

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
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COVENANT AS MYTHIC HERO

Because the logical orientation of our twentieth-century Western worldview works to pop the bubble of the supernatural, reconciling a contemporary person dominated by a stringent medical technology with a mythic existence seems incongruous. Just as he wanders from the paradigm of the fantasy hero, it is safe to say beforehand that Covenant differs from the picture of the mythic hero that Western religious texts and the literary canon have drawn for us: Moses, Jesus, Hercules, Perseus, Romulus and Remus, and so on. Heroes of classical mythology and their direct descendants belong to a species with clear outlines and established colorings and markings.⁴ Generally the hero is of a high but hidden birth and at first appears in a lower station in life. Cast away - often cast adrift on the sea - he is found and raised by a poor couple who recognize that he is different and meant for other, greater things. Spurred by a prophecy or visitation by a supernatural figure, he leaves his home and through journey and trial discovers who he is. After his education by a figure of wisdom who endows him with a magical weapon or talisman, he passes sundry tests, garners honors and rewards, and accedes to his rightful place. In his initiatory trials, which are generally battles of both learning and martial

prowess, he acquires symbols of his authority, shows himself a favorite of various gods, and is frequently linked to the sun god himself. His apotheosis exalts him as a transfiguring agent and, in some cases, translates him into the reigning pantheon where even greater significance is conferred on his temporal achievements.

While the *Chronicles* introduces a host of mythical beings, it hardly relates Thomas Covenant to a Hercules, an Odysseus, or a Beowulf. It conforms to epic dictate by beginning in *medias res*, looking back in perfunctory glimpses to earlier periods in his life and revealing information about only the period of Covenant's life after the discovery of his leprosy. Of his birth family, his childhood, his early adult years, they are silent. Far from the lost, heroic prince of epic and romance, Covenant is simply a common man, and no imagery, description, or association link him to any royalty or solar deity (although his half-hand associates him with Berek once he arrives in the Land). As we have seen, his abhorrence of violence, killing, and death with his rejection of Loric's *krill* shows that he is clearly not a warrior. In the *First Chronicles* Covenant undergoes no apotheosis in the traditional sense, no elevation either to the godhead or to ideal humanity. In fact, he ends up where he began, no richer or poorer, no more or less powerful, except in spirit and will to survive.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell outlines the paradigm of the monomyth, which exists in all cultures. Thomas Covenant better falls into this looser sequence than into that of the traditional fantasy warrior hero, albeit with a number of dislocations from Campbell's pattern:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation-initiation-return*: which might be named as the nuclear unit of the monomyth.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30)

Clearly Covenant leaves the "world of common day" and enters a "region of supernatural wonder" in the Land. And just as obviously, he defeats Lord Foul in a decisive battle. However, the boons he bestows aid those in the marvelous world, not those in his own world when he returns. One might say that in the Second Chronicles Covenant has regained his creative power and surpassed his original authorial capacity in the books written in the decade interim and has thereby benefited his fellow man. But the true reinvigoration has come in the Land; only Covenant himself has improved or been renewed in his world.

Campbell's three-tiered process spells out the discrete stages of the protagonist's separation, initiation, and return, but Donaldson again manipulates the pattern in accordance with the problems created by his anomalous hero. Thomas Covenant's progress follows the first quite closely, diverges substantially from the second, and abandons the direction of the third almost entirely while adhering to its form. Because he is called to the Land three times, he undergoes the process of departure and testing three separate times, but his returns are turned inward, directed toward himself, a reiteration of the element of projection and unconscious desire common to myth and fantasy. Campbell separates the primary stage of departure into five steps: a call to adventure, a refusal of the call, the acquisition of supernatural aid, the crossing of the first threshold, and a descent he calls "the belly of the whale."

In the call to adventure a herald or sign is given to the hero, an unsuspected world is revealed, "and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces not rightly understood" (Campbell 51). The initial sign is given by the old beggar, the Creator, whom Covenant meets outside the phone company office in *Lord Foul's Bane*. His note, which Covenant considers incomprehensible and irrelevant, hints at the unsuspected world to which Covenant is shortly thereafter transported. Once in the Land, Covenant knows nothing and understands little of what occurs around him. His first exposure to the Land is a surrealistic nightmare in which he meets Drool Rockworm and then floats in a cloud, subjected to the mocking, coercive voice of Foul. After recovering consciousness, he discovers himself in a place where his leprosy retreats, his ring has magical power, and

impossible creatures exist. His response is to rationalize it all as a dream or a delusion - which he can comprehend.

