

CHAPTER FIVE
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The Helliconia Trilogy, books by Brian Wilson Aldiss consists of Helliconia Spring (1982), Helliconia Summer (1983) and Helliconia Winter (1985). They are set on an earth like planet, called Helliconia, which differs from the Earth in only two crucial respects. First, instead of orbiting one star, Helliconia orbits two. It revolves around Batalix, its cold primary star, once in a period slightly more than one earth year. Batalix in turn orbits around a second star, Freyr, which is a blue super giant once every 1825 years. This orbit is highly elliptical, bringing Batalix and Helliconia close to Freyr for some of the orbit and very distant for other parts of it. Since Batalix is cool, when the system is distant from Freyr, Helliconia endures a dark, cold Great Winter, during which the whole planet is snowbound for centuries. At the opposite extreme, the highpoint of summer turns the planet into a scorching furnace. The second difference to Earth is that the planet is inhabited by humans and a second species - the Phagors, which are furry goat like creatures, who thrive in the cold.

The effect of the climate is, to set the history of the planet into a never ending cycle of rise and fall, dominance and enslavement. For example, during the darkest years of the great winter, human civilization is all but wiped out and the Phagors enslave most of mankind. During the high summer this is reversed and the Phagors are docile slaves of man. Ironically it is this enslavement that ensures the other race survives through its darkest hour and rises again.

Each of the books is set at a different time in one great year. The first book is set during the period where the great winter comes to an end and the planet wakes up. At the same time humanity is starting to rise from barbarity once again. As the snows recede, humans rediscover skills and knowledge long forgotten and start to regain mastery of the planet.

The ambitious trilogy is completed with stories, or sheafs of stories, set in later periods of the Great Year: Helliconia Summer (1983) and Helliconia Winter (1985). The lush summer volume uses cadences intentionally echoing William Shakespeare's, A Mid-Summer Night's Dream (1594). Kings, queens and marriages dominate the realm of politics, while a Renaissance is in full swing for art and scientists. At the height of summer, the equatorial regions spontaneously catch fire. Many life times later, the inevitable winter begins to close in, affecting both the mental as well as the physical climate.

Helliconia is a world imagined in enormous detail. Animals are given names: horse like "hoxneys", and easily imagined "yelk". The humanoids' evolution has reached an uneasy balance with the helico virus, whose name suggests the DNA double helix and which brings both death and adaptation to the changing ecology: as "bone fever" it strips away body fat reserves for spring, while as "fat death" it prepares survivors for winter.

Thus the cycle of enantiodrama, of qualities turning into their opposites, which pervades Helliconia. As Aldiss himself remarks in Helliconia : How and Why, " knowledge becomes by turns a blessing and a curse, as does religion". Subjection and freedom swap roles. Humanoids and the phagors who regard them as food undergo cyclic role reversal,

alternating between dominance and slavery. In part the phagors represent the animal flipside of human nature, the bestiality that seems to recur no matter how often repressed by civilization.

Epigraphs from the rational scientist–poet Lucretius’s De Rerum Nature contrast with sympathetically handled mysticism. Perception of the lay-like “land-octaves” and “air-octaves” that are significant to phagor migrations may involve subtle psychic powers. Humans sense a literal after life of angry ghosts far under-ground, spirits whose apparent rage becomes imply benevolence as the world warms. The mythology naturally includes gods and goddesses like Wutra, who brings the winter. Less metaphorical are the “tutelary biospheric spirits”, which Aldiss imagines as aspects of Helliconia’s overall planetary balance or consciousness – James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis exported to another world. Indeed, Gaia and the Helliconia-soul achieve empathic communication.

Certain scenes are knowingly adapted from older science fiction. Helliconia Spring (1982) echoes a passage of Jules Verne’s Hector Servadac (1877) quoted approvingly in Aldiss’s Billion Year Spree (1973) in which an ice fragment thrown into a super-cooled sea converts it rapidly to a sheet of ice. In the Helliconian version, the quick-freezing lake becomes a trap for pursuing phagors, a first hint that these monsters can be defeated. Helliconia Winter features the Great Wheel that revolves horizontally inside a mountain, hauled by entrapped volunteers whose efforts – in a metaphor suggesting ancient Egypt – supposedly pull Helliconia through the long winter. This architecture-cum-machine pays homage to the revolving temple or prison of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s The Gods of Mars (1918).

Ultimately Aldiss shows a triple choice for humanity and near-humanity. The voyeuristic scientists of the artificial satellite Avernus lapse into decadence, barbarian strife, and eventual death. Earth, recovering from an apocalypse brought on by nuclear war in the far future, develops into a contented, harmonious utopia. And Helliconia struggles onward, locked in the Great Year's endless cycle of planetary metamorphosis, a punishing cycle that is also the vital rhythm of life.

Aldiss is careful to avoid the easy puzzle-solving of pulp science fiction, whose conventions would demand both a "magic bullet" of advanced medicine to break the hold of the virus and sustainable high technology for comfortable winter survival. As Helliconia has been conceived, though, this solution is no solution but rather a disaster, a poisoning of the biosphere's delicate self regulation. The actual ending or lack of ending is more grimly resonant. Despite many fine inventions, however, the second and third volumes do not equal the magical, colour-splashed unfurling of Helliconia Spring.

