

Excerpts from

*Variations on
The Fantasy Tradition*

Stephen R. Donaldson's
Chronicles of
Thomas Covenant

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THOMAS COVENANT: A HERO OF A DIFFERENT COLOR

In view of this outline of the protagonist in the majority of high fantasies, a more unlikely hero than Thomas Covenant is hard to envision. First, of course, there is his leprosy, a disease most people automatically fear and abhor. From medieval times to the present, the leper has been a figure of shame and guilt, someone who has been visited with God's wrath for some unspeakable blot on the soul. Our revulsion at leprosy springs not simply from its unpleasant physical symptoms but from the moral and spiritual associations that have accompanied it for ages. Lepers, for much of history, were treated as kin to the damned, forced to announce their presence by shouting "Unclean," or locked away from the rest of the world and shunned by decent, Godfearing folk; in fact, medieval monks sang the requiem mass for lepers, signifying their death of body and soul. Robert Henryson, in his fifteenth-century poem "The Testament of Cresseid," was so outraged by Cryseyde's betrayal of the noble Troilus that he shows her at the end not betrayed in her turn or emotionally devastated by her perfidy and Troilus's death but afflicted with leprosy by the gods and cast

among the lepers to die, the ultimate degradation possible in his mind.² Although five centuries later we know that leprosy is caused by a bacillus and can be treated, allowing the afflicted to live a relatively normal life, the weight of the past combined with lurid depictions of the leper in movies (for instance, *Ben-Hur* or *Papillon*) still induces fear and loathing.

The second departure from the norm is Covenant's Unbelief, which will be treated in greater detail in terms of its effect on the narrative. Covenant goes through much of the action of the novels, and through all of *Lord Foul's Bane*, rejecting the reality of the Land and his experiences there. His assumption of the epithet "The Unbeliever" inverts the usual heroic description implicit in such titles by denying him any special power or status, and it stands in direct contrast to the names others give him that do create a heroic identity: Ur-Lord, Ringthane, Giantfriend. (Covenant, of course, winces at their use.) The typical character transported from one world to another comes to terms with the magical world, finds it a vast improvement over his own, and is moved by its need. He then commits himself to it and works for its ultimate good, no matter what the eventual cost to himself. Poul Anderson's Holgar Carlsen, Andre Norton's Simon Tregarth, the children in Lewis's Narnia series, or even Donaldson's own Terisa Morgan from the Mordant novels typify the behavior of the protagonist in their acceptance of the magic world as doubt becomes converted to partisan accord. It is difficult to picture any one of them - or any character in a fantasy - throwing up her hands in twentieth-century skepticism and baldly announcing that she doesn't believe anything that is happening to her. Yet Covenant clings steadfastly to Unbelief for as long as possible in this first trilogy and makes it the basis of his approach to the Land.

Thus, a third element becomes involved, that of his own culpability, for his Unbelief dictates both actions and inaction that have consequences he comes to regret. Fantasy heroes and heroines commit errors, but normally those resulting from misjudgment, ignorance, or zeal; Covenant tries to foist off his responsibility on others when he is not denying it outright and behaves in ways that later torment him. Even when Covenant willingly suspends his Unbelief toward the end of *The Illearth War*, he is not working

simply out of concern for the Land; mostly he is trying to atone for his own sins, both mortal and venial: his rape of Lena and all its consequences for himself and others, his constant bargains to escape responsibility, his refusal to help those in need, his curt or even brutal treatment of others, his denial of their justifications, and so on. At the last in *The Power that Preserves*, as he witnesses the celebration on the shores of Glimmermere of his defeat of Foul, he "found that he could not argue away his guilt" (476). "This function of guilt is hardly the quintessence of the normal heroic fantasy, whether the guilt derives from a problem in the primary or secondary world. The hero is usually the one who desires to assist the cause of the good and is not generally driven to it" (Slethaug 26). Yet Covenant, both directly and indirectly, is responsible for many of the evils in the Land. He finally fulfills Atiaran's philosophy that the task of the living is to make meaningful the sacrifices of the dead, but he does it to assuage his own guilt in making necessary those very sacrifices.³

Such problems confuse the task of establishing Covenant's place within the ranks of fantasy heroes, a task akin to pounding a decagonal peg into a proposed hole. The complexity discussed in the first chapter arises again because Covenant falls into no neat category of hero and does not conform to any stereotype of fantasy hero, particularly not with the body of warriors like Conan, Elric, Fafhrd, or even Aragorn. Moorcock identifies the "decent chap" established by Sir Walter Scott so that gentlemen heroes become the norm of romance and thus the preeminent heroes of modern fantasy (76), but Covenant stands outside that group entirely. He has affinities to the Byronic hero and kinship with the antihero, as Christine Barkley tentatively argues, but in neither case do those labels do him justice. Timmerman and other voices argue for the common man as the central figure of fantasy, but even there Covenant edges into the shadows outside the definition. For he is not naive; he is cynical and hardbitten, has lost his sense of wonder, and begins in a state beyond the experience of most readers. So what are we to make of him?

