Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood, by Paul Kincaid

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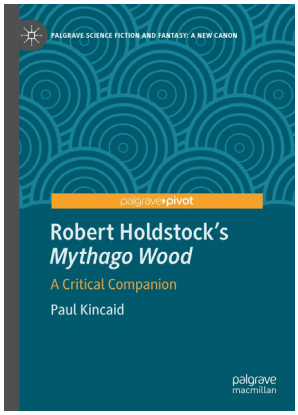

I began drafting this review from a treefarm in the Salish Sea that used to be part of a vast swath of Pacific Coast temperate rain forest. Like much of the Pacific Northwest, the land was logged over at the beginning of the last century, grazed for several decades, then left alone aside from occasional selective harvesting. It's now an expanse of same-aged 90-to-120-foot-high conifers, traversed by footpaths and a few dirt roads, with widely spaced, even-sized treeboles; light and rain filter down to low brush at the forest floor.

How different from Robert Holdstock's impenetrably dense, insanely haunted, and topologically and chronotopically esheresque Ryhope Wood, composed of "primeval" woodland, "untouched forest from a time when all of the country was covered with deciduous forests of oak and ash and elder and rowan and hawthorn" at the end of the last ice age.[1] Plugging into the fantasy topos of an unknown space that is impossibly bigger inside than outside, Ryhope Wood is also, as John Clute memorably termed it, an "abyssal chthonic resonator": it generates—in psychic collaboration with the individuals who enter it—avatars of basic story patterns and experiences that are, in Jungian terms, universal among human beings—among which is surely the attraction to and fear of forests.[2] Though my own experience of woodland, probably like that of many of Holdstock's readers, is no more chthonic than the tree farm I've just described, his vision of a mysterious, unmappable, actively rebarbative wildwood in the heart of darkest Herefordshire is compelling.

Paul Kincaid has produced a concise but valuable companion to *Mythago Wood* (1984), the prize-winning first volume of the Mythago Wood series, with an introduction, three thematic chapters, and very brief coda. Given the dizzyingly nonlinear and recursive temporal structures of the narrative (not to mention how these are repeated and complicated in four subsequent novels), rather than attempting to offer a definitive interpretation or universal theory of Holdstock's work(s), Kincaid sets himself an appropriately circumscribed goal: to suggest "something of the originality, the importance, and the downright strangeness" of the text.[3] The novel's complexities, recursivities, and echoic intertexts are derived from the premise that basic story patterns are immanent in every human consciousness; in the psycho-generative spaces of Ryhope Wood they play out differently for each traveler based on individual cultural contexts and memories, but they

are recognizably familiar plots driven by such figures as the absent father, the quarreling siblings, the rescued child, the supernatural hunters, the hero's journey to restore the Land.

Kincaid documents *Mythago Wood*'s impact and influence on fantasy-writing in the last decades of the twentieth century, noting that it won both the British Science Fiction Award and the World Fantasy award and "has consistently been named as one of the best and most important works of fantasy from the twentieth century" (4). In 2012 the British Fantasy Society renamed their top prize the Robert Holdstock Award, in recognition, Kincaid asserts, of his "entirely new way of writing fantasy" (4). What's new is Holdstock's play with narrative temporality. Having explored time travel in earlier science-fiction novels, Holdstock brought to the fantasy genre a more complex model of narrative temporality that changed the kinds of stories it could engage. Before Holdstock, fantasy was associated with the 'there and back again' structure of the quest, in which time and the narrative move forward to the resolution of the hero's journey:

> … the structure of time commonly plays little or no part … : past and present are consistent, practically static. The idea that time might be layered, that the same myths might take radically different shapes, that the past might interpenetrate the present and the present might interpenetrate the past, has no part to play in stories of the rightful heir being restored and evil being defeated. (3)

