

Excerpts from

*Variations on
The Fantasy Tradition*

Stephen R. Donaldson's
Chronicles of
Thomas Covenant

W. A. Senior

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STEPHEN R. DONALDSON AND
THE CHRONICLES OF THOMAS COVENANT

Among the most prolific and successful high-fantasy writers of the last fifteen years is Stephen R. Donaldson, whose two Chronicles of Thomas Covenant established him as a major figure, winning both critical acclaim from many reviewers and awards. In 1979, for the First Chronicles, he received the British Fantasy Award for the Best Novel and the John W. Campbell Award for the Best New Writer. In 1981 *The Wounded Land*, the first novel of the Second Chronicles, won him the Balrog Award, and in 1983 its sequel, *The One Tree*, received both the Balrog and Saturn awards. A third Balrog went to his short story collection, *Daughter of Regals and Other Tales* (1985). And the Mordant's Need novels, *The Mirror of Her Dreams* (1988) and *A Man Rides Through* (1989), were both

voted the Science Fiction Book Club Award for the Best Book of the Year; the former also garnered the French Julia Verlanger Award in 1990. All have sold very well and made Donaldson a significant figure in the field,¹² but his career almost never got off the ground. Although the *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* has been enthusiastically received, its history is a curious, and now well-known, one. Donaldson sent the manuscript to more than forty publishers before Lester Del Rey finally accepted it on the second submission, insisting, however, on major revisions that led to protracted battles between writer and editor. Yet when the final results emerged, the *First Chronicles* was a rapid success and placed Donaldson on the best-sellers list. Despite the many accolades, little critical work has been done on these books, although the *Covenant* books come under scrutiny in many studies of fantasy. In part, I believe, this neglect is the result of the complexity and novelty of Donaldson's opus and the lack of a standard approach for it; and in equal part it is a product of its unremittingly dark vision, its occasional unevenness, and its seemingly unlikeable hero.

The object of this study is to locate the first trilogy in the canon of modern epic fantasy and to explain what makes the vision Stephen Donaldson has created so powerful and appealing. Donaldson's importance to the field of fantasy lies primarily in the unique variations of its standard themes, characters, and actions that he produces, but the depth and power of the vision in the *Chronicles* also merit notice and praise. Initially, we can outline in brief four explanations for Donaldson's success as a fantasy writer: the intricacy and profundity of the *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, its adult level, the modern social and spiritual questions it addresses, and the predominantly American vision it contains.

Among modern epic fantasies the *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* "is quite simply among the best both in conception and aesthetic richness" (Timmerman 104). A vast and complex work that twists and turns around unending paradoxes and continuing complications, its vision is a strikingly daring and different one, and its tension neverending. Its disparate influences include Tolkien, Scott, Wagner's Ring cycle, Donaldson's childhood in India, his father's medical practice as an orthopedic surgeon for lepers, his own status as conscientious objector during the Vietnam

War, and his trials as a writer searching for success. In its fifteen hundred pages are a Dickensian breadth of characters, a powerful evocation of the magical world through vibrant descriptions of setting, a gripping narration of events, a constantly shifting and changing sense of urgency and danger that underlies the constant tension and that produces the strong pacing, and the complicated nature of the hero and his relationships within the secondary world. Because the reader is transported to the Land with the confused and ignorant Covenant, he must make rapid decisions and judgments along with him much of the way. Little is overt; much is left to the imagination or to anticipation as both hero and reader try to come to grips with Covenant's bewildering experiences. Part of the confusion or complexity stems from Covenant's lack of clear choices. At almost no time is he offered a choice that he unequivocally desires and can accept; there is no wish fulfillment here. At best Covenant elects what he believes to be the least damning path, for there is no clear best route for him. Each of his three journeys in the Land is a reluctant one that tears him from another possibility, so that doubt pervades him.

The *Chronicles* is also a troubling work with little of the consolation and security that normally attend fantasy. Although comedy or humor is not a main staple of epic fantasy, it is almost entirely lacking in the *Chronicles*. Wit, often of a cynical or cutting nature, enters, but at no time does pure laughter dominate. Even the few moments of relaxation or respite are short lived and contrast that much more violently with the harsh, threatening world outside these havens. Each refuge from terror, from attack, from doubt in turn falls: success, marriage, home, a complacent view of happiness and reality in the "real world"; Lena's innocence, the spirit of Soaring Woodhelves, Trothgard, the Plains of Ra, even the slumberous ground itself. The constant inversion of the normal expectations one has of high fantasy leaves little relief for readers, whether admirers or detractors.

