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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Holdstock, Robert. Lavondyss. Holdstock, Robert. Mythago Wood.

Tales Newly Told

A Column on Current Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

Back in 1981 a fellow member of the Mythopoeic Society brought to my attention a story by Robert Holdstock entitled "Mythago Wood," which had just been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. As I read it with increasing wonder and delight I felt that I had come upon a mythopoeic fantasy of great literary importance, one that had tapped the same sources of inspiration that had given such lasting power to the works of the Inklings. By taking the particular approaches and styles characteristic of horror, high fantasy, and science fiction respectively, and by bringing them together not as an amalgam but as a fusion of those elements they all have in common, and guided throughout by a clear and unwavering personal vision, Holdstock had given imaginative literature a renewed power to convince and compel. He had led us into an area of the psyche that was raw and frightening in some ways, yet also, in a primal, unanalyzable fashion, immensely comforting. A few years later the story was expanded into a full-length novel, a process which diluted some of its original impact, but did not obscure the vision that had made it so disturbing and memorable.

The events of *Mythago Wood* are set in rural 1400s England, on the edge of a wood which is reputed to be the last surviving fragment of the forests that covered Britain in prehistoric times. An eccentric scholar, George Huxley, and his colleague Wynne-Jones are investigating strange phenomena associated with Ryhope Wood: apparitions of humans from long-vanished cultures or creatures of myth that form on the periphery of an observer's vision and then take on actual existence, although they cannot live for long away from the trees among which they took shape. These "mythagos" — as Huxley names them — seem to arise from the interaction between energies somehow produced by the trees of the wood itself and the images hidden in the unconscious of a human observer. Although they need such an observer to give them life, they in time acquire a flesh-and-blood reality, and can kill and be killed. After Huxley's death his research notes are passed down to his sons Christian and Steven, together with the complex of mythagos that have been animated by his studies — and by his own deep needs. An obsession with the mythago of a beautiful Celtic princess leads to a somewhat Freudian scenario in which Oedipal and fratricidal rivalries — clearly dormant within the family for a long time — become exacerbated and finally explode, taking the protagonists deep into the otherwise inaccessible heart of the wood, where whole landscapes and time periods exist as mythagos that can be entered and explored, and where archetypal conflicts find both their source and their resolution.

In *Lavondyss* (Victor Gollancz, 1988), Holdstock returns to this territory and leads us through it again, but uses a

different map. This time he focuses on Tallis, the younger sister of Harry Keeton, the army pilot who accompanied Steven Huxley on his last expedition into Ryhope Wood. Where the characters of the first book had taken an essentially analytic, theorizing ("masculine") approach to the phenomenon of the mythagos, Tallis' path is that of the shaman, the artist, the poet. She is obsessed with her brother's disappearance but knows that it is linked to the mysterious nature of the wood, and spends her childhood elaborating — in fact, "remembering" — a long fairy tale in which are embedded the elements of her relationship with her brother, and which she hopes will yield clues to aid her in her search. Guided by mythagos, she fashions a little pantheon of archetypal masks for herself, through which she can perceive reality from different points of view. In her conversations with the composer and folklorist Mr. Williams (who is obviously intended to be the real-life Sir Ralph Vaughan Williams) she discovers that this private world of hers has roots in myth and folk-ritual and that, though she has invented it, it is larger than herself. At last, having perfected the technique of "hallowing" (gaining access to other levels of reality), she contacts a young man who is half-human, half-mythgo, and who can thus, by bridging the worlds (and also by being the object of her love), set her on her way.

The rest of the book details her wanderings through the mythic landscapes inside the wood, as she grows from an adolescent into a mature woman. The mythagos she meets all have the numinous and half-familiar air of figures from mythology or ancient folk-tradition, yet can never be clearly traced to a specific literary source. She has long known that the key to finding Harry lies in "Old Forbidden Place," beyond the First Forest, and the very heart of the woods magic. This, one can guess, is the unconscious — both collective and personal, where all myths have their source, but which cannot be unlocked without great effort, or indeed without trauma. Its oldest name, in the folk-memory of the mythagos, is *Lavondyss*, and from it have come all subsequent tales of Earthly Paradises. Although it has commonly been portrayed as the Land of Heart's Desire, all beauty and rest, it is in fact a place of great pain and terror, where the Ice Age reigns eternally, and yet it is also the place of ultimate healing. How Tallis comes to the end of her quest there, and how she is healed of her longing, gives rise to some of the most frightening and moving imagery in the book.

One of the striking aspects of this rich, many-layered work is its close interest in the process of mythopoeic subcreation itself. One is constantly being made aware of the intricate interplay of the personal and the universal,

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Nature). This establishes the contrast between Mediaeval magicians like Merlin (who "produces his results by simply being Merlin" [THS, 246]), and the Renaissance magicians of popular imagery.

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and the essential unity of experience in myth. It is the very specific psychological drama at the heart of the Huxley and Keeton families that creates the mythago patterns in the story, yet the drama is shown to have been enacted many times in human memory, and all the characters that have ever enacted it are linked together within an archetypal Story that gives life and value to all its subsequent versions. Tallis' long polishing of her childhood fairy tale, waiting for the certain intuition that each episode is "true," cannot help but remind us of Tolkien's lengthy, circular re-workings of *The Lord of the Rings*, now made intimately available to us by the publication of the manuscripts. And, just as Tallis' desire for her brother awakens a series of mythic resonances extending all the way back to the Ice Age, so do the fictions of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, though rooted in identifiable circumstances of their author's lives, transcend the psychological situations that give rise to them and attain a timeless universality. Holdstock, through, a complex weaving of powerfully charged images, confirms to us that fantasy and reality, the particular and the universal, time and eternity, joy and grief, life and death are all intimately linked, and that it is in the cultivation of that link — the secret of mythopoeia — that transformation and healing are to be found. *Lavondyss* is very much, as Tolkien said of his own work, about "death and the desire for deathlessness": a concern of poignant relevance to all of us, and which can be dealt with only in the realm of myth.