With a new level of temporal complexity, Kincaid claims, "*Mythago Wood* remakes fantasy from the perspective of science fiction" (3) and effects "a reimagining of the whole fantasy landscape" (4).[4] The impacts for both plot and character are significant: in Holdstock's novel, "there is no return from [the] quest, the land is not healed, the hero is not restored," and "there is no true hero just as there is no villain"; each character "is transformed utterly, and so everyone becomes both hero and villain of their own story, and neither" (4). In consequence, the narrative remains endlessly open: "what healing there is, is not the end of this story but rather the beginning of another story, a story which also cannot be ended" (8). The focus of the novel—as the reader gradually realizes—is the power and agency of the Wood as it collaborates with the traveler in shaping the story and transforming the teller. The Wood is the figure and engine of transformation. I offer here a brief summary of the novel to confirm Kincaid's assessment of the work's radical weirdness.

Part I: the narrator, Steven, returns from WWII service to his family's home at the edge of Ryhope Wood. His distant, preoccupied father has died and his older brother Christian has developed a weird relationship to the Wood, which has never been surveyed or mapped. Christian has been pursuing their father's research into the wood's capacities to generate avatars of folklore and myths: the Night Hunters, Robin Hood, the warrior woman, Arthur, the shaman. Christian explains the basic premise in a useful expositional brain-dump:

> "The old man believed that all life is surrounded by an energetic aura – you can see the human aura as a faint flow in certain light. In these ancient woodland, *primary woodland*s, the combined aura forms something far more powerful, a sort of creative field that can

> interact with our unconscious. And it's in the unconscious that we carry what he calls the pre-mythago – that's *myth imago*, the image of the idealized form of a myth creature. … The form of the idealized myth, the hero figure, alters with cultural changes, assuming the identity and technology of the time." (original emphasis; 53-54)

The mythago emerges where a culture is under threat, fading when the hero figure is no longer needed but remaining "in our collective unconscious, [to be] transmitted through the generations" (53-54). Seeking to penetrate the Wood's mysterious heart, the brothers encounter a huge boar/man in the Wood who clearly intends to kill them; Steven realizes this is, somehow, both a prehistoric demiurge and their father.

In Part II, Christian leaves to explore the Wood. Steven studies his father's notes and maps and hires a fellow vet to attempt an aerial survey of the wood (blocked by bizarre winds). The Wood begins to grow into the house clearing, as if "a pseudopod of woodland" was "trying to drag the house itself into the aura of the main body" (95).[5] Steven receives strange emissaries from the wood, including the avatar of Guiwenneth, a young red-haired woman-warrior who was raised by the Night Hunters.[6] Different avatars of Guiwenneth had had relationships with Steven's father and older brother, and now Christian re-emerges from the wood, almost entirely unrecognizable in his transformation into a violent warrior leader who appears to be decades older. His fighters seize Guiwenneth and disappear.

In Part III, Steven and his pilot friend plunge into the Wood to trace Christian and recover Guiwenneth. Christian had once imagined that if he could make it to the 'heartwood,' the icebound area behind the wall of fire called Lavondyss—the place of origin and possibly rebirth for the mythagos—he could emerge on its other side and return to ordinary life. But as Steven moves deeper into the Wood, he realizes from talking with different people they encounter that he and his brother are now part of a story that they don't control—the story of a Kinsman who must kill his rogue relative, the Outsider destroying the land. As Kincaid writes, he must "abandon any hope of shaping his own story" (12): "there is no real world for [the brothers] to return to; they are both mythagos now, and mythagos cannot leave the wood" (13). In the final confrontation of the brothers, Steven believes he must kill Christian, according to the myth they are enacting, but Christian asks that they suspend the clash. He will use a shamanic ritual to pass through the fire and, he hopes. return to his previous life. Intending to send him a talisman for this journey home, Steven knocks him into the fire where, we infer, he dies. Guiwenneth arrives at the stone that marks her father's grave, but she has been mortally wounded and dies in Steven's arms. The father-monster re-appears and seems to tell Steven that Guiwenneth will return, before carrying her corpse into the fire. Two story-patterns are completed here—that of Cain and Abel and that of the kidnapped child—but the novel ends in a suspension: Steven settles in by the tomb of Guiwenneth's father to await her return.