For the *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* is in many ways a peculiar work that repels even as it attracts. Its hero is a leper who has been cut off from his family and community because of his disease and a disfiguring amputation of several fingers on his left hand. Horribly embittered by his ostracism, Thomas Covenant moves

through his world like a threatening spirit, frightening all who see him. Even the beginning has none of the complacency with which fantasies normally start. On a raging visit to the small town on whose outskirts he lives, Covenant falls unconscious before a police car and awakes to find himself in another world, one in which disease is unknown and where health itself is the nature of all things. He meets a gentle village girl named Lena and follows her to her parents' home in the Stonedown, where various people greet him as the reincarnation of one of the Land's saviors. Covenant both rejects their claims and flees from their judgment but rapes Lena as a result of the shocking revitalization of his leprosy-numbered body by the Land. Thus begin his three journeys to the Land - certainly a violent revision of the conventional start of fantasy.

In addition, the entire series, from the first page, is constructed of an elaborate set of paradoxes. G. K. Chesterton tells us that, "If you really read fairy tales, you will observe that one idea runs from one end of them to the other - the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea, which is the core of ethics, is the core of the nursery tales. The whole happiness of fairyland hangs upon a thread, upon one thread" (28) and that "This great idea, then, is the backbone of all folklore - the idea that happiness hangs on one thin veto; all positive joy depends on one negative" (29).¹³ The one negative in this case is Covenant's illness, which is the touchstone of the paradoxes, which are too numerous to detail here and continue unabated throughout the action in a degree beyond that of other fantasies.

They cluster most densely about Covenant. As the bewildered and desperate protagonist tries to come to terms with his leprosy, his searches "confronted him with a vicious and irreparable paradox. Without the support or encouragement of other people, he did not believe he could endure the burden of his struggle against horror and death; yet that horror and death explained, made comprehensible, almost vindicated the rejection which denied him support or encouragement" (I:22). This contradictory pattern continues in the Land where he cannot accept the very things he needs, its health and healing, because they are prohibited by the demands of what they would cure. Even when Lena asks him how she has offended, his shamed response is "By being nice to me" (49). His ring, the white

magic, holds the key; it is an element missing in this universe, itself a paradox of existence, but it is also the key to Covenant:

And he who wields white wild magic gold
 is a paradox -
 for he is everything and nothing,
 hero and fool,
 potent, helpless -
 and with one word of truth or treachery,
 he will save or damn the Earth
 because he is mad and sane,
 cold and passionate,
 lost and found. (I:70)

Certainly, this is no description of the standard hero of romance or fantasy, and the contradictions within Covenant give the *Chronicles* one of its most intricate and demanding facets, for the action of the trilogy proves the song correct and necessitates growing complexity. "Thomas Covenant is paradoxically the weakest, most culpable of men, subject to the severest limitations of his real world as he is thrust in the role of the hero in the secondary world" (Slethaug 22).

Even small things, such as the name "Saltheart," form part of this pattern, and of course it informs the macrocosmic dimension of the fiction as well. The Giantish chant of the sea and rock they love so might well describe the contradictions that suffuse the *Chronicles*:

Stone and Sea are deep in life,
 two unalterable symbols of the world:
 permanence at rest, and permanence in motion;
 participants in the Power that remains. (I: 179)

This is a world where good begets evil and evil begets good, where nothing is necessarily what it seems to be or ought to be. Foul must make Covenant destroy his prison for him: "that this prison also represents to Covenant the humanity he must constantly refuse is the underlying paradox, the underlying dilemma that causes him

such extraordinary anguish, making him, in the end, despite his repellent personality, a figure with whom the reader can sympathize deeply" (Clute 270). Within his mass of internal contradictions, Covenant progresses in spirit, but the demands made on him exact a terrible toll because "Behind him was the impossibility of believing the Land true. And before him was the impossibility of believing it false" (I:369). In essence, Covenant constantly faces diametric opposites of belief, decision, and action, which preclude one another yet coexist.