In many ways, Covenant is a failure as hero, in the context of the typical hero of any literature. First, the position he takes is antithetical to the usual action of the fantasy hero in that he tries

to escape involvement. Second, he realizes that he is Foul's primary tool in this war, a peculiar state for a hero. Third, he cannot stave off disasters or even save those he wishes to. Tuvor dies in his arms; Elena falls to her demise as he stands by impotently; Lena takes a knife meant for him and dies at his feet. These incidents remind us that Stephen Donaldson has revised the landscape, tone, and outcome of conventional fantasy. Rarely do readers of high fantasy witness the death and destruction of so many of the good, and Donaldson does not shy away from the grim necessities of his tale. The Wraiths in *Andelain* are attacked and dispersed; the armies of the Lords are ravaged; the Giants commit a mass genocide/suicide; *Revelwood* is burned along with its defenders; the Bloodguard are tainted and lost; *Revelstone* itself suffers calamitous destruction. The Lords *Callindrill*, *Shetra*, and *Hyrim* all die terribly, and *Mhoram's* parents sacrifice themselves before his eyes; *Hile Troy* is also sacrificed in a different way; three of the *Unfettered* die directly as a result of aiding *Covenant* or carrying out his wishes. All of this occurs while *Covenant* stands by impassively or rages impotently. He can't do anything to help; even in the *Second Chronicles* he requires a combination of rage and poison within him to raise the wild magic, but his control of it is too often precarious. Although all ends correctly in that the *First Chronicles's* denouement conforms to the traditional fairy-tale ending in the defeat of evil, it does not end well for the inhabitants of the Land, whose world is ravaged and whose population is decimated, nor necessarily for *Covenant*, who does not live happily ever after either.

Nowhere else in modern fantasy does the hero exert less influence on the survival of others, all in accordance with the author's vision and intent, as he explains:

In the milieu in which I was writing *Covenant*, I had just come through college and graduate school, very much in love with the literature and with things intellectual, but the people who surrounded me all sneered at fantasy, and ultimately they would say that this wasn't serious enough. So one reason that *Covenant* is the way he is is that I don't want anybody to be able to come back and say that I looked away from the crucial

questions when it mattered. Covenant doesn't look away. Whatever else happens, he faces things, and he becomes the center of the intellectual seriousness of the story because he is not a sentimentalist, he doesn't blink, he doesn't avoid pain either for himself or for other people. Because of that, it's a serious story. It doesn't fit the parameters people use when they dismiss fantasy. (Interview, 1990)

As a result, Covenant also doesn't fit the parameters people use to define the fantasy hero.

One way Donaldson pounds this point home is through the amount of suffering Covenant endures. Ordinarily, we expect characters in fantasy to have to endure hardships and travail, but Covenant's misery is all out of proportion to the usual battle wounds, difficult journeys, and unrequited love common to the formula and perhaps more in line with conventions of horror fiction, as John Clute suggests. At first, his trials are moderate. Drool Rockworm jabs at him through the earth with what seem to be electrical shocks in *Lord Foul's Bane* to the point that he cannot put his feet down. He starves himself in order to clear away what he thinks is a hallucination. He is knocked senseless several times and ends up passing out from concussion and sheer fatigue. However, in the next two volumes, the severity increases. In his "real" world, Covenant endures arson and vandalism, is manhandled by police and evangelists alike, cracks his head open on a table corner, suffers malnutrition and a relapse of his leprosy, bites into a razor blade, walks the skin off his feet, bruises himself violently, and finally faints from sheer physical deprivation. In *The Illearth War*, he appears in the Land with his skull split open, is attacked by Trel, rides out a flood with Bannor, and gets walloped in the head with a staff by Hile Troy. At the end of *The Power that Preserves*, it takes a miracle, a *deus ex machina* of the Creator, to save his life. In this third volume, all comes to a climax as he appears suffering from total inanition, hypothermia, and the ravages of leprosy. He travels despite his exhaustion, endures biting cold, eats poison grass, receives a compound fracture, and makes his way to Foul's Creche without water or food, at which point he undergoes Foul's assault.

