

## Birthday Songs and Mementos – A Family History in Some Lines in Robert Holdstock's *Avilion*

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### Abstract:

Robert Holdstock's poems are far from being standalone masterpieces like, for instance, Tolkien's embedded ballads and songs in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* and they are not opening up new aspects of a story or relating chronicles from the life of one or another character. They briefly present bits of stories or events that nevertheless complete the prose narration and give it a new dimension, making it more easily accessible and sometimes offering explanations or even possible interpretations of things in the Mythago world. Although these poems or songs never present a full story from beginning to end, the addition that they provide are crucial from the point of view of the story. The fact that these poems or songs are all told by Yssobel shows that beyond her instinctual mythago knowledge there is her human mind that is necessary to compile an over-all entity. The poems that I deal with in the essay are "The Crossing Place" and Yssobel's birthday songs. Through these poems I prove their necessity in creating a united and complete story.

**Keywords:** fantasy, song, memento, family, relationships, history

The late English writer Robert Paul Holdstock (1948-2009) is best known for his achievement in the field of fantasy and science-fiction. Undoubtedly, he is among the most imaginative authors after Tolkien. Although he did not write many poems, and there is no collected volume of his writing in verse, still the poems he embedded in his novel *Avilion* are equally imaginative as his prose writing and deserve attention from several points of view. In the present essay I look at two of his poems and analyze them through the lenses of the plot of the novel and the characters' life experiences.

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opening up new aspects of a story or relating chronicles from the life of one or another character. What they do, however, is to present a situation, a place, a feeling, a tiny bit of a story that complete the prose narration rather than stand as separated units or asides in the course of the text.

The two poems that I examine are “The Crossing Place” and Yssobel’s untitled song, which deal with places and events significant in Steven Huxley and Guiwenneth’s half-human half-mythago family life. I have chosen these poems in order to show the ambiguity that lingers in *Avilion*, the doubleness that characterizes this world.

The poems deal with family matters and individual history. “The Crossing Place” presents the most crucial place in Ryhope Wood and in the whole Mythago world as such:

The crossing place is where we meet, and where we part.  
 The crossing place is where we test our heart.  
 The crossing place is where we turn and turn:  
 It is the moment’s pause; the road where we make selection.  
 Yes, this is the Shaping Place!  
 Yearning comes strong here.  
 At the crossing place we find our next direction.

The Crossing Place is in fact the entrance to Lavondyss, something like Arthur’s Avalon or Tolkien’s Valinor. It is a crossing place or rather a threshold crossed by several of the characters, some of which have it encoded in their story like Guiwenneth. Since she is a mythago, the story of her life, past, present and future is already written, so we know from the start that at a certain point she will cross that border so as to later return from Lavondyss. As Guiwenneth and Steven are to become a couple and have children, the Crossing Place will play an important role in their would-be family life. We first see the crossing place at the end of Mythago Wood and at that point Lavondyss seems the place that everybody wants to reach. At the crossing place the Urcumug-father Huxley and his sons meet, but the opportunity to cross the border is not granted for all of them: Christian, the hostile foe, is killed while Steven has no permission to

enter. However, the dying Guiwenneth is escorted to Lavondyss by the Urscumug. While the Urscumug fulfills a dream by the crossing, in Guiwenneth's life it is just a station, a journey she has to take and from which there is returning and Steven would wait for her all along. As predicted in her myth, Guiwenneth returns from Lavondyss at the Crossing Place and thus it becomes known as "*imarn uklyss*, ... 'where the girl came back through the fire'." (*Mythago Wood*, 319) Since this moment is of great importance in the couple's life, the place serving as setting also becomes important. Later their daughter Yssobel will treasure and guard the place as her sanctuary, her place of peace and knowledge, where she can access her mythago past and lament over her human heritage. Both in her and her mother's story this is the place where they "meet and part," where they "make selections," where they "test their heart" and ultimately where they "find new directions" (*Avilion* 341). For the two heroines of the novel this place is even more significant than for the rest of the characters because they are linked to it in more than one way: Guiwenneth is predestined to cross the place several times, so she practically has no choice but do what was *written* for her three times in the course of the events of the cycle; Yssobel, in her turn, also crosses to Lavondyss in search of her mythago identity, performing exactly the opposite movement of her brother Jack's similar quest: the latter journeying outwards for his human identity while the former travelling inwards.

