

traveling north: imagined geography

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 06 Jun 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5625>

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David Stockhoff — 06 Jun 2010, 13:17

That's really interesting. I've been pondering the imagined geography of Middle-earth my entire life, and it's always seemed to me that it is a re-imagination of the early medieval world projected forward from an ideal past which itself was projected backward from an early medieval world distilled from reading way too much medieval literature. It represents several orders of idealization, in other words. (John Crowley kind of addresses this literary process in his novella *Great Work of Time*.) For example, if there were Irish legends of Western isles of afterlife, then there were origins to that fact. Since those origins do not lie in a geographical past, they must lie in an imaginary past---and by "imaginary" I don't mean "not real" but rather very real: "more real than real." What did the old bards actually imagine? Tolkien thus supplanted the historical roots of the romance with his imagined romantic origins of the romance. And while the Orcs and Easterlings plainly express the insecurity (fear of absorption of the West by the East) of Orientalism (perhaps African/Arab and Arab/Asian, respectively), the relationship is not a simple one; Tolkien didn't simply say, Hey, I need some scary Mongols and Saracens. Rather, he said, What's scary about what Europeans feared about the Mongols and Turks and Saracens? Where did it come from? How to make "sense" of it? And of course his Orientalism was not a medieval one in the first place, but a 20th century one. his Orcs are more central than the Easterlings; who are less "processed" and less interesting. (I don't think we ever even "see" them; they literally lurk at the far edges of an imagined map.) Regarding what I mean by "sense": Take as an example the influence of Blake on the description of goblins in *The Hobbit*, which contains language very similar to "satanic mills." ----- Message:

2 Date: Sat, 05 Jun 2010 18:09:55 -0500 From: Jeff Wilson <jwilson at io.com> To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net> Subject: Re: (urth) traveling north Message-ID: <4C0AD943.7070304 at io.com> Content-Type: text/plain; charset=ISO-8859-1; format=flowed

My point remains that around this time (1936 or so) he placed the setting we know as Middle Earth in the literal past, slightly overlapping the historic era, with bloodlines continuing to this day allowing retrogression from our time to that. Things accumulated and by the 70s he was reported saying it was in an imaginary world rather than an historical one.

I cut that loose a bit early. I just now reviewed a BBC interview from 71 and he says:

T: Oh yes, they're the same word. Most people have made this mistake of thinking Middle-earth is a particular kind of Earth or is another planet of the science fiction sort but it's just an old fashioned word for this world we live in, as imagined surrounded by the Ocean.

G: It seemed to me that Middle-earth was in a sense as you say this world we live in but at a different era.

T: No ... at a different stage of imagination, yes.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20040911093705/www.geocities.com/misctolkien/TolkieninterviewBBC1971.txt>

-- Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com IEEE Student Chapter Blog at < <http://ieeetamut.org> >

brunians at brunians.org — 06 Jun 2010, 13:35 · in reply to David Stockhoff

It's rooted in Tolkien's thoughts on deep history.

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