While the exterior structure of the trilogy displays many of the traditional forms of fantasy, Donaldson has found a radically different way to fill that structure. On the surface, he uses many of the standard building blocks of fantasy: the apocalyptic threat to the world; the translation to the magical realm; the night-sea journey of the protagonist; the primitive, bucolic setting; the teeming hordes of inhuman warriors in evil's army; the hero's valiant and loyal companion; a final titanic battle; and so on. Yet, many of these elements have different purposes, functions, and ends in the *Chronicles*. For example, Foamfollower, Covenant's vital comrade, dies, whereas Lord Foul, his demonic nemesis, is merely diminished, and through laughter at that. The action of the three novels occurs over several generations, itself unusual in epic fantasy. Covenant as hero constitutes the most striking alteration: Covenant is a leper, a man who wishes to escape the secondary world for the primary, despite what the former offers him. Lord Foul is not an abstract, generalized allegory of hate and evil but a limited one reflecting Covenant's own spiritual malaise. To emphasize this opposition, the forces of good in the *Chronicles* are remarkably weak and inefficient in comparison with the standard prevalent in other high fantasies. The forces arrayed against Foul stand no chance against his armies and are incapable of winning even a single battle.

Thus, tone and atmosphere in the *Chronicles* are unsettling in a way few fantasies are. While one of the trademarks of epic fantasy is the violent clash between good and evil, few authors revel in the bloodlust and physical descriptions of destruction and battle as Donaldson does. In fact, John Clute claims that the *Chronicles* is more truly horror than high fantasy (267,272). Clute may overstate the case here, but these books are gritty, wrenching reading at times:

there are vivid descriptions of horribly deformed human monsters, of Covenant walking on a compound fracture of the leg, of blood-splattered and maniacal warriors, of bodies supernaturally fried from within so that smoke rises from the eyes and mouth of the dying victim, of drooling, maddened creatures. Soldiers, tongues blackened and eyes staring, drop dead on forced marches in *The Ill-earth War*. The Giant, Foamfollower, holds his hands in a hot fire and accepts excruciating agony to purge his emotions in the ritual *caamora*. The warped child, Pietten, drinks blood wherever he can find it, licking it off his hands before his mother. The three Ravers, the embodied demons of the Chronicles, practice a gleeful cannibalism. Rarely in modern high fantasy does one meet such graphic and sustained depictions of suffering and misery; most have one or two brutal moments and tend to shy away from such intensity.¹⁴

One explanation for this is that Donaldson had a thoroughly adult audience in mind when he wrote the Chronicles, whereas some high fantasy straddles the amorphous literary fence between adult and adolescent levels (leading to the tendency I have cited of librarians to lump it all together). Michael Moorcock, who for the most part has little good to say about the Chronicles in *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, claims that the heroics of epic fantasy are generally children, or are at least childlike creatures such as hobbits, but concedes that Donaldson's characters are adults trying to deal with adult concerns (82, 91). The beginning pages of *Lord Foul's Bane* show us a Thomas Covenant vainly trying to come to terms with a terrible disability and an anguishing divorce. The flashbacks to the leprosarium reveal the rigid demands his leprosy places on him, and the switches into the narrative present highlight his concern about how he is to live in a place whose inhabitants, once his friends and neighbors, abhor and shun him. Donaldson concentrates on such nonfantastic concerns as grocery shopping, paying electrical and phone bills, dealing with lawyers and law officers, maintaining property, and so on. This exposition locates the reader in a recognizable framework, although the circumstances the hero faces differ greatly from those of the average person. The trilogy thus moves from the seemingly unreal world of the leper to another location of the unreal but continues to address serious questions; from the pragmatic temporal, inquiry moves to the spiritual and ethical.

