

tolkien's successors

The Urth list — 10 messages, 8 voices, 30 Nov 2004

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4252>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

turin — 30 Nov 2004, 12:46

I agree with Dan'I in that Tolkien and Wolfe are very different from other fantasy and constitute something outside of the easy categories of science fiction and fantasy we use today. Tolkien and Wolfe are both primarily philosophical authors. I think Wolfe succeeds in some places where Tolkien failed, but Tolkien is not exactly a novelist. He has one true novel, and it is debatably a romance. He was more interested in the construction of artificial languages and prose narratives to explain their cultural evolution. In that he is unique. Wolfe and Tolkien share the idea of imaginary history, Tolkien used this term, because besides thinking of Ea as a possible world he also thought of the the histories of Middle-earth as a possible and this is important, cultural and linguistic, history of this world, specifically a possible narrative and linguistic root of Indo-european culture as I mentioned before. For Tolkien it is an imaginary past and for Wolfe a future. Tolkien in some ways is trying to write about real events which have been mythologized over time. Morgoth did steal the Silmarils but it was communicated to humans through poetry and the imperfections of language. Wolfe seems to be starting with Christians myths and transforming them into future events. Tolkien is making analogues to Christian events. I think the Catholic narrative is stronger in Wolfe, and so it is to a certain degree more allegorical, but it uses more science. What are we to make of techno-myth? I think Wolfe is a better novelist than Tolkien, but as I said Tolkien is not exactly a novelist, but they both do the same work. I do think Wolfe is Tolkien's successor, perhaps, and not his rival, they use similar subject material as well as the same philosophical questions, and I think medieval Catholicism has a lot to do with it.

However, and this may seem strange, but I think a lot of *science fiction* is in the category with Wolfe and Tolkien than most *fantasy*, specifically Arthur C Clarke, and anything that has Tielhard de Chardin, Omega Point, Hegelian history, which is a move to a deChristianized godhead, and there is a lot of it. Tolkien did not like to talk about the divine for fear of blasphemy and so direct speculation on Christ is conspicuously absent from his work, even if there is a god. But they both a feeling of cosmic otherness, and an reality which is realer, and more complex than the one we know. Even the heirodoles are the product of evolution. C S Lewis loved Childhood's End. I don't know if Tolkien ever read it, though. When they gave him the grandmaster's Nebula he thanked them but said he had never written any science fiction. Other work includes Dune and The Left Hand of Darkness, these aren't omega point or next step in human evolution novels, they are about world building, which I think is also at the forefront of Tolkien's work. This is a rule Clarke forgot to make about science fiction. Any complex worldbuilding author after 1955, has read The Lord of the Rings.

Besides Clarke, I think a lot of cyberpunk is in the same as Tolkien. What Neal Stephenson is doing in Cryptonomicon and the Baroque Cycle is a kind of imaginary history, he even talks about Lord of the Rings in Cyptonomicon, not that mentioning Tolkien is enough, but he seems to be trying to practice the same restraint Tolkien used. I am less sure about William Gibson's work, but he is a world builder and an omega pointer. The difference between Tolkien and other scifi writers is the difference their ideas of entropy and is that where in Ea there was a glorious past and elves, in the future there will be things like elves, though it may not be all that glorious or good, for humans there is a level of increasing order and complexity even as the universe at large winds down. However, Ea is not always winding down at all levels from its creation, but only

after Morgoth ruins the spring of Arda, and destroys the lamps. The peak of complexity has been attained and now the world is in decline.

Id like people's ideas about who they think is working in the same vein as Tolkien.

EOT;

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 30 Nov 2004, 14:41 · in reply to turin

Turin -

What a fascinating discussion!

I'd say that Tolkien actually wrote two novels, _tLotR_ and _The Hobbit_, though the latter is in its original intent a novel for children. (I exclude _Mr. Bliss_ and _Roverandom_, like "Farmer Giles" and "Smith" and all, for reasons of length.)