Kincaid's single-word chapter titles, "War," "Time," and "Myth", suggest his broadly thematic approach. "War" briefly discusses the WWI service of Holdstock's grandfather, then turns to

explore what it means that conflict is how mythagos are generated. George's journal asserts that mythagos are formed at the intersections of conflicts between the cultures "of the invader, and the invaded": "mythagos grow from the power of hate, and fear" (MW 51). Kinkaid concurs and points out the narrative implications: since mythagos "emerge from war and exist for no other reason than war …. (t)he hero figure, whatever hero might mean in this context, is a personification of the hate and fear of an invasion, and the cruelty of those invading" (25). On his reading, the end of the novel resolves the cycle of violence: "it is a novel in which war is what shapes and drives everything, but it is a novel in which peace and reconciliation is the only possible outcome" (30). Yet the end of the conflict does not allow Steven, any more than Christian, the 'back again' of the fantasy quest: instead, he will spend 'the long years to come' in a nearby village of "Neolithic peoples," waiting for Guiwenneth to return.

In "Time," Kincaid links Mythago Wood's temporality to Holdstock's earlier science fiction novels, which explored the fluidity and irregularity of time: "Time is, in a sense, the only continuing character in Holdstock's work, yet it is never consistent" (34). Kincaid notes that the Wood is "not just … a confusion of all time; it is actively antagonistic to time as it is measured outside the wood" (41): Harry's watch breaks when he enters the Wood; a reverse Rip Van Winkle effect ages Christian by decades more than his brother. Even as Steven encounters a kind of historical pageant of people who suggest the prehistoric past, Saxon England, the Middle Ages and Civil Wars, time is shown to be "a psychological rather than an ontological reality, working its changes and being changed by the imagination, by the very human force of story" (37). Kincaid borrows Stefan Ekman's coinage "mythotopes" to describe the different time-space zones associated with different mythagos, and some readers have used these to create speculative maps of the wood, but the zones are unfixed and permeable, and the figures associated with them can turn up in other places and in other times.[7] Poignantly, Christian imagines that if he can traverse the heartwood, he might be able to recover the time he has lost and the damage that has been done to his body, but the novel doesn't confirm this possibility; nor do we find out whether, as the father-monster promises, Guiwenneth eventually returns to Steven. Carefully gathering up scattered narrative threads, Kincaid traces out the brain-bending temporal paradox of Mythago Wood: the prehistoric people tell Steven stories of the earliest mythagos, but these stories reflect the specific manifestations of the avatars that have been shaped by his own family's engagement with the Wood. So which came first? Holdstock refuses to answer.

In "Myth," Kincaid connects the "science fantasy" aspects of *Mythago Wood* with the cultural politics of early-twentieth-century (pseudo-)sciences. George's journals employ a metabolic vocabulary of energies, vibrations, ley matrices, and auras to be mapped and measured. Alfred Watkins (1855-1935), the ley-line hunter, visits to show George his maps of the invisible tracks connecting spiritual power sites.[8] The device George and his Oxford research pal create to boost his mythago-projecting abilities is "a sort of electrical bridge which seems to fuse elements from each half of the brain" (MW 55), involving a "curious" mask and "electric gadgetry" (MW 81) that Steven describes as "paraphernalia out of *Frankenstein*" (MW 83). Through these allusions, George

is "plug[ged] directly into the conservative network of interwar archaeologists and folklorists" who longed to recover a glamorous national deep past (53). But Kincaid emphasizes that far from re-creating an English Golden Age of chivalrous knights and Merry Men, *Mythago Wood* "is deliberately designed to counter the familiar nationalist story" by highlighting the brutality and violence of the past and the indifference of Nature (55): it's cold, dark, and nasty in there.