The crossing place can also be regarded as representing Ryhope Wood on a smaller scale. Ryhope Wood, situated in England, Staffordshire, next to the village Shadoxhurst, is an ancient oak wood of several hundred acres, insignificant from the outside. Still there is an inexplicable power lingering around it that fills everybody with an uncanny feeling. People do not cross but rather avoid the woods while its mystery draws the more susceptible in. This pattern is easily traced in the case of the crossing place. Just like Ryhope Wood uses delusion to mislead intruders and defend itself, the crossing place is situated in the heartwoods where it is hard to be found. It also disposes of a ring of fire functioning as a defense mechanism against the unwanted and *unauthorized*. It is not by chance that the ones who get entrance to Lavondyss via the crossing place are never human beings but children of the wood. Since mythagos are created in the wood, they are, as Guiwenneth once puts it: "wood and rock, not flesh and bone." (*Mythago* 175) So, like Ryhope Wood, which grants free access and passage

through the dense forest only for its own creatures, the crossing place only allows the mythagos Guiwenneth, the Urscumug, and Yssobel to step over the threshold. The pattern reminds us of the Russian matryoshka dolls: one can go on and on opening one doll after the other but the truth within will always remain the privilege of those initiated in and by the wood. As in the case of the dolls, the characters know very well that there is much more **of the wood that meets the eye. The wood itself erects obstacle after obstacle to mislead wanderers and prevent any kind of unauthorized intrusion.**

*Avilion* is the story of Steven's family and the crossing place is the mysterious place where things fold and unfold for the protagonists. In Steven's life it is the place of waiting and of saying good-bye: waiting for Guiwenneth and later parting with her and Yssobel. At the same time it is the place of enlightenment where he recognizes the Urscumug as the late George Huxley and thus reconciles with his father. In George Huxley's life, whose quest is thought to be further brought by the Urscumug, it is the place of the fulfillment of a life-long dream. In Christian's life it is the place of his doom, the final encounter with Steven and ultimately his death by the hands of his own father in defense of his other son. In Yssobel's life it is the place of inspiration where she decides to start a journey in search of her mother and her mythagonee. Regardless of whose story we take, it is evident that the decisions and actions linked to the crossing place are typically definite and affect the course of the events. This is how the crossing place becomes the "Shaping Place" (*Avilion* 341). It is also certain that we cannot proclaim this crucial place as an ending point alone but also as a starting point or rather as a crossroad where it is up to the traveler to decide which way to take. And all the *travelers* make their decisions, be it right or wrong.

Out of all the characters in *Avilion*, Yssobel coins the most poems. She recalls her dreams in verse as if it would be easier to relate the experience for example of her stealing King Arthur's armor and opportunity to cross to Avilion (Avalon). But Yssobel does not only compose poems to hide or defend herself. She always composes a poem for her brother's birthday. This became her habit which started long ago and always cheered up the celebration. Jack, however often says he did not really like these poems because they sometimes seemed silly and meaningless: "The song she always sang for Jack was a deliberately created piece of nonsense,

though it echoed the sense of loss that was to come.” (*Avilion* 107) The lingering sense of loss that was to come, the unease that these songs left behind in Jack despite of the nonsense setting however turn out to be precisely what made Jack to treasure the songs. Towards the end of the novel, before he and Yssobel part, he even admits that he did like the poems and that he would miss them if Yssobel leaves.

On Jack’s birthdays Yssobel usually stood up and prepared for the show:

Jack, yes Jack, my brother Jack,  
Hunts in the wild, chases at the run,  
Brings back a kill, but dreams in his heart  
Of reaching the edge,  
Where our family was begun,  
Where a father met a mother,  
Though from forest mind she came,  
And a brother loved a brother,  
Though this wouldn’t stay the same...

If we take this short poem line by line we come up with a family history in just nine lines. The first four lines shows Jack, the hunter doing his duty without a word of complaint, taking part in the job of providing food and supplies for his family and friends inhabiting the villa, their home in the heartwoods. But deep inside Jack longs to see what is beyond it. He is his father’s son, although half-mythago, his human part is stronger and he is eager to experience the world outside his comfort zone. And Yssobel, who on the other hand is her mother’s daughter, is more of a mythago and clearly perceives Jack’s hidden ambitions. In her song she foretells that Jack will journey to the edge though she does not know what would wait for him there.

The line “...the edge,/Where our family began” (*Avilion* 107) is I think not randomly put to the middle of the poem. It is the most significant verse sending everybody back to the beginning of their family. And *family* here does not only stand for the four of them, Steven, Guiwenneth, Jack and Yssobel, but also it includes George Huxley’s first experimental trips into

Ryhope Wood, Jennifer Huxley's suicide, Steven and Christian's childish games on the Sticklebrook river, their first perceptions of mythagos forming at the edge of their vision, and finally the first encounter of Steven and Guiwenneth which turned the already disturbed family chunk upside down. Although Yssobel does not speak about all these in her poem we still know that as a mythago she knew not only what her father and mother told her but also fed on their untold memories thus she was able to put the tiny bits of the puzzle together and logically trace back her family history. The true beginning thus was the father George Huxley's intrusion into the undisturbed world of Ryhope Wood which proved fatal for all the family members. The central position of this line than is crucial because everything that is said before it belongs to the present or suggests future events while the lines that follow talk about the past. It is like the rays of the sun, each ray starting from this line and reaching a bunch of memories or even predicting what is to come. This is how only a few lines can come to mean much more than the words might suggest.