I'm also fascinated by the idea of Wolfe as the heir to Tolkien - certainly there is a lot of JRRT "influence," though well mulched rather than in overt homage and reference, in GW's work. And certainly they have some themes in common - in particular, they both put a lot of energy into the question of what it means to live a virtuous life in a radically Fallen world.

Regarding Clarke et al - you might like the Panshins' book _World Beyond the Hill: Science Fiction and the Quest for Transcendence_, which is a fairly intensive (but quite readable) study of the mystical impulse in SF.

Yes, the Catholic narrative is ... I won't say "stronger," but "more overt" in Wolfe than in Tolkien. The latter hides a lot of crypto- Catholicism in his work; for example, the day he chooses as the New Year for the Fourth Age is the Feast of the Annunciation - which was long celebrated in Britain as the start of the New Year, probably as a survival of the equinoctial festival of Beltane. And Elbereth seems to be intended as an "image" of the BVM.

I don't know whether JRRT read _Childhood's End_ either, but I recall in one of the late _Letters_ he mentions that he'd been reading a lot of "American science fiction" and I _believe_ he mentions a particular fondness for Asimov ... a writer who doesn't really figure into the "transcendence" thematic the way Clarke, Herbert, and Heinlein do. (I exclude Le Guin, though I love her work dearly, from this because her mysticism - if it even _is_ mysticism - is of another tradition entirely.)

Perhaps I'm wrong, but I don't think the hierodules are "the product of evolution," at least as a purely "natural" process - don't we learn that they were (to use David Brin's term) "uplifted" by humans?

I'd love to know how you see cyberpunk as "in the same [vein?] as Tolkien." If there is transcendence in most cp work, it is purely a machine transcendence, a Godel-Turing transcendence. (Perhaps the most important exception is Sterling's little chiller "Swarm," about a species that -- but that's a serious spoiler.)

Regarding Ea and entropy, I don't think JRRT would think of "entropy" or "winding down" at all. Rather, he would speak in terms of Ea as having experienced the Fall; in a Fallen world, all things come in time to ruin unless the Creator intervenes (in the form of the Savior).

Id like people's ideas about who they think is working in the same vein as Tolkien.

Strangely, the first name that comes to my mind is Tim Powers.

Tim builds complex historical models and sets novels in and around them. His method is fascinating: he reads a lot of history and finds things that puzzle him, then tries to find an explanation for them. For example, his novel *_Declare_* is rooted in a detailed study of the British and Soviet secret services in WW2 and after, but to make sense of their behavior (and especially of Kim Philby and his even stranger father), he winds up invoking something mysterious and deadly on Mount Ararat. Similarly, *_Last Call_* asks why Bugsy Siegel built his palace in the desert; change the word "desert" to "wasteland" and you find yourself involved with the Fisher-king, which brings in the Tarot, and thus the mystical game of poker... The point being, most of Tim's novels are ... not even "alternate" histories, so much as *_secret_* histories, quite rich with meaning.

Dan Simmons, at least in his "Hyperion Cantos," mines a future quite as rich as that of Wolfe's Briah cycle. I've only read the set of four books once and don't feel qualified to say much more, but I think that he's operating in Tolkien-ish territory here - and in Tim Powers territory in *_Carrión Comfort_*. (Simmons is not as good a writer as Tolkien, Wolfe, or Powers, though; I was turned off by one of his novels in just a few pages, because the narrator kept telling us that he could tell how bad a place Calcutta was the minute he set foot there, thus reducing the book to an idiot plot - "If you know it's so bad, schmendrick, why don't you just hop the next flight out?")

Le Guin does not (to my mind) usually run to the level of historical worldbuilding of Tolkien et al, but there are one and a half exceptions.

The one clear exception is *_Always Coming Home_*, which I once described this way: "Imagine if, instead of *_The Lord of the Rings_*, Tolkien had published a hugely expanded set of appendices, with the text of *_The Hobbit_* interspersed among them in several parts, and then summed up the War of the Ring in a memo near the end." There is absolutely no narrative reason why *_ACH_* should work, but it does.