A further way the adult audience is reflected is in Donaldson's style, which is alternately affective and impressive and then difficult and uneven. Stephen Donaldson himself admits that he often overwrites, and his prose is often dense, his vocabulary obscure and *recherché*. The reader, dictionary in lap, regularly encounters little-known and rarely used terms, such as "anodyne," "roborant," "attar," "carious," "bedizened," "verdigris," and "ire" (used in an unusual way, as in "the grotesque ire of moss and branch and trunk" [I:348]). One overly belabored word that appears in a variety of grammatical forms is "clench": as an adjective, "with a clenched look in his eyes" (I:156); as a verb in its normal usage, "he clenched his fist over his ring" (I:182); as a verb but in a peculiar assignation, "with his teeth clenched on the fine beery flavor of the springwine" (I:219); as a noun, "the old Forest's angry clench of consciousness" (II:460) and, the colossus, "gnarled at its top into a clench of speechless defiance" (III: 358). The pathetic fallacy of the final two adds to the strain placed on the word itself. Convolutioned sentence structure and images or metaphors that overreach at times add to the problem, but at no time does the tone or level of diction bend down from its level of complexity or occasional overexertion.

Part of the problem is that fantasy authors must try to define in words what does not exist, and so the language of fantasy is always pushing against the barrier of meaning and significance - at times with good effect, at times not. Rosemary Jackson explains that the fantastic rests on the implication of meaning, on semiologies that can be taken in various ways so that a gap between the sign and meaning emerges; there are no things but nameless things and no names but thingless names (i.e., Cthulhu exists nowhere except in Lovecraft's works) (37-40). Todorov specifies that the fantastic emerges on its basic level from verbal strategies, from the sentences that compose a text (20). Estranging language and images, thereby, become the foundation of fantasy writing. Salted with difficult vocabulary and arcane usages, passages in the *Chronicles* are also frequently peppered with contorted, overwrought images as Donaldson is all too apt to work his metaphors or vocabulary too hard in attempting to elevate intensity to a rarefied level. For instance, to demonstrate Covenant's struggle to preserve his own perspective at the end of *Lord Foul's Bane*, "All he could do was trail behind Birinair's flame and tell over his refusals like some despairing acolyte,

desperate for faith, trying to invoke his own autonomy" (I:423). At one point, we get a starving Covenant who smells aminabhavam, the magic grass of the Ranyhyn, that "made him so hungry that he felt about to vomit chunks of emptiness" (I:365). Earlier, during his trek to Revelstone with Atiaran, Covenant "chewed the gristle of his thoughts for leagues" (I:118). In all such cases, the problem with the image or association is that it tries too hard to bring together the foreign and the familiar, so we are left contemplating the gap still between them. Ambitious failures, but failures nonetheless. Yet he is often successful, and Donaldson defends his epic style as follows:

It is an operatic style in the Chronicles of Thomas Covenant - deliberately so - and I will admit that it is occasionally misjudged because I am human and I screw up sometimes I try to make stylistic decisions in the same way I try to make all other storytelling decisions: What is right for this particular story? Then I try to go out and learn how to do whatever this particular story needs. I believed that the Covenant books required an operatic prose in order to generate the colors and feelings that I wanted, and that it was better to err on the side of excess than it was to make the mistake of not providing that particular rhetorical richness. I make those kinds of decisions for every story I write. Operatic prose would have been completely inappropriate for Mordant's Need. Mordant's Need is a different emotional universe. For one thing it's not epic. It's not archetypal. ... If I had told the Mordant's Need story in Covenant's style, people would have a real reason to complain about my writing because it would have been heavy handed and turgid and inappropriate. It doesn't fit the story. (Interview, 1991)

While Donaldson is generally successful and effective at creating and maintaining the level of stress he aims for, he is often at his best in two totally different arenas: his lyric poetry and descriptions of landscape and the narration of action and battle. Consonant with the complexity and paradox of the Chronicles is Donaldson's evocation of a marvelously beautiful place, an idealized version of our own world also possessed of brutality and the capacity for its destruction. Lena's song of beauty (I:57); Atiaran's prelude to the tale

