Excerpts from

Variations on
The Fantasy Tradition

Stephen R. Donaldson's Chronicles of Thomas Covenant

W. A. Senior

STRUCTURE: MIRRORED WORLDS

As I have pointed out, Covenant's two worlds are closely related, and the response of one to the other informs the narrative logic. The opening chapters of each novel constitute many of the harshest and most unsettling episodes in the Chronicles because they are so intensely personal and disturbing. The entire movement of the trilogy is from the emotional pain and anguish of Covenant's plight in his "real" world to a recovery instilled by the Land. From a narrative perspective each book constitutes a stage or progress that moves Covenant closer to his goal. Although the concerns of each volume are not discrete and do overlap, Covenant's thematic instruction falls generally into three categories, from the simplest human associations to more complex beliefs. *Lord Foul's Bane*'s concern is with friendship, the acceptance of and by others that Covenant so sorely lacks. *The Illearth War* builds on his burgeoning needs for others and focuses on love, through High Lord Elena, and on understanding one's limitations and capacity. *The Power that Preserves* moves to a more metaphysical sphere and deals with both social and individual ethics and belief systems, structures that permit responsibility. This sequence forms an educational curriculum for Covenant in remedial humanity. At the outset, he has no chance of battling Foul and winning; by the end, he has acquired all the tools he needs in the form of friendship, love, and commitment. He has also, in a sense, returned where he began, resumed an equilibrium with all of its narrative and behavioral connotations.

Most high fantasy begins with a pastoral calmness and serenity that the incursion of evil disturbs and transmutes. Tolkien's Hobbits in their Shire, Le Guin's Ged and Ogion on the goat island of Cont, McKillip's Morgon of Hed and his brother Eliard on their farm, or Card's Prentice Alvin in the altered American Midwest -

all have their roots in a cherished countryside from which they are drawn forth by some menace. Covenant does live in a small, bucolic town, but *he* is the minatory disturbance in the people's eyes, an inversion of the usual formula. The monster here is not the dragon on the heights or the troll under the bridge; it is leprosy, a biological, nonhuman threat in human form. To accompany the pastoral, we look forward to innocent, pleasant inhabitants who live happy lives in unity with their environment. Conversely, our preliminary acquaintance with the embittered and diseased Covenant jars us as readers because he does not fit the paradigm we anticipate just as his abrupt incursion to the Land jolts him because it contradicts his expectations.

Lord Foul's Bane emphasizes again and again Covenant's isolation and distance from others in the appalling mantra of "*Beware! Outcast unclean*" (I:1). Covenant's utter detestation of his effect on others and in part a loathing of himself that he shares with the townspeople separate him from others and reduce any initial feeling of identification or of sympathy. As a result, Covenant will rediscover friendship, acceptance, and beauty, even though he clings adamantly to the distrust of all three. In the flashbacks of the first chapters, we learn of Covenant's journey to the leprosarium and his experiences there. Constantly emphasized are the doctors' lectures on the abhorrence that people hold for lepers and on their resultant exclusion from their fellows; these factors are as deadly as failure to follow his medical routine. In the narrative present, he walks into town to pay his phone bill and finds that it has been paid for him, an episode that casts into bold relief the dislocation of which the doctors warned him. There is no particular threat to him, no overt hostile action, simply avoidance and repugnance and the ugliness of human hate in matched reaction to the ugliness of leprosy. Subsequently, a dream he has in the Land evidences the impact that the attitude of others has. He is lying in front of the car in his "real" world while the "townspeople chorused, 'You are dead. Without the community, you can't live. Life is in the community, and you have no community. You can't live if no one cares'" (I:191). Covenant wants this community, human companionship and understanding and purpose - the primary thematic center of this novel.

When he talks to the old man, whom we later learn is a guise of the Creator, "Covenant had not heard sympathy for a long time, and the sound of it affected him acutely" (I:27). He is searching to recover his niche in life. Deserted by his wife and young child, exiled from his quandam friends, and walled into his house in the woods, Covenant withers as a person. His desires, balked and frustrated in his world, are projected into another where he can find a solution to his terrible dilemma. As John Timmerman suggests, "The world of fantasy matches our world in reality. It is not a dream world, a never-never land, but a world in which characters confront the same terrors, choices and dilemmas we confront in our own world. The reason for creating such a world is to confront more openly and daringly a spiritual reality too often ignored in our world of system and fact" (I:49).

The learning and rejuvenation he acquires in the Land, a moral pedagogy and spiritual renewal, will counteract the reductive, factual orientation of the leprosarium. But Covenant must first understand what it is he must learn. The old beggar leaves him a note that outlines and foreshadows his translation to the Land and announces the crux of his dilemma:

> A real man - real in all the ways we recognize as real - finds himself suddenly abstracted from the world and deposited in a physical situation which could not possibly exist: sounds have aroma, smells have color and depth, sights have texture, touches have pitch and timbre. There he is informed by a disembodied voice that he has been brought to that place as a champion for his world. He must fight to the death in single combat against a champion from another world. If he is defeated, he will die, and his world - the real world - will be destroyed because it lacks the inner strength to survive.
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> The man refuses to believe what he is told is true. He asserts that he is either dreaming or hallucinating, and declines to be put in the false position of fighting to the death where no "real" danger exists. He is implacable in his determination to disbelieve his apparent situation, and does not defend himself when he is attacked by the champion of the other world.