The half-exception is the Earthsea cycle, whose history developed long after the world itself was fairly solid in its creator's mind; part of the *_Tales of Earthsea_* is devoted to stories explaining how various aspects of Archipelagan culture got to be the way it was at the beginning of the original trilogy.

Cheers,

--Dan'l

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
"Saddam would still be in power if he were the President
of the United States, and the world would be a lot better off."
-- The Forty-Third President, 10/8/04

Maru — 30 Nov 2004, 18:32 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

He was mining Kevin Kelly's book 'Out of Control'. It's a bit dated, but still well-worth the read. So he is not completely originating all this, but his job of integrating and warping it all is still marvelous. It is a shame that his Hyperion universe is so small- aside from the 'Amoiete Helix' it contains his best short stories (the short story in 'Prayers to broken stones' is on par with Wolfe, IMHO) and books. None of his other stuff matches up. It seems to be a common tragedy to SF that some of its best authors produce one, and only one, really good work. Anyone know why? ~Maru I'd put Wolfe in the above category too. I haven't noticed the richness of tBotNS in the long sun, short sun, wizard-knight or cerberus novels at all.

--- Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:
Dan Simmons, at least in his "Hyperion Cantos," mines a future

quite as rich as that of Wolfe's Briah cycle. I've only read the set of four books once and don't feel qualified to say much more, but I think that he's operating in Tolkien-ish territory here - and in Tim Powers territory in *Carrion Comfort*. (Simmons is not as good a writer as Tolkien, Wolfe, or Powers, though; I was turned off by one of his novels in just a few pages, because the narrator kept telling us that he could tell how bad a place Calcutta was the minute he set foot there, thus reducing the book to an idiot plot - "If you know it's so bad, schmendrick, why don't you just hop the next flight out?")

Eric Mattingly — 30 Nov 2004, 20:51 · in reply to turin

Not to switch subjects too quickly, but I think that an interesting line of discussion has been broached. But on the whole successor thing-- I think that we have to see Wolfe as building on Tolkien's work rather than mirroring it precisely. Both are indeed philosophical writers, but I honestly find more philosophical depth and-- even more importantly-- questioning in Wolfe. And here is one major reason I see that. Whereas Tolkien is interested in establishing a history, Wolfe is interested in establishing a path of evolution (as has been said already in our discussion). Where the former wants to establish a mythology, the latter wants to move beyond mythology into blessedness. Wolfe's use of mythology then (especially in the *Book of the New Sun* and *Urth of the . . .*) has some uncanny (and conscious I would argue) parallels with the ascent to bliss in gnostic mythology (this element in the *New Sun* series deserves a thread of its own). The dynamic at the heart of the *New Sun*, then, is one of evolution at the core-- the universe is being conformed slowly and with epochal carefulness into an eventual direct communication with the Pancreator (Ein Sof?).

This leads directly to the question of Wolfe's religious heritage in his own work. Textually speaking, I believe that trying to apply the term "christian" to something is moot and bound to fail. Rather, we cannot truly define Christianity unless it is a kind of mysticism that is beyond language or a kind of experience at the root of action (a la Kierkegaard) and which also resists definition. Rather, we get a mixture of acceptance and reaction to certain ideas that arise from Christianity and which are patterned in certain ways. The end result of all my babble is to say that I believe we can call Wolfe more readily a "Catholic" writer than we can a "Christian writer." My own beliefs lead me to question whether or not "christianity" even exists, but certainly I can't see how it becomes embodied textually. As a "Catholic", then, I think it is clear that he is neither doctrinaire or even orthodox. At the base of the *Book of the New Sun* is an idea of evolution that (as I have already said) is gnostic-- but it is also a variety of a famous almost-heresy called the "apocatastasis" (restoration) wherein all souls must eventually through the suffering inherent in their own actions be restored to grace. All will eventually choose the "good" once the "good" is known. That includes the damned and satan.