The introductory chapters to *The Illearth War* and *The Power that Preserves* show us the protagonist struggling with his experiences and attempting to make sense of them. In the second volume, he awakens and spends two weeks in a dazed state, trying to come to terms with the Land, dream or not. Then at the tavern he visits he hears himself called Berek (22), which both signals his imminent return to the Land and adds another puzzlement for him. Soon he finds himself materializing in Revelstone. Here again changes in the Land are explained to him and questions answered to help him comprehend. In *The Power that Preserves* Covenant waits for the summons to the Land, knowing that he will be called, but he rejects Mhoram's first attempt because of the little girl's rattlesnake bite. Once with Triock and Foamfollower, Covenant insists on being informed of everything and tells Foamfollower, "I want to know it all! I need - everything, every damned despicable thing that Foul -" (134). Although he does not entirely understand what he will or can do, Covenant is trying to organize both himself and others.

Campbell's second step involves the refusal of the call: "the refusal is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest" (60). Because of his leprosy, Covenant avoids involvement far longer than the typical hero, whose reluctance is generally short lived and whose commitment eventually becomes whole-hearted. Covenant's initial response to the old beggar and his note is to ignore it since it does not, he thinks, apply to him. From the time of his introduction into the Land until his reappearance in *The Power that Preserves*, he spends most of his time attempting to reject its needs and to preserve himself. He names himself the Unbeliever, repudiates his resemblance to Berek (I:44, 220, 235), and even flings an arras depicting the hero out of his window (235); he insists on his leprosy-induced incapacity to avoid responsibility and doggedly holds himself back from full, honest involvement. He vows to keep moving, to keep himself aloof and thus alive. Capitulation to the Land is capitulation to leprosy, an action that will doom him in his own world.

In *The Illearth War* his interrupted conversation with his ex-wife leads him to demand that Elena return him to his own world.

Mhoram, alarmed by his virulent reaction and hostility, tries to aid him, but Covenant venomously rejects all appeals or any support: "I don't care what you need. You can drop dead for all I care. You're a delusion. A sickness in my mind. You don't exist. Send me back. You've got to send me back" (31). Moments later a disfigured, tormented Waynhim is led in by Bloodguard, and, after its questioning, the creature attacks Covenant. When Covenant later asks Mhoram the Waynhim's motives, the Lord replies, "My friend, this is not pleasant to say. But it is in my heart that *dukkha* attacked you because you refuse to aid the Land" (45). For much of this second novel, he tries to refuse Elena, who becomes the touchstone of his growing acquiescence, until he finally confesses to her all of his duplicity and his self-serving and selective contributions.

Manipulation. Not Foul's - mine. I've been manipulating you, using you. I told you I'd made another bargain - but I didn't tell you what it is. I've been using - using you to get myself off the hook. I promised myself that I would do everything I could to help you find this Ward. And in return I promised myself that I would do everything I could to make you take my responsibility. I watched you and helped you so that when you got here you would look exactly like that - so you would challenge Foul yourself without stopping to think about what you're doing - so that whatever happens to the Land would be your fault instead of mine. So that I could escape. (494)

Only the shock of his success and thus of her failure and resultant death jolt him out of his semipassivity. Yet in *The Power that Preserves*, he still refuses to aid the Land at first, and only when he has returned the snake-bitten child to her parents does he accept the Land's need. When he does, his ferocious exigency is as proportionately severe as his previous unwillingness. He demands that Triock inform Mhoram that he has arrived in the Land, despite the odds against the mission's success, and when Triock protests, he says, "It doesn't matter what you think is possible or impossible. Everything here is impossible. If we don't start doing the impossible now, it'll be too late" (132). And with that injunction he and Foamfollower set off on their own impossible quest, without counsel, aid, or provision.