> Question: is the man's behavior courageous or cowardly? This is the fundamental question of ethics. (I:24-25)

Covenant scorns the moral question and strides off, seemingly to faint in front of a car, which we later learn did not strike him, and finds himself in the Land, where he is offered friendship, acceptance, and hope. The doctors had told him that "The patients who survive find someone somewhere who is willing to help them want to live. Or they find somewhere inside themselves the strength to endure" (I:18). In Mhoram, Foamfollower, and the others Covenant finds those who can help him, in a sense finds them as the expression of endurance inside himself. However, he needs to come to grips with what he faces; the reanimating properties of this world permit the sensory paradoxes the old man's note describes and throw him out of kilter as his nerveless appendages start to recover tactility. His travels across the Land with Atiaran, then Foamfollower, and finally the Quest with the Lords and their company all describe his attempts to comprehend the miraculous nature of the Land. But just as Covenant scorns the "fundamental question of ethics" in the beggar's note, so he ignores any ethical inclusion in the Land by remaining unengaged as much as possible.

For he is not yet ready, has not yet regained his implicit humanity, to shoulder any emotional or ethical burden; he sees the world in terms of ugliness since beauty has been denied him. His walk into his town exposes to us the boiling frustration of his leprotic impotence, which assumes sexual implications: "In the decay of his nerves, his sexual capacity was just another amputated member" (I:3). The sight of the attractive girls in the shop and the clerk at the phone company foreshadows his reaction to Lena and the eruption of his pent-up and denied sexual desires when the hurtloam and aliantha berries restore physical sensations that leprosy had deadened. Covenant's journeys reacquaint him with the elemental fact of beauty through the ripeness of the Land, the rightness of Andelain, the achievement of Revelstone, and the lives and homes of the people he meets. As Matthew Fike points out, "in the first trilogy, Covenant journeys from passionate abuse of the beautiful in the rape of Lena to passionate desire for beauty's preservation" (I:36). On the subject of beauty, Covenant says to

Mhoram about scenery, which is what he asserts the real world calls beauty, that "It means that beauty is something extra .... It's nice but we can live without it" (I:284). However, he is wrong, for the lack of beauty in his life and the dominance of ugliness in various guises has driven him to a sere, sterile existence. The doctors' examples and lectures lead to the implicit assumption that his determination to survive will not be enough without some other nourishment for the spirit. Accordingly, his unadmitted need for beauty shines clearly through his leprosy; when the Hirebrand of Soaring Woodhelven offers him the *lillianrill* staff, Covenant wants to know why Baradakas trusts him, and the latter says, "You are a man who knows the value of beauty" (I:147). In *Lord Foul's Bane* Covenant recovers his lost sense of beauty, with friendship as the first step on his odyssey to full humanity and all it demands.

The opening of *The Illearth War* adumbrates by the increasing hostility to Covenant and the emerging danger of his "real" world situation the increasing malevolence of Foul. The first novel presented a minor test in the Land; there is no actual confrontation or assault with or by Lord Foul himself. And Covenant meets only a generalized fear and hate on the streets of his own hometown. In the second, the sheriff's violence, the arson of the stables, and Covenant's accident (this time a real one) foretell a more serious violence in the Land, where war and destruction from Foul's hand have begun.

The first chapters of this second novel recapitulate Covenant's experiences in the first novel, reveal his deepening need for acceptance, and provide a clear transition from *Lord Foul's Bane* and its thematic center. His consternation over what he considers his dream and his resolution to seek out human companionship at a local bar betray his ever-growing need for treatment by others in his world like that shown him in the Land. He begins to draw connections between the two places. As Joan's stable burns, "in it he saw Soaring Woodhelven in flame. He could smell in the memory the smoldering dead of the tree village" (II:5). The despite evidenced in one world finds parallels in the other. When he hears himself called Berek in the bar and is returned to the Land's claim on him, he wishes to ignore it, not to respond to Lena's innocent hope in him. Yet, later he instead finds himself ignored when the

singer refuses his account of what she said and accuses him of being a practical joker (III:7). Excoriated by the town, rejected and feared by strangers, and manhandled by the law, Covenant sinks further into a despair for which the only anodyne is the Land.