Anyway, I apologize for that mess. That's what you get for thinking as you write :). I hope that it isn't total tripe.

eric

A heretic is a man who sees with his own eyes.

-- Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Dec 2004, 09:51 · in reply to Eric Mattingly

Eric -

as one of the list's token Catholics I tend to agree with you that "Christianity doesn't exist." More accurately (and I think this is pretty close to what Kierkegaard was getting at) you can't, in this life, "be a Christian," you can only "be in the process of becoming a Christian" - but then that makes the referent of the word "Christian" an ideal rather than a real object, and so the word "Christian" in the context of the "real" world (or the "world that is the case") becomes someone who "is in the process of becoming" a Christian-in-the-ideal-sense.

Given how many blatant references (analogies, allegories, whatever) to the Christ-story Wolfe packs into his stories, and especially the Solar stories, it's difficult, not to say somewhat obtuse, not to read them as in-some-sense "Christian" stories. The difficulty arises when someone tries to define just

how, especially when one tries to make too simple of a call

-- Wolfe himself has repeatedly denied that any of his heroes

are "Christ figures," by which he appears to mean nothing more than that he would not want anyone to confuse them with the unique historical Messianic Person; I think that it's reasonable to call Severian, Silk, and the Narrator "Christ figures" in the same sense that Moses, Samuel, and Samson all "figure" Christ in traditional (Catholic) readings of the Old Testament.

--Dan'l

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
"Saddam would still be in power if he were the President
of the United States, and the world would be a lot better off."
-- The Forty-Third President, 10/8/04

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2004, 18:31 · in reply to turin

I'd like people's ideas about who they think is
working in the same vein as Tolkien.

Isn't this a bit like asking of the mystery genre, "who is working in the same vein as Arthur Conan Doyle?"

It seems to me that the only current fantasy writers not furthering the school of Tolkien are placed in the Horror genre.

Surely all fantasy writers today must say -with apologies to Nixon- "We're all Tolkienites now".

~ Crush

Nathan Spears — 01 Dec 2004, 19:13 · in reply to James Wynn

I think what he was getting at was that Tolkien had broken some fundamentally new fantastic ground, in a unique way. He created a world from scratch; even though it was informed and influenced from many sources, it's still infused with its own life.

I think the question was more along the lines of, "Who is being earth-shatteringly and uncompromisingly original?"

One of the things I love about Tolkien is that he doesn't have an agenda; I don't think he's even as interested in searching for truth in some grand sense as Wolfe is. You can try to read that into his work, but I think that he tries to tell a powerful story, and that a side-effect of a powerful story is that it has to be true, or have enough truth to resonate with us.

Let me clarify a little bit: Tolkien deliberately includes "true" things like linguistic evolution in LotR and the history of Middle Earth, but I don't feel the same applies to larger themes like his beliefs about God and salvation, or the beauty of creation, or the bittersweet nature of life for men on earth. I feel that these themes infuse his work because he believes them so deeply that they can't help but surface in his writing; this differs from the tone of many modern writers of fantasy who seem to be aiming to entertain and teach us, rather than to tell us a story that happens to resonate with what they believe.

I don't know if anyone is trying to do that anymore. I get a sense of that from LeGuin, but she definitely picks her topics deliberately. I don't mind it because she is so intelligent and such a wonderful storyteller.

--- James Wynn <thewynns at earthlink.net> wrote:
I'd like people's ideas about who they think is
working in the same vein as Tolkien.

Isn't this a bit like asking of the mystery genre, "who is working in the
same vein as Arthur Conan Doyle?"

It seems to me that the only current fantasy writers not furthering the
school of Tolkien are placed in the Horror genre.

Surely all fantasy writers today must say -with apologies to Nixon- "We're
all Tolkienites now".

~ Crush

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 02 Dec 2004, 09:17 · in reply to Nathan Spears

On Wed, 1 Dec 2004 19:13:34 -0800 (PST), Nathan Spears
<spearofsolomon at yahoo.com> wrote:
[... T]his differs from the tone of many modern writers of fantasy
who seem to be aiming to entertain and teach us, rather than to tell
us a story that happens to resonate with what they believe.