What's more, once you go in, you can never come out. Steven's friend Harry returns to the chicken/egg question: "If we do become legends to the various historical peoples scattered throughout the realm … [w]ill we somehow have become a *real* part of history? Will the real world have distorted talks of Steven and myself, and our quest to avenge the Outsider's abduction?" (MW 225). As Kincaid points out, there can never be an answer to Harry's question, because none of the characters ever return to life outside the wood. The implications for questions of agency and ethical responsibility are dissolved, not resolved, in the hallucinatory efflorescence of the narrative: although Kincaid asserts that Steven's decision to wait for his lover's return, "to become a part of the story of the valley 'where the girl came back through the fire'" (67), is an act of free will, it's hard to see how this decision is ontologically or ethically distinct from any actions he has taken since entering the Wood.

Kincaid's exploration of *Mythago Wood*'s radical paradoxes culminates with his salute to Donald Morse's proposition that Ryhope Wood, like the planet of Ursula K. Le Guin's "Vaster than Empires" or our current nightmares about AI, is a self-aware agential entity—a "dream creature [that can] dream other creatures into being" (71).[9] Turning the screw of indeterminacy to its extremest tension, Kincaid even suggests that in returning again and again to the stories of Mythago Wood, Holdstock as author was "as trapped … as George and Christian and Steven." However, this "productive entrapment" (71) is what enables the series' "startling intellectual examination of the very nature of story" (78). If after reading Holdstock via Kinkaid you are not convinced that a clutch of archetypes exists that all humans can recognize, at least it will mean that you will never see that grove of trees in your local park in quite the same way again.

Notes

1. Holdstock, *Mythago Wood* (Orb Edition, 1984), p. 27. Further page references are given in the text of the review.

2. Clute, John. *Look at the Evidence: Essays & Reviews* (Liverpool University Press, 1995), p. 111.

3. Kincaid, *Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood*, p. 13. Further page references are given in the text of the review.

4. Holdstock's science-fiction novel *Where Time Winds Blow* was published in 1981, the same year as the prize-winning novella "Mythago Wood," which forms Part I of the novel *Mythago Wood* (1984).

5. This detail is one of the reasons Farah Mendelson classifies *Mythago Wood* as an Intrusion Fantasy rather than a Portal Fantasy in her taxonomy of fantasy types: yes, the Wood is an entrance into a mystery zone, but the Wood rather than the humans controls what happens: "In the portal fantasy the protagonist retains the upper hand over the otherworld. … In this novel, all the power is with the wood. It reaches out, disrupts; when it does draw the characters in, it is for purposes of its own" (Rhetorics of Fantasy, Wesleyan UP, 2008, p. 154). While *Mythago Wood* may seem to be "resolving into a portal fantasy in the last third" of the novel, even then Steven and Christian are never the heroes: "[t]he protagonists and the reader are nakedly at the mercy of the intrusion, not in notional command of the adventure" (p. 156).

6. As readers hear more about this attractive avatar with superb weapon skills, they may be reminded of Terry Pratchett's parodies of 1980s sword-and-cape fantasy warrior women (Herrena the Henna-Haired Harridan; Conina, daughter of Cohen the Barbarian, etc.). In *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region* (1988), the second in the Mythago Woods series, Holdstock imagines a female character encountering Ryhope Wood.

7. Ekman, Stefan. "Exploring the Habitats of Myths: the Spatiotemporal Structure of Ryhope Wood." In *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock: Critical Essays on the Fiction* (eds D. E. Morse & K. Matolcsy), McFarland, 2011, pp. 46-65.

8. Watkins was a lifelong resident of Herefordshire.

9. Morse, Donald E. "Introduction: Mythago Wood – 'A Source of Visions and Adventure'" in *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock: Critical Essays on the Fiction* (eds D. E. Morse and K. Matolcsy), McFarland, 2011, pp. 3-11.

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