of Berek (I:78-79); the oft-chanted refrain of unfettering (I:171); Elena's song of the Power that Preserves (II:123); and the descriptions of Andelain, Glimmermere, Revelstone, the great Plains of Ra, the approach to Kiril Threndor, Foul's Creche, or the swamp Life-swallower - in these passages is a transforming control and power of language. In battle, Donaldson excels, whether it be the narration of the Giant/Ravers raising of the dead, the flight of Hile Troy's army, Lord Hyrim's attack on the Raver summoning a tidal wave, or simply the ballet of the Bloodguard in action. There is nothing in such passages of the meter ballad-monger or mincing poetry of which Moorcock (or Hotspur) complains. Nor does Donaldson ever relent in the often-grim depiction of Covenant's experiences or the discomfort of his emotional volatility. Suiting the word to the deed in this case demands that language be dark and extreme and that syntax itself be difficult at times, for the *Chronicles* contains emotions, actions, philosophies, and decisions that are unyieldingly complex and often harsh. There is little of the sylvan enchantment of Queen Mab in the Land, for Donaldson's vision has presented in the enchanted world an often-dismal reflection of the poverties in our own.

In the first half of this chapter, I defined several of epic fantasy's attractions for an audience. One is its link to reality and its reflection of contemporary issues. From an internal perspective, Thomas Covenant's story begins in our/his world in a location we can all envision easily; it also ends in that place. His journeys to the Land do not constitute simply an escape, a flight from reality, for he refuses to accept the Land's reality in view of the demands of his leprosy and even chooses to return to his former life. To surrender to the Land's attractions would doom him because it would undo all the strict discipline instilled by the doctors at the leprosarium. Covenant does not run away to avoid his disease; he is transported to a world where all his needs can be met but which paradoxically he must refuse because of the real laws of his world. There is no escape involved except suicide. We must keep in mind always that at the end he still has Hansen's disease and that people still shun and abhor him. How, then, has he escaped?

Donaldson is writing about any man caught in the trap of life. There is a naturalistic flavor about much of the *Chronicles*, a hint that there are insensate, random social and natural forces at work in

the everyday world that simply crush or erase those who do not fit or do not have adequate social, economic, or psychological protection. Covenant represents anyone who has been cast out and left to fend for himself alone or anyone who does not fit into the pre-conceived molds and forms that society deems appropriate. No matter where he goes, in his world or in the Land, he is marked as apart, as someone he does not see himself as. The stigma of leprosy is the mark of Cain. Thus his is an old story in many ways but updated to emphasize the alienation of modern times, a common theme of its literature.

So into his life comes unlooked-for wonder and the evidence that there are forces beyond the scope of man, powers that take a hand in the affairs of men when they can. The Creator, the old man Covenant meets on the street, is a reassurance that some sort of order exists on a numinous plane. Donaldson is careful not to tie events in the "real" world to mythic battles of gods, but he does intimate that divine forces, as powerful as the seemingly aleatory turns of fate, reach into the world at times in concern or in malice. Somewhere a power for good and order exists, although it cannot directly assert itself. But what Covenant learns, as its agent and proxy, is that even in the seemingly mindless and random misfortune of his leprosy are a function and power that belie his quiet life of desperation. He is still responsible for his actions, and no superhuman hand directs his will or behavior. As the Creator tells the disembodied Covenant at the end of *The Power that Preserves*, "but you were - free of my suasion, my power, my wish to make you my tool. Have I not said the risk was great? Choiceless, you were given the power of choice. I elected you for the Land but did not compel you to serve my purpose in the Land" (472). This explanation might well account for the path of many lives, including Covenant's. Just as the Creator gives him no choice in being chosen for the Land, Covenant had no choice or hand in contracting leprosy or in its aftereffects. However, in both the Land and in his world, Covenant retains absolute autonomy of choice and behavior. Like any other human, he faces forces larger than he is and must decide how to deal with them; however, fantasy allows him insight into a reason for these powers, some explanation that makes sense of what happens to him, an answer to anyone who has ever said "Why me?"

The move to the magical world does not evade such questions. It offers answers to them. Fantasy addresses a variety of further concerns in our world, from the desire to return to the unpolluted world of the past to the need for understanding. Donaldson's Land, like most imagined worlds, is an organic one in which all is alive and participates in unfolding events. Its goal is to return to its primeval, pristine condition. But beyond that the Land is also a place that reflects the innately human desire for community and peace. The peoples of the Land live primarily in small, tightly knit communities bound by common goals, history, and customs and are at peace with themselves and their world until, as Tolkien puts it, the dragon returns. This small-town, country life-style addresses symbolically many of the concerns of the modern reader: the confusion inherent in the postmodern world; the breakdown of neighborhoods, education, and value systems; the erosion of communities themselves; the onset of multiculturalism, political correctness, and so on.