The last four lines of this poem talk about Steven and Guiwenneth's falling in love mentioning that She was mythago and He was human, and about Steven and Christian's brotherly relationship that ended brutally as a result of a fatal misunderstanding. The memory to which this last reference leads us is Steven's. Home alone in Oak Lodge after a long time of absence Steven starts exploring the house and its surroundings and finds the buried body of a beautiful woman, *a version* of Guiwenneth to the influence of which his mind creates his own Guiwenneth as the third in a row after George Huxley and Christian. The result is shocking: having lost his woman, Christian wants Steven's Guiwenneth and he is even capable of killing his own brother: "And a brother loved a brother,/Though this wouldn't stay the same..." (*Avilion* 107) This event makes Steven enter the wood and chase Christian, the savage warlord, who kidnapped Guiwenneth and marks the point where the family – Steven and Guiwenneth's – started.

Dealing with the lines one by one and reorganizing them omitting some, we come up with an additional reading: "Jack, yes Jack, my brother Jack,/ ... /dreams in his heart/Of reaching the edge,/ Where our family was begun,/Where a father met a mother,/And a brother loved a brother, ..." (*Avilion* 107). Taken out of context, these lines return us to the past linking it to the

present and eventually to the future: the past when it all began, the present of telling the poem, and the future journey to the edge of Jack, and to the heartwood of Yssobel. The present tense of the first part of the stanza of Yssobel's song is striking. Given the fact that it summarizes past, present and future in one verb tense shows timelessness conferring a universal character to everything and reminding us that in Ryhope Wood time does not matter: everything that was, is and will be add up to one perfect unity and result in the constant now. This might be regarded as the motto of the mythagos who are ageless and ever-present while mechanically playing the role given to them in a story or legend drawn from the collective memory of a nearby human mind.

In contrast with this timelessness stands another stanza of Yssobel's song for Jack:

Brother Jack, brother Jack, he's lost his shadow, but hears my cry;  
Our brother Jack is back!  
And he will find his place upon the path, and one day he will die,  
But Jack is back,  
The Hunter's gone,  
A new world waits in terror for his clumsy life,  
His special dreams, new strife, new fears,  
But a sister will love him from afar, and there will be loving memory in her tears.

This part of the song is exclusively about Jack and Yssobel, their relationship and the bond that links them even when they are far from each other. This stanza is inserted into the text of the novel *Avilion* right after Jack returns from the edge and before Yssobel sets out on her journey inwards. Knowing his brother Yssobel feels the unease that the trip left in Jack but she suggests that he would find his right place in the villa where he belongs and with the passage of time he would also be able to discover his human self. The first line of the stanza celebrates Jack's return while also mentioning his lost shadow. The shadow in this context can be interpreted ambiguously: on one hand a shadow is usually something negative, lurking behind us causing discomfort, but what we have in Jack's case is something more than that. This shadow has been

growing in Jack from his boyhood feeding on his father's stories about his childhood and his father and the world and people outside Ryhope Wood. For him the mystery was not what was deep inside but what was over the edge, out there. This hunger for his human roots drove him to Oak Lodge and lead him to experience that even a half-mythago cannot dare to depart from the wood. So while the shadow in this case was not something bothering its loss was even more painful and like a wound hurts Jack from the inside. But, as Yssobel suggests in her song, he will find his place and will be happy. In the last but one line Yssobel admits that Jack is not a usual mythago, he has "special dreams, new strife, new fears" (*Avilion* 317), he is different even from his sister, although both of them are unique in the history of Ryhope Wood having a mythago mother and a human father. The last line suggests that it is time for the siblings to part, that now it is Yssobel's turn to explore her inner drives and discover her mythago self. In spite of the sad atmosphere of the lines the fact that this time we have all three verb tenses suggests some kind of continuity. This continuity brings mythagos and humans closer. The here and now of the mythago is partially gone and for the first time in the course of the Mythago cycle the human interference has a positive echo: there is a future for them, there is a future for the family together. The fact that this strange family now shares a past and a present adds a lot to both mythagos and humans: from this point on mythagos are not just robotically executing their tiny roles in a huge play but they seem to come to think and decide for themselves although the call of the wood is still irresistible. Steven, the only fully human character at this point assists to this coming of age of his children and reconciles with his situation.

There are some further poems in the Mythago novels the analysis of which was not the purpose of this work. I chose the ones to include here on the basis of their global meanings and their validity from the point of view of the novels' action. The poems analyzed manage to summarize in verse the very essence of the Mythago world. "The Crossing Place" and Yssobel's other songs present much more peaceful and often sad facts of the Huxley family biography. Besides being just short songs, and sharing only limited details, these poems manage to describe a much bigger and more complete picture, that of the life, deeds and deaths of the Huxleys. Each and every line of these poems serve as guidelines towards more complicated facts, memories and events, sometimes offering possible interpretations, sometimes just

weaving the storyline on. The fact that these poems or songs are all told by Yssobel shows that beyond her instinctual mythago knowledge there is her human mind that is necessary to compile the over-all story, to put together the pieces of the puzzle and see through Mythago Wood. And this is where mythago and human existence are reconciled by completing each other's story.

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