_a_s_s_i_c_P_a_r_k exaggerated the size of velociraptors for artistic effect. Raptors were nasty but they were not as big as they appeared in the film ... it was thought. And his advisors complained that Raptors were just not that big. Apparently Mother Nature saw the film and said "I got to get me

some of those." Before the film even was released fossils twenty-foot-long, 1500-pound Raptors were found in Utah. They called them Spielberg's Raptors (or Utahraptors for the state where they were discovered). It's not nice to underestimate Mother Nature.

3. MYSTERIUM by Robert Charles Wilson (Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37365-X, 1994, 288pp, US\$11.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I have liked all of Robert Charles Wilson's previous books (T_h_e_H_i_d_d_e_n_P_l_a_c_e, M_e_m_o_r_y_W_i_r_e, G_y_p_s_i_e_s, T_h_e_D_i_v_i_d_e, T_h_e_B_r_i_d_g_e_o_f_Y_e_a_r_s, and H_a_r_v_e_s_t), which is even more interesting when you consider how widely they vary. T_h_e_H_i_d_d_e_n_P_l_a_c_e is a fantasy set in a hobo camp during the Great Depression, M_e_m_o_r_y_W_i_r_e is a science fiction story of cybernetics in 21st Century Brazil, G_y_p_s_i_e_s is about the military trying to use children who can "sidestep" into other worlds, T_h_e_D_i_v_i_d_e is about the experimental enhancement of intelligence, T_h_e_B_r_i_d_g_e_o_f_Y_e_a_r_s is about time

travel, and H_a_r_v_e_s_t is about aliens who come to transform the human race into something higher. If there's a pattern here, I don't see it. (And lest there be any confusion, this book is n_o_t by the co-author of the "Illuminati" books. That is Robert A_n_t_o_n Wilson.)

And now we have M_y_s_t_e_r_i_u_m, a book based on gnosticism. I must admit that gnosticism in the early Christian church is not one of my strong points. From a historical perspective, I know that gnosticism led in part to Manichaeism and the religion of the Bogomils, but I am less clear on their doctrines, so I have to take M_y_s_t_e_r_i_u_m based on what Wilson conveys within it. (I hope he's more accurate on gnosticism than on mathematics--where he refers to the "anthropic principle in the language of set theory"--or physics--where he describes a thirty-degree incline as "not steep.") Of course, one might claim that since one of the basic principles of gnosticism is hidden knowledge Wilson doesn't have to convey it clearly. After all, in Luke 8:10 it is said, "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand," a very gnostic concept.

The town of Two Rivers, Michigan, is happy when the government builds a secret laboratory nearby, disappointed when they discover the employees won't be pumping money into the local economy, and surprised when they wake up one morning to discover that their entire town has been transported to a world like theirs--but different. Their country--whatever it is--seems to be at war with New Spain, and the Proctors have arrived to bring the town under control. No one is quite sure what has happened, but Howard Poole is sure it has something to do with his uncle, Alan Stern.

The three parts of M_y_s_t_e_r_i_u_m are entitled "Mysterium," "Mysterium Tremendae," and "Axis Mundis" (reminiscent of the three sections of A_C_a_n_t_i_c_l_e_f_o_r_L_e_i_b_o_w_i_t_z). Each begins with a brief excerpt from Stern's diary, heavy on the Greek terms but somewhat helpful in understanding the religious basis not only of this new world but also of the book itself. Because gnosticism is the key to what's happened to the town of two rivers.

I have a couple of minor quibbles. Given the time of the "world-

split," it seems unlikely that names such as Boston and Meso-America would be use. (Wilson attempts to explain this by having Graham note, "The movements of people, the evolution of language. It's as though history wants to flow in certain channels. Broad ethnic groupings persist, and there are roughly analogous wars, at least up until the tenth or eleventh century. There are plagues, though they follow different patterns. The Black Death depopulated Europe and Asia no less than five times," but I'm not convinced.) And his science is sloppy (see my comments about set theory and thirty-degree slopes earlier). But in spite of these problems, I found M_y_s_t_e_r_i_u_m to be an engrossing novel. I may not believe the religious underpinnings of it, but then the same was true of A_C_a_n_t_i_c_l_e_f_o_r_L_e_i_b_o_w_i_t_z and that didn't stop me from liking that. This uses religion slightly differently, of course, but read it for yourself to see how.