Added to this physical torment is his sense of guilt, his pain over the loss of his family and friends, his loneliness, his bitterness at his fate, his doubt and unbelief, and even his fear of heights, since it seems he is constantly faced with climbing mountains and trees or traversing bridges over deep pits or ravines. Whatever the suffering of the conventional hero, it is never as pervasive, many-faceted, or acute as Covenant's. When he returns home, there is not even a solution to his unrequited love for his ex-wife, no recovery of happiness.

Not only is Covenant himself a complete anomaly as protagonist, most of the characters in the Chronicles are unlikely or unwilling heroes. There is no dominant military figure in the form of a warrior king, swordsman, or fighter; the quasi-aristocratic knighthood of most fantasy is absent; the mage, adept, or divine interceder capable of summoning sufficient might to challenge the evil figure does not appear; and even the glorious armies and alliances common to much heroic fantasy are lacking. The Bloodguard are peerless fighters, but their number is limited to five hundred, they eschew weapons, and they choose their battles and opponents themselves for the most part. In an incredible departure from the norm, these semi-immortals who have vowed themselves to service for over two thousand years even disband before the final volume begins. The army of the Lords, the Warward, does not fight in the first volume, gets marched almost to death in the second, and is besieged in the third so that it fights only one desperate defensive battle. The Giant Foamfollower is a potent fighter, but he is tortured by his own hate of his enemies and lacks the individual power or force to dominate a major battle's outcome by himself in the manner of a Hercules or even a Lancelot. Of the Lords, only Mhorham has anything that approaches the power and wisdom of a Gandalf or a Ged, but even he falls well short of the might of the mage in most high fantasy. Elena's titanic force offers momentary hope, but her disastrous fall, as a result of overreaching herself, exposes her limiting flaws. Likewise, the one brilliant military mind, Hile Troy, fails almost beyond his own conception. Thus, while much of the action of the three books is concerned with war and battle, Donaldson has deviated the focus from the martial heroism generally associated with epic fantasy, a strategy in keeping with his reluctance to glorify war.

The heroism of the Chronicles relies on the deeds of average people who are pinned in a corner, doing what they can in the face of almost certain defeat, an old story and a noble one. Many are simply protecting their homes and loved ones; there is no grand alliance marching valiantly to confront the forces of evil or coming to their aid. Most of the people of the Land, from Soaring Woodhelves in the first volume to Revelstone in the third, confront the enemy in their own homes. For, on one level, fantasy addresses the confrontation with one's own demons, the daily or domestic threats in life, in symbolic form. Only in the second volume does an army issue forth, and that to disastrous results, as I have noted. Mhoram and the Lords fight out of a conviction that resistance to Foul is the task of their lives not out of the expectation (except for Elena alone) that they can defeat him. The firm belief that what one does and what one believes are more important than final success permeates the moral and ethical structure of the Chronicles. The Ramen's selfless service to the Ranyhyn, the Stonedowners' guerrilla tactics in *The Power that Preserves*, the stolid fortitude of the inhabitants of Revelstone, or the endless patience of the *jheherrin* - such is the nature of valor in these works. Even the suicide of the Giants reflects this orientation, for in their passivity is an active moral force and motive: they will not allow themselves to become their worst nightmare. Each being finds within himself or herself the courage and strength to do what he or she must because no one can count on the appearance of a superhero.

For the only person capable of being the superhero in the Land is Covenant, who is paradoxically the least interested in becoming a savior. His reasoning is as follows: lepers must fear power, the illusion or delusion that they can put themselves at risk. If the Land offers him a power that does not exist in his world and he succumbs to its lure, the inexorable effects of his leprosy will destroy him. The two, leprosy and potency, are mutually exclusive. And Covenant, who emerges from his early cocoon of middle-class contentment, is a survivor. Leprosy makes him all the more aware that life is precious, and he does not wish to lose what he has held on to.

Within the Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the question of the value of life is crucial in view of Covenant's leprosy and his alienation from the rest of his world. Because Covenant is not sure that

his life has any worth, the people around him would be much happier without him as well. Covenant needs a savior as much as the Land does and ultimately must find that person inside himself. So he must find his own meaning in life, his own reasons to persevere and overcome, as everyman must eventually, and his trips to the Land open the door to that possibility. Like Dorothy, Frodo, or Gulliver, he must go back home after his experiences. This much is consistent with standard fantasy paradigms.