I don't know if anyone is trying to do that anymore.

Well, you mentioned Le Guin, and I agree - she is not as consciously manipulating her material
as it at some times seems. Yes, there is some of that, but (for example) she discovered only in
retrospect how important the images of trees and walls were to her.

I think that this is true even of the most "deliberate" fantasists. For example, Delany certainly
deliberately inserts his political, sexual, and postmodern-philosophical-linguistic concerns into
his work. But I doubt very much that he realized until at least the novel
Neveryona how important the image of cities was to him; he
clearly loves cities, and his best novels are full of stuff about how to get along in and enjoy

cities.

Stephen King, at the top of his game (which is all too rare), is full of a kind of faith in the basic goodness of the universe - no, really - that I don't believe he puts there consciously. Hell, half of the problem with King is that he doesn't do enough consciously; he sits down at the typer and is as surprised at what comes out as the readers are, then doesn't revise or cut it anywhere near enough, three quarters of the time. He launches into a novel not knowing where he will come out, and when he gets to the far side he's unwilling to change the course he's followed, thus resulting in novels with some of the most unsatisfying endings imaginable, dammit.

H'mmm. In general, though, you're right. Most of the major fantasists running around loose today are extremely self conscious about what forms and informs the meaning-structure of their work...

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
Freedom has no barcode.
--J.G. Ballard

Matthew Malthouse — 02 Dec 2004, 13:24 · in reply to James Wynn

At 02:31 02/12/2004, Crush wrote:
Surely all fantasy writers today must say -with apologies to Nixon- "We're all Tolkienites now".

To my mind the "Like Tolkien" tag is a bad reviewers tag.

There aren't any writers like Tolkien. Oh, there are some who on their own merits are just as good or perhaps better if one is prepared to compare apples and oranges. But no one is doing precisely what Tolkein did and it's possible that because he did it already no one will.

I don't think it's to be disputed that Tolkien is an irradicable influence on contemporary writers and to that degree they might all be Tolkienites.

Matthew

Brian Lindenmuth — 02 Dec 2004, 13:59 · follows Matthew Malthouse

I have been lurking for a long time now and would like to contribute more but I just cant seem to make the time. Any way, I think that you can compare Tolkien's influence: good, bad, intended, unintended, forced on him by critics and fans and detractors alike to someone else in a diffrent entertainment field altogether. Bob Dylan.

When Dylan came on the scene his impact was so tremendous that he himself almost was crushed under the weight of it.

But more importantly, because Dylan's shadow loomed so large over the music landscape everyone from that point forward had to react to him in some way to him, whether in a positive or a negitave way. He became the base line.

Critics for years after would say things like "The next Dylan..." or "Dylanesque..." or "Wanna-be Dylan..." and invariably musicians were crushed under this weight. But there were some artists who persevered and went on to claim there own legitimate place in the rock canon and make there own music and create their own vision. Springsteen might just be the best example of this.

I apologize for my first post ever not mentioning Wolfe (well I guess I just did), but I did see some comparisons and just wanted to share.

-----Original Message-----

From: Matthew Malthouse [SMTP:matthew.malthouse at ntlworld.com] Sent: Thursday, December 02, 2004 4:24 PM To: James Wynn; The Urth Mailing List Subject: Re: (urth) tolkien's successors

At 02:31 02/12/2004, Crush wrote:

Surely all fantasy writers today must say -with apologies to Nixon- "We're all Tolkienites now".

To my mind the "Like Tolkien" tag is a bad reviewers tag.

There aren't any writers like Tolkien. Oh, there are some who on their own merits are just as good or perhaps better if one is prepared to compare apples and oranges. But no one is doing precisely what Tolkien did and it's possible that because he did it already no one will.

I don't think it's to be disputed that Tolkien is an irradicable influence on contemporary writers and to that degree they might all be Tolkienites.

Matthew