Tied to these is Donaldson's concern with particularly American issues. In great part, his unique appeal and success stem from his Americanness, as opposed to Tolkien's or Lewis's Britishness. We can see Thomas Covenant both as victim of his American heritage and as an upholder of its positive traits. His resistance to the Land stems from a puritanical outlook that refuses to accept pure pleasure for itself and distrusts anything that is fun, free, or fattening. Donaldson insinuates a theological explanation for Covenant's leprosy: the punishment by an angry, jealous god of the self-satisfied, worldly rich. Covenant's head rejects this concept, but his heart remains in doubt. So he instinctively suspects the Land because it is so beautiful and healthy. When Lena proposes treating his wounds with hurtloam, a magical mud, Covenant grows angry and yet more suspicious. He is even more daunted by Glimmermere at first and does not want to enter a body of water that seems opaque. He goes so far in *Lord Foul's Bane* as to fast in order to purge himself of all the desires and emotions that the Land inspires in him. Pain and self-denial, of any sort, become the mark of reality for him.

Covenant is steeped in the philosophy that is predominantly Western and especially American, that reality is concrete, tangible, and marketable, so he explains his experiences, away as a dream. In

a sense, Covenant is the ultimate example of American materialism and bourgeois outlook. His eventual success as an author is purchased by living in relative poverty for several years until he becomes rich as a result of placing a novel on the best-sellers list. Thus, suffering and deprivation lead to socially accepted rewards: money, fame, and a family. Afflicted by leprosy, he loses the latter and his entire world becomes dominated by things. The doctors at the leprosarium even reassure him that the hand of God has nothing to do with his case, that all knowledge is reducible to chemistry and biology. He is that typically American figure, "a terrible thing," as Le Guin terms it, "a hardworking, upright, responsible citizen, a full-grown, educated person, who is afraid of dragons, and afraid of hobbits, and scared to death of fairies" (*Language* 43). Because the world of the Land differs from his and because it does not conform to the maxims he lives by, he denies its validity until he sloughs off his shortcomings and widens his perspective. When he returns home, he lives by examining things constantly, his body during his VSE, his furniture, his clothing. He can't even write because any spiritual or emotional possibilities have been denied him. As a result, those around him begin to view him as an outsider and as a thing.

Ironically, Covenant mirrors this closed vision when he enters the Land. Like the dreaded ugly American abroad, he is rude, arrogant, defiant, demanding, thankless, and xenophobic at times. One way of looking at this is to see him as an exaggeration of the typical American hero: the independent, self-sufficient, pragmatic, mysterious gunslinger, detective, spy, or even businessman who is a peculiar mix of cruelty and compassion, aloofness and commitment. Once his job is finished, he leaves.

A crucial American theme that reflects the American mindscape after Vietnam is the distrust of power expressed in the *Chronicles*. Only evil people want power, and only blind people desire to employ it. Covenant's ring, the white gold, holds an apocalyptic power, and he is asked to use that power in order to play policeman, in a sense, in this world. Granted the potential of absolute might, what should he do? Donaldson turns the question in view of the American experience in Southeast Asia to demonstrate not only the distrust of power but the fear of the motives that could unleash that power.

Underlying all is the dual perspective that the use of power rebounds on the user and that power itself may ultimately be anile, another of Donaldson's enracinated paradoxes. On the simplest level, Covenant can't use his ring because he doesn't know how to summon its potency. Possessed of ultimate might, he doesn't actually know how to employ or deploy it. Second is the fact that this power occasionally erupts on its own, out of his control, particularly in the *Second Chronicles*. It threatens, directly and indirectly, both friend and foe alike: the Hirebrand Baradakas is knocked unconscious by it; Atiaran immolates herself to recall it to the Land; Foamfollower dies in Foul's Creche, the victim of what might be termed friendly fire. For in the *Chronicles*, battle is not glorious, not admirable. It is ugly and rife with error and stupidity, its cost both physically and spiritually appalling. Donaldson's vicious descriptions of its results and wrenching narration of its confused progress denude it of any flag-waving and innocent euphoria. In the slaughter/suicide of the Giants, the corruption of the Bloodguard, the Ritual of Desecration are the traces and images of the My Lais and Indo-China atrocities.