However, Covenant is as much the problem as the solution. The entire existence of the Land bears affinities to his own life in that the evil that invades it, in the form of corruption and despite, corresponds to the evil of leprosy that afflicts him. He is an odd admixture of scapegoat and hero, of victim and victimizer, as Slethaug notes: "His refusal to abandon feelings of victimization in order to accept pure responsibility for the well-being of others in the secondary world ultimately turns him into a victimizer, not just a victim" (22). Covenant does unto others, albeit unwittingly, as leprosy and Foul do unto him, and Covenant finds in Foul his own image. The victim of his own resurgent feeling, he victimizes Lena; in his request to the Ranyhyn to visit her, he attempts to atone for his act but ends up victimizing the Ranyhyn. The constant balance between what is done to him and what he does to others gives the *Chronicles* one of its unique characteristics. Covenant achieves his triumph over Lord Foul as an expression of this duality. Rather than defeating Foul through a war of magics or force, Covenant simply endures and assimilates the worst Foul can do to him when the Despiser transforms him into a putrescent figure in the last stages of leprotic decay and shows him his wife and child and his friends in the Land rotting of the same cause (III:457-58). He then realizes that "The Stone could not corrupt him; he was already as fundamentally diseased as any corruption could make him" (461). Using this weakness as his strength, he uncloaks Foul and calls on the dead Lords and Foamfollower to laugh Despite into nothingness. As a victim who cannot laugh, he uses that fault creatively to return it on Foul's head.

What makes Covenant vital and ultimately heroic is that he has managed to overcome his worst tendencies and to obey the stricture laid on him by the old man/Creator, Foamfollower, Elena, and

others: to be true. He renounces force after the battle of Soaring Woodhelves and is horrified and disgusted when he must resort to it later during the fight with Pietten in *The Power that Preserves*, for instance, the result of which is Lena's death. Covenant is not the fairy-tale child hero who accedes to adulthood through adventure and trial; he acquires no magic sword or steed (in fact, contrary to the paradigm, he rejects the Ranyhyn, the supernatural horses of the Land, as well as the *krill* of Loric). He is also not the warrior whose adventures testify to his battle prowess. His story is that of the constant struggle to assert the primacy of the human will. He refuses to be defeated, and this refusal produces some of his ugly actions and behavior, but it also demonstrates a powerful will and mental toughness or discipline.

One fashion of defining Covenant is as an intellectual hero. His entire experience in the Land is a pursuit of understanding and knowledge, a pervasive theme treated in a later chapter. He grows from limited comprehension to solution and acquires another kind of wisdom, that of the heart, as he goes. From the first, rationality marks him for us. His survival as a leper depends on his understanding of his condition and his reasoned perception of what he must do in any given situation. His foray into the town at the start of *Lord Foul's Bane* has a logical component in it in his realization that he cannot allow himself to be buried in Haven Farm, figuratively or literally. Covenant sees things so clearly that his rational side has obscured his emotional side.

In the Land the depth of his intellectual ability becomes apparent, for he recognizes immediately the threat to him and establishes a theory for reaction in his Unbelief and refuge in the explanation of dream. Yet beyond that is his capacity to see the dimensions of problems and their origins in the Land before anyone else. During his first meeting with the Lords, he informs them that they are not asking the right questions of him and warns them that they are doing what Foul wants them to do, and we must remember that all of this supernatural activity is only a few weeks old to him. He repeats such warnings to Elena in *The Illearth War* and intuits the problem facing her if she drinks the Earthblood. He also figures out the Bloodguard's reaction to Amok and gives Elena the solution to that puzzle and their silence. He correctly predicts Hile Troy's failure

and tries to explain where Troy is going wrong. In *The Power that Preserves*, he understands how Foul can be defeated more thoroughly than ever before and even realizes the potency of the white gold as an expression of himself. This apocalyptic insight will find its fullest expression at the end of the second trilogy when Covenant's shade explains to Linden the series of events from Elena's destruction of the Law of Death to Hollian's death and her revivification that allowed him to understand what he must do to defeat Foul.

But understanding by itself is not sufficient. Donaldson clarifies his hero's nature and significance in *Epic Fantasy in the Modern World*:

"Man is an effective passion."

This, I think, explains much of the popularity of modern fantasy. After reading all those mainstream novels since 1945, we need to hear affirmative things about being human. We're faced with an accumulating future and culture shock. Our capacity to destroy ourselves as a race grows stronger. We hardly ever see any evidence that who we are or what we care about matters to anyone else in the world. Under the circumstances, it's understandable that we have grown tired of being told how futile we are. Reasons for hope would be priceless at any time, but now they have become especially valuable because they are so rare. When we are farthest down in the void is when we most need to be reminded that "Man is an effective passion." (9)

With this statement Donaldson reveals the quintessential characteristic of his hero and the faith that gave birth to the Chronicles. He is writing in response to the nihilistic spirit in the modern world and to the debunking of individual merit that Carlyle deplures in his essay on heroism. The basis of fantasy as a reaction to the real world becomes apparent here, and we can see a Covenant of heroic stature simply because he personifies "effective passion" in the face of a juggernaut of modern society that sweeps all resistance away.