The second book is set during the great summer. Brian Aldiss was not interested in Helliconia's physics, nor was he concerned with the star system containing Malacia, which seems basically a manifestation of an alternate Earth. But in Helliconia, the physics are critical. In a sense, the novel is constructed on the skeleton of Aldiss stellar system, with its precisely computed orbits and eclipse, its apastron and periastron for the planet Helliconia as it circles the star Batalix, which in turn orbits a second star, Freyr, in a Great Year lasting 2,592 Earth years, with correspondingly elongated winters and summers. This planetary system resembles one Aldiss

examined some years earlier in *Farewell, Fantastic Venus*, when he cited Richard Proctor's discussion of a theoretical inclination of Venus axis: An inhabitant of the regions near either pole has to endure extremes of heat and cold, such as would suffice to destroy nearly every race of living beings subsisting upon the Earth ... Certainly none of the human races upon our Earth could bear the alterations between these more than polar terrors and an intensity of summer heat far exceeding any with which we are familiar on earth.

As we might expect, however, Aldiss does not rely on the inherent interest of his planetary system to engage his readers, as do such writers as Robert Forward in *Dragon's Egg* (1980) or Hal Clement in *Mission of Gravity* (1954). Instead, Aldiss uses science to frame the most exciting element in *Helliconia*, the relationship of that system with our own world.

In *Spring*, Aldiss tantalizes that he introduces *Avernus* station and through it, Earth, but infrequently. Those few references promise a deeper involvement with Earth, suggesting that the spectacle of *Helliconia* moving into spring may be in some senses peripheral to Aldiss' ultimate concerns. In *Summer*, observers from *Avernus* enter into the action on *Helliconia*, as Billy Xiao Pin leaves *Avernus* for *Helliconia*... and death, since the helico virus that enables *Helliconians* to survive summer and winter invariably kills Earth-humans; *Helliconia* remains isolated from Earth. *Avernus* is isolated from both from Earth by three-thousand light years, from *Helliconia* by the surety of death.

Billy's presence alters that balance, however briefly. The italicized passages dealing with *Avernus* cease to be merely cold observations.

Avernus is as critically sensitive to change as Helliconia itself to the despair of separation from all other humans, to the tensions of centuries within an artificial world, and to the sheer tedium of constantly observing and never participating in a world, to stasis. When Billy touches Helliconia, the relationship between observer and observed blurs.

In *Winter*, Aldiss increasingly moves his focus from Helliconia to Earth. The narrative still concentrates on Helliconia of course, but includes longer and longer italicized passages, until Earth and Helliconia are not isolated but parallel each other. Helliconia faces the cyclical threat of winter and summer – only in spring and fall is the planet truly habitable. Earth, in the meantime, has undergone a “Great Year” of its own. Nuclear warfare has isolated it even from its own children on Avernus, ironically, as Earth ceases transmitting to Avernus, and as the transmissions from Avernus play to emptiness on a devastated Earth. The inhabitants of Avernus themselves change, losing contact with their past and their purpose. They turn science to perversion, creating “perambulant pudendolls”, enormous motile genitalia that symbolize the distortion and, the boredom that destroys Avernus. Aldiss’ systematically aliens the three worlds; in spite of technological breakdowns, they are connected through the empathic power developed by Earth humans adapting to an altered environment. Gaia, the Earth Mother, can touch the original Beholder, the god-image of Helliconia. Observers become participants, losing some of their individuality to gain contact with other sentient species.

To make connections between Earth and Helliconia even more explicit, Aldiss uses a number of techniques. Most immediately, at the level

of plot, Aldiss re-creates the history of western civilization. At the core of Helliconia lies the question of order and stability within change. In “prelude”, Pannoval has achieved stability, but at the price of a stultifying priestly bureaucracy, the remainder of spring traces an alternative movement in Embruddock. Beginning at the level of mere survival, the people progress through identifiable stages paralleling the development of western culture on Earth. From survival, they move to rudimentary attempts at controlling nature through magic and ritual sacrifice, attaining finally to the beginnings of scientific investigation, inventing the telescope and charting eclipses. With increased knowledge they expand westward, across the river, to new lands beyond the waters, only to confront a new threat, the invading hordes of phagors led by the Kzahhn Hrr-Brahl Yprt. The first volume concludes with Embruddock in flames, for the moment, the momentum of civilization halts.

In Summer, Aldiss narrows from generations to weeks, delineating a society reminiscent of Renaissance Europe. Kings and generals war for supremacy, manipulating and manipulated by social forces, religious prejudice, and the developing impact of science. A rising entrepreneurial middle class at times almost eclipses the royal machinations of JandolAnganol or his deposed and imprisoned father VarpalAnganol. Court scenes both religious and secular, describe the Holy Pannovalan Empire of the Father Supreme of the Church of Akhanaba, the Great C’Sarr Kilander IX – a reflection of Renaissance Catholicism blended with the Holy Roman Empire. By depicting battles that resolve nothing, societies increasingly aware of science and technology and court intrigues both public and private, Aldiss creates a sumptuous world that is simultaneously imaginative

creation and astute exegesis of history. The historicity is compounded by the expansiveness of the volume, which moves across the landscape of Helliconia from the distend reaches of northern Sibornal. In such a way Aldiss comment on history as well as technology about future.

In a splendid turn of image, Aldiss suggests yet another possibility in the name of the planet. Scientist of Avernus know about the deadly virus, which they refer to as the “helico virus”. The world, appropriately a form of Helliconia without the doubled ‘L’, corresponds to helix, symbolizing the eternal intertwining of light and dark, heat and cold, life and death that is Helliconia. It manifests in the narrative as the ever-present, “Circle or wheel with a smaller circle at its centre. From the centre circle, two opposed curved spokes radiated to the outer one”. Aldiss continually returns to this image, using it to represent not only the cycles of winter and summer, but the multiple dualities implicit throughout diversity and unity, stasis and change, love and hatred, earth and sky, underworld and overworld, microcosm and macrocosm.

These are grand topics, yet the trilogy of books covers them through the eyes of various protagonists, from all levels of society. These are not novels about politics and intrigue but about how individuals cope with their circumstances however, good or bad and the decisions they make. These books are about the nature of humanity, on an epic scale.