What allows him to undertake to destroy Foul and accomplish his impossible dream is the white gold. The third step in Campbell's first stage of the monomyth is the acquisition of a supernatural aid, and here Donaldson's epic departs substantially from the paradigm. According to Campbell, the hero's first encounter comes with a protective figure who gives amulets (69); in higher myth the figure is a guide, a teacher (72). Covenant does acquire objects of power (the *lo-millialor* staff from Baradakas in *Lord Foul's Bane* and the orcrest in *The Illearth War*), but he already possesses the true heirloom of power, his ring of white gold. However, it is, in effect, inert. The standard hero acquires weapons and mastery over them, but Covenant can never master the ring. In the end, Covenant does not defeat Foul and destroy the Illearth Stone with the might of his ring but with his own passion and conviction channeled through the ring, as expressed in Mhoram's exhortation, "You are the white gold" (III:59). In addition, his first mentor, in a sense, is Lord Foul, who mocks his inability and taunts him with it. From there, Covenant follows a series of guides, all of whom teach him, but there is no one true father figure, like a Gandalf, to lead him, because the Creator, who nominally could fill the post, is barred from interfering in his own creation. And no one can teach him the mystery of the white gold because no one else can know it.

The fourth step is the crossing of the first threshold, where stands a "'threshold guardian' at the entrance to the zone of magnified power" (77). Normally this guardian is an ogre or monster who protects the entrance to a place of power or who waits beyond the pale of a safe, civilized area: beyond is the dangerous region entitled "Here be dragons" on old maps. Or this creature guards the bounds of the world and must be passed. Covenant certainly does not have to fight or outwit a sentinel to enter the Land, and only by a disfiguring stretch can Lord Foul be considered a guardian, especially since his purpose is to get Drool Rockworm to summon Covenant to the Land so that he (Foul) can have his ring. Covenant awakens at a place of power, Kevin's Watch, but no one attempts to repel or attack him. Even throughout the Land, this warding or threatening figure is scarce. Only the three-headed monster at the entrance to Foul's Creche (III:434) truly qualifies, and Covenant and Foamfollower disable it without much effort. This entire step is

out of sequence, however, since the hero normally obtains guidance and defenses before he enters the other land and challenges his enemies; Covenant is hurled into the fray without preparation.

A statement more applicable to the Chronicles is Campbell's assessment of the zone of power or ground beyond the threshold: "The regions of the unknown (desert, jungle, deep sea, alien land, etc.) are free fields for the projection of unconscious content" (79), what Yolen terms lithe landscape of allusion" (19). As we have seen, the Land and its peoples embody Thomas Covenant's fears, needs, doubts, frustrations and operate as proving grounds in his psychomachic struggle to overcome the despite of leprosy and to regain a viable place in his world. Lord Foul is the leprosy that infects the Land, so its inhabitants face the same challenges Covenant does, and their example provides him with the determination and reason to conquer Foul and what he represents within Covenant.

Last in the departure stage is the step Campbell labels "the belly of the whale" (90), the passage of the threshold that results in a rebirth. A Freudian application of myth exists in this *regressus ad uteram*, a rebirth in psychological terms, but this also finds an extension in rebirth in spiritual terms, a mystical rebirth (Eliade 79-81). In each case, Covenant becomes unconscious before his supernatural removal to the Land. First, he awakens on Kevin's Watch and is greeted by a young girl, a new world, and reborn nerves and feeling. There is an edenic quality about his first hours in the Land when he is discovering life and feeling as though for the first time. His innocent, pristine guide contributes to the prelapsarian atmosphere, and it would seem that Covenant has been offered a new beginning to his life, one that he rejects, however. In *The Ill-earth War* he comes face to face with the result of his rapine in his daughter Elena, and a whole new world, signified by his journey through Trothgard, opens up to him. In the third volume, the rebirth takes a dark turn, for Foamfollower and Triock must restore him to life even in the Land (100ff).

Although not in accordance with the order of Campbell's schema, more directly apposite to this stage are the three descents to the underground, symbolic deaths and rebirths, which conclude each respective translation to the Land. In *Lord Foul's Bane*, Covenant enters the catacombs of Mt. Thunder with the other members of the

Quest; in *The Illearth War*, he follows Elena and Amok beneath Melenkurion Skyweir to seek the Seventh Ward; in *The Power that Preserves* he and Foamfollower enter the subterranean passages of the *jheherrin* and then Foul's Creche itself. All three descents result in a tumultuous conflict from which Covenant emerges a changed man. The final, of course, results not only in victory against Foul but in Covenant's personal triumph over his own demons and a restitution of life in his own world that parallels his spiritual rebirth.