In *Hile Troy*, the other figure from Covenant's world, Donaldson has fleshed out a morbidly comic picture of American military thinking. A theorist in a defense think tank, Troy is blind – not only blind but eyeless - from birth. His strategies have no roots in reality but deal dispassionately with abstract and theoretical configurations, with number crunching and spatial logistics. Initially, Troy works for an ideal inspired by the Land, and his plans have a logical positivism about them that does not allow room for human error or failure. When the war with Foul begins, Troy learns step by step the horrible consequences that his plans, his wielding of power, can have for others, and the result is a horrifying vision when his soldiers, men and women, die terribly because of his miscalculations, which follow one on top of the next. At the end, it takes a literal miracle, the intervention of a power beyond the human, to save even a remnant of the original force. Covenant tries to warn him, but Troy will not listen:

"Listen," Covenant demanded. "I'm trying to warn you. If you could hear it. It's going to happen to you, too. One of these

days, you're going to run out of people who'll march their hearts out to make your ideas work. And then you'll see that you put them through all that for nothing. Three-hundred-league marches - blocked valleys - your idea. Paid for and wasted. All your fine tactics won't be worth a rusty damn."

"Ah, Troy," he sighed wearily. "All this responsibility is going to make another Kevin Landwaster out of you." (II: 188)

Certainly, in this speech are reflections of American disillusionment and doubt engendered by Vietnam: lives wasted, the failure of abstract theory and bad intelligence, disasters beyond the scope of any contingency, destruction of morale and belief.

Covenant is a particularly doubting Thomas when it comes to himself. If he avails himself of this might and finds a way to summon it, what will be its effect on him? Lepers live by the code that they have no power and cannot take risks. If he begins to see himself as a fighter and looks to force as a solution to his problems, how long would he survive in his own world where a simple abrasion could kill him?

Even in the Land, the fear of power and the lessons of its use have a history. Earlier wars fought against Lord Foul did not solve the problem. In fact, Keven Landwaster's Ritual of Destruction approximates nuclear holocaust but, despite its immense power, does not destroy his enemy or provide an end to strife. Huge armies have clashed on the eastern plains, but the cycle continues, no matter how large the force or how violent the combat. Out of these repeated failures has come part of the Oath of Peace, which has the ring of the peace chants of the 1960s:

Do not hurt where holding is enough;
do not wound where hurting is enough;
do not maim where wounding is enough;
do not kill where maiming is enough;
the greatest warrior is he who does not need to kill. (II:154)

The people of the Land recognize the need for defense and for fighting, but they also understand that bloodlust corrupts and becomes an end to itself. This tendency, rooted in everyman's heart of hearts,

leads to the downfall of the Giants. A blood-soaked, grotesque Foamfollower, following the battle of Soaring Woodhelven (I:321ff), excoriates himself for his own joy in destruction and speaks for all his kin: "Giants, I am not alone. I feel you in me, your will in mine.... We are diminished. Lost Home and weak seed have made us less than we were. Do we remain faithful, even now?" (334). The usual lament of heroic fantasy is a loss of power in battle from a past golden-warrior age, but Foamfollower agonizes over the reverse, bewailing the atavism that possesses him in battle.

And there is no escape from the assault of evil with its Hydra heads. Whether Covenant is in his "real" world or in the Land, he faces a different kind of reality in the pressures brought to bear on him. "And it is this factor which gives it an especially American cast, in the manner of Hawthorne, Melville, Ellison, and Barth where innocence cripples, leading to despair over the knowledge of pain, suffering, and evil" (Slethaug 22). Covenant as fantasy hero and American figure is a complicated issue and forms the subject of the next chapter, but Slethaug's observation further defines the quintessential difference in Donaldson's *Chronicles*. Its aim is not escape or evasion but confrontation, another highly American trait. It might be said that what we dislike about Covenant we dislike about ourselves and our culture, and what we like about him we encourage in ourselves. In either case, there is no escape.