4. AGYAR by Steven Brust (Tor, ISBN 0-812-51521-8, 1994, 254pp, US\$4.99) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I greatly enjoyed Steven Brust's T_o_r_e_i_g_n_i_n_H_e_l_l, and have heard good things about his other books. But I have been unwilling to jump into the middle of the Vlad Taltos novels or other associated books, and C_o_w_b_o_y_F_e_n_g's_S_p_a_c_e_B_a_r_a_n_d_G_r_i_l_l_e seemed probably atypical of his writing style. (Of course, that might also have been true of T_o_R_e_i_g_n_i_n_H_e_l_l.) So I was pleased to see that at least there was a non-Taltos Brust book available.

John Agyar is new in town, and leading a somewhat peculiar life. He lives in a haunted mansion, where he converses in a quite normal fashion with the ghost of the ex-slave Jim. (This isn't Hannibal, Missouri; I doubt there is an intentional reference here.) He is seeing two women, Jill Quarrier and her roommate Susan Pfahl. And he's being pursued by a third woman, Laura Kellen whose intentions are not exactly friendly.

Brust manages a style that is modern enough for the setting, yet poetic enough for the feelings and the mystery and the strangeness of what is happening. He keeps the reader just slightly off-balance, delivering a surprise here, a twist there, but never

enough to overthrow what has come before. This is a book that slowly unfolds and opens itself, like the roses on the cover. (And my the way, the cover by Jim Burns is an excellent rendering of a painting described in the book itself (pages 219 to 220), and no fair skipping ahead to it!). Agyar, and the town of Lakota, and what happens there all form something you won't soon forget. I recommend A_g_y_a_r and I may even brave the Dragaeran series if this is indicative of Brust's writing.

5. BLACK BIBLE CHRONICLES: FROM GENESIS TO THE PROMISED LAND

interpreted by P. K. McCary (African American Family Press, ISBN 1-56977-0000-X, 1993, 190pp, , US\$14.95) (a book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Perhaps best described as "the Torah for homeboys," this is the first of a series of books translating (or "interpreting," to use McCary's term) the B_i_b_l_e into urban language. This volume covers the five books of Moses (G_e_n_e_s_i_s, E_x_o_d_u_s, L_e_v_i_t_i_c_u_s, N_u_m_b_e_r_s, and D_e_u_t_e_r_o_n_o_m_y); a second volume has already been published covering the four gospels (called R_a_p_p_i_n'_w_i_t_h_J_e_s_u_s). But as a Jew I was understandably more interested in this volume.

This translation omits large sections of these books, particularly the genealogies (the "begats"). Since the footnotes reference this translation back to the chapters in the complete version, I don't consider this a big fault. More problematic is McCary's somewhat loose translation. The use of the term "church" to refer to the Temple may not be too unreasonable (though it points out the Christian focus of this translation, rather than a Judaic or Islamic one), but the translation of "Sabbath" into "Sunday" in several spots is irksome and deceptive. And, for example, the translation of Leviticus 18:21 as "he can't put her children on the altar to be burned 'cuz that'll cause the ultimate in punishment" may not be an accurate rendering of what the original says: the King James translation is "And thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Molech, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord," and Maimonides says this refers to passing an old practice of passing a newborn child through the smoke of a fire as a pagan rite (T_h_e_G_u_i_d_e_f_o_r_t_h_e P_e_r_p_l_e_x_e_d, Part 3, Chaper 37). On the other hand, "Don't mess with someone else's ol' man or ol' lady" is probably a better rendering of the intent than "Thou shalt not commit adultery." (The latter seems to lead to all sorts of hair-splitting over the precise definition of adultery.)

I notice, by the way, that while most of the Laws in L_e_v_i_t_i_c_u_s are retained, the prohibitions against homosexual behavior between men

seem to have vanished. Not only does McCary include all the other

THE MT VOID

Page 6

sexual prohibitions ("And the Almighty didn't want folks peeping on people they had no business seeing naked"; "It was especially uncool to get down with any animals"; "The Almighty didn't want kissin' cousins getting hitched, and brothers weren't to sleep with their mothers or any wife of your dad's, whether she's your mother or not. Granddaughters, daughters, and half sisters are out of the question for doing the wild thing, just as your aunt or your sister-in-law"), but even the clothing ones ("Mix matching clothes, like wool and linen, isn't just a fashion downer, it ain't happening here"). One can only conclude that political correctness is at least partially responsible for this omission.

_ B_ l_ a_ c_ k_ B_ i_ b_ l_ e_ C_ h_ r_ o_ n_ i_ c_ l_ e_ s is certainly an unusual translation, and one

that is surprisingly engaging. It manages to bring a life and a directness to the story that traditional translations don't. Whether it will reach its intended audience is not clear, but it could well find a favorable reception with an audience looking at it as a literary work rather than an inspirational one.

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The world is a spiritual kindergarten where bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks.

-- Edwin Arlington Robinson