He reaches a personal nadir in *The Power that Preserves* when he goes berserk after calling the Defense Department to inquire about Hile Troy and finds all his efforts burked.

In a paroxysm of fury, he lashed out and kicked the coffee table with one numb booted foot. The table flipped over, broke the frame of Joan's picture as it jolted across the rug. He kicked it again, breaking one of its legs. Then he knocked over the sofa, and leaped past it to the bookcases. One after another he heaved them to the floor.

In minutes, the neat leper's order of the room had degenerated into dangerous chaos. (III:9)

Like Lear on the heath, his deprivations have made him mad and exposed him spiritually naked to the harsh elements of modern life and to the cruelty in others. Covenant is a man backed up against the wall of life by a world hostile to him, and he must fight it without any aid. He has been stripped of the accoutrements of daily life, the people and objects that we surround ourselves with to ward off the outside world. His family is gone; his house is merely a refuge. Even his furniture is a danger to him. His reputation and standing in the community have disappeared. His friends have deserted him.⁴ No medicine, no scientific breakthrough can help him, for what good is technology to the spiritually and psychologically damaged? The world inside him, the world inside all of us, is one we must face alone; there are no magical solutions or escapes. For Covenant, there is only the hope of effective passion.

Mhoram underscores this point when he whispers to the fading Covenant, "*You are the white gold*" (III:59). The white gold is not simply some arcane talisman or periapt like one of Kevin's Wards. It is different from the traditional magic swords, sceptres, shields, rings, or mirrors of high fantasy. It is the power of the human spirit springing from ordinary events to the unforeseen catastrophes life brings. As the song of the white gold tells, "it speaks for the bone of life." It also carries all the contraries of human nature, sanity and madness, coldness and passion, being lost and being found (I:258-59). The attempt to master the white gold is the attempt to discover and master the self, the task of all lives. Beyond that, the potency of the white gold signifies the power and magnitude of such a task and endows it not only with meaning but with hope. As a result, Covenant becomes the symbol of a commitment to a philosophical position and to intellectual integrity in the face of

tremendous hostility and pressure, for to define himself and determine who he is poses a daunting task.

All of this further marks him as an essentially American figure, trapped between the increasing technology of a fast-paced and mobile society and the need to maintain his humanity.

We have machines to think for us; we have no machines to suffer for us, or to rejoice for us. Technology has not made us magicians, only sorceror's apprentices. We can push a button and light a dozen cities. We can also push a button and make a dozen cities vanish. There is, unfortunately, no button we can push to relieve us of moral choices or give the wisdom to understand the morality as well as the choices. We have seen dazzling changes and improvements in the world outside us. I am not sure they alone can help change and improve the world inside us. (Alexander 142)

Like anyone in our consumer society, Covenant can lose himself to the power of material possessions, which can "own" their possessors and influence who we are. His leprosy, as I have noted, makes things central to him not for what they can do for him but what they can do to him, a scorching symbolic criticism of American materialism.⁵ His effective passion, when aroused, places him in the mainstream with such heroes as Harlan Ellison's or John Gardner's or Ernest Hemingway's, all of whom rage against the dying of the light and oppose the inevitable at every turn. What they all share in particular is a vision beyond the trivial and quotidian to what really matters. And what matters is life and the way one lives life, not what one is or has. The theme is an ancient one but all the more relevant in modern America, with its disposable, advertisement-driven society.

In the end, like the most popular among the pantheon of American heroes - the gunslinger, the private detective, or the secret agent - Covenant finds his own solution and makes his own quietus. He does not settle down to become a part of the community he saves but rides off into the sunset, so to speak. When the Creator offers to leave him in the Land to live out his life in health and as a hero, Covenant refuses, something few readers or critics compre-

hend or want. But Covenant's rejection explains his answer entirely: "That's not my world. I don't belong there" (III:474). A hero of a romance would agree to stay because he would belong in that world; but Covenant is a twentieth-century American, and he must return to the world in which he belongs just as the gunslinger or spy must.

The biggest shock, however, comes in the *Second Chronicles* when Covenant gives Foul his ring and allows the demon to kill him. Donaldson turns the tables entirely in the next three volumes because Covenant does become a willing hero and does accept heroic responsibilities and power; but allowing himself to be killed in order to come back to defeat his enemy certainly qualifies as a diversion away from the typical hero of fantasy - or of almost any other type of story.