Campbell also claims that "This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation" (91).⁵ In *Lord Foul's Bane* Covenant actually attempts suicide as a liberation from the warrens beneath Mt. Thunder, "a chance for immolation, escape" (I:428-30). Covenant's subsequent passages through the Land result in appalling physical hardships and attrition from which he emerges with reacquired well-being, although not health. First, his behavior in his own world seems a calculated suicide as his reactions to his experiences in the Land lead him to disregard the treatment he needs to follow in order to stave off the depredations of leprosy. Little by little, he declines physically until he is a blood-covered specter the doctors do not think can survive. Proportionately, in the Land his condition worsens to reflect that of his real world until in the final book hunger, deprivation, illness, a compound fracture, and frostbite render him little more than a gaunt, emaciated wraith before Foul. From this utterly reduced state, in both worlds, he arises again to find himself whole and reinvigorated. Having lost himself through a symbolic physical transformation, he is restored to himself and emerges from the belly of the whale hardy, if not entirely hale.

Campbell's second major stage in the development of the monomyth involves the initiation; however, because Covenant's trials and journeys follow this outline only very generally and because his testing in the Land is tied so closely to his unconscious desires and ills in his world, his proving and growth have been treated in the chapter on Covenant as hero, so Campbell's observations about the return of the hero and their application to Covenant finish the paradigm of the monomyth.

Five of the six steps that Campbell assigns to the final stage, the return, apply, in one form or other, to Covenant (see 193-238). First

is "the refusal of the return." Often the hero, his deed accomplished, does not wish to leave and to take back what he has gained to his people. Covenant, offered a place of honor within the Land, refuses to stay, a reversal of the standard. Then comes "the magic flight" to transport the hero home, which the Creator does perform, but the return is not a physical one since Covenant's body has not left his world. The transmission is primarily spiritual and psychological as Covenant's disembodied consciousness witnesses the celebration at Glimmermere and then returns to its hospitalized near-corpse, not a triumphant return by any means. A "rescue from without" often occurs, and the Creator's intercession, the doctor's aid, and his lawyer's defense constitute three separate rescues that Covenant needs (clearly akin to the constant rescues by his friends in the Land). The "crossing of the return threshold" shows the difficulty of importing the wisdom the hero has gained, since it often does not apply to his world, and Covenant would only risk further ostracism by recounting his experiences in the Land because people would think him crazy, probably as a condition of his leprosy. And last comes the step Campbell entitles "the freedom to live," which speaks feelingly for itself in the final pages of *The Power that Preserves*.

The final and most wrenching stage for Covenant as protagonist (and perhaps for the reader, whose expectations from other fantasy works will not work here) is the aftermath, the period of calm after the crisis in which the hero's gifts or powers are no longer needed. "*The return and reintegration with society*, which is indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world, and which, from the standpoint of the community, is the justification of the long retreat, the hero himself may find the most difficult requirement of all" (36). In Covenant's case, this return is especially problematic because his community derives no overt benefit from his heroism; he leaves the society that he has helped and cannot even explain his experiences, never mind justify them. Saving the little girl has made him a hero of sorts in his own world, but his reintegration remains a chancy and unbalanced thing because he is still a leper. He has been rescued from persecution and eviction from his home, but certainly no parades or adoring crowds greet his return.

What this shows us about Covenant as mythic hero places him both in the tradition and at the same beyond it - or beside it - paralleling his situation as neither entirely of nor separate from the Land. Covenant performs heroic deeds unheroically. The power of myth as an expression of sacral authority or of "rightness" itself overcomes his individual reluctance and intransigence. He may repudiate the road other heroes have walked, but his attempt to escape or detour from its end fails, and he is inevitably drawn back to the purpose assigned him because of the power of its demands, which become his own.

Until there is a final battle with Foul in which one of them is destroyed, Covenant cannot have the typical apotheosis because he must keep coming back to fight Foul. His leprosy also causes a violation of the paradigm, since it is irremediable in his world and so allows Foul to live in a metaphoric fashion: Covenant must fight this despite all his life in a world where magic and myth have been lost and where weapons are useless. As Maynard Mack, quoting Yeats, says of Hamlet, "Why should we honor those who die on the field of battle. A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself" (60).