His interrupted conversation with his estranged wife accelerates his despair and introduces the primary theme of this second novel: love. If *Lord Foul's Bane* recalls Covenant to friendship, companionship,[3] and the glimmerings of a personal loyalty to and solicitude for others, the reintroduction of love in *The Illearth War* reconstitutes an equally potent component of his lost self. As Covenant is searching for further reasons for life and hope, his ex-wife's unexpected telephone call triggers an emotion so powerful that he has muscle spasms and collapses. Joan's simple words, "I've been so lonely. I - I miss you" (II:27), return to him a realization of all that he has lost and desires to regain. He will meet this need and love again in Elena, the High Lord, his daughter, whom he cannot deny and from whom he cannot separate himself. All who know her come to love her, but she wholeheartedly offers herself to Covenant, choosing him above all others, stirring the passions he has locked away within himself and providing the healing he craves:

> At her touch, something within him broke. The pure tenderness of her gesture overcame him. But it was not his restraint that broke; it was his frustration. An answering tenderness washed through him. He could see her mother in her, and at the sight he suddenly perceived that it was not anger which made him violent toward her, not anger which so darkened his love, but rather grief and self-despite. The hurt he had done her mother was only a complex way of hurting himself - an expression of leprosy. He did not have to repeat the act. (II:419)

He begins with both distrust and fear of Elena, yet gradually he ends up incapable of refusing her or resisting her. Her frank offering of herself despite its incestual overtones stands in complete contrast to Joan's denial of him and the inaccessibility of other women as a result of his disease.

Among the other parallels he recognizes is one with Bannor, who "too, had lost his wife - She had been dead for two thousand years" (II:107). In fact, when summoned by Elena to the Land, Covenant protests violently but turns to Bannor as if in hope of some brotherhood, the shared burden of the same loss: "'Bannor,' Covenant pleaded, 'she was my wife'" (II:33). Covenant, appalled by the ascetic result of their Vow, does not want to become like the Bloodguard. Nor does he wish to endure the type of high-school crush Hile Troy feels for Elena. In the tormented love between Verement and Shetra, Covenant can see a cousin to his plight, whereas the quiet comfort between Faer and Callindrill and the hospitality they extend to him provide a proportionate opposite of domestic comfort. Love's paradox, brawling love and loving hate, as Romeo phrases it, demonstrates its power. In the actions of Trell and Atiaran Covenant witnesses the devotion and fury that love, or its ruin, can produce. The former's despair mirrors Covenant's own; the latter's sacrifice replays his impassioned desire to find a way to make things right. Covenant's violation of Lena unleashes the unlooked-for ramifications of Trell's desecration and Atiaran's self-immolation. Even Hile Troy's puppy love for Elena drives him to extravagance.

In a related vein, then, recognition of one's limit or control of oneself informs this novel as well. In his "real" world Covenant cannot get his "dream" out of his head: "For two weeks now he had completely lost his grasp on survival, had not taken his medication, had not performed one VSE [Visual Survey of Extremities] or any other drill, had not even shaved" (II:7). This is a Covenant in total contrast to the man we first meet. In trying to rise above one's nature or capacity - whether as a result of love, charity, ignorance, or desperation - the individual comes to failure and, like Covenant, faces despite: Hile Troy's plans to fight Foul's army, his offer to Caerroil Wildwood, even his understanding of his summoning, are all built on a tissue of lies, distortions, and omissions that drive him beyond what he and others can do or give. Atiaran's hate-filled summoning of Troy destroys her. Callindrill exerts himself beyond his strength and matches himself to a superior foe to the same end. The Bloodguard, trusting in the imperviousness of the Vow, take the piece of the Illearth Stone at Coercri and lose themselves to its irrefusable malignity. In consuming the Blood of the Earth, Elena

surpasses both ability and knowledge, damning herself and altering even the Law of Earthpower. All actions rebound on the doers in equal proportion to the force of their passion.

Behind all this fatal commitment looms Foul, whose strategy depends on making people push themselves beyond their limits so that in defeat their despair will be much greater. Covenant, who understands this fact, attempts to explain it to Troy in his comparison of Troy to Kevin, but to no avail (II:188). Kevin, of course, epitomizes the tragedy of someone forced beyond himself by Foul into his own personal hell. The truckdriver Covenant befriends unknowingly describes Foul's nature in his disquisition on the (to him) unknown leper: "What he does, he goes round where he ain't known, and he hides it, like, so nobody knows he is sick. That way he spreads it; nobody knows so they don't take care, and all of a sudden we got us an epidemic. Which makes Covenant laugh hisself crazy. Spite, like I tell you" (II:21). The epidemic in the Land is not one of physical disease but a wrongheaded willingness to do anything, offer any sacrifice, a form of hubris, perhaps, through which the individual accepts action or direction without fully considering his own potential and the possible dangers or risks involved. There is an existential ring to the truckdriver's convictions that complements the dark vision of the Chronicles, and echoes of Foul's mocking laughter and indirect, covert manipulations resound through this speech. Covenant's plea to Elena to forbear using the Earthblood recapitulates the driver's warning as Covenant finally sees "all the manifest ways in which he was responsible for Elena .... His duplicity was the cause - his violence, his futility, his need" (II:493). He tells her that "This is all some plot of Foul's. We're being manipulated - you're being manipulated. Something terrible is going to happen" (493). Yet she cannot perceive the wrong in herself or the trap any better than the driver can discern Covenant's leprosy, although he too is warned: "nobody knows so they don't take care."

Yet there is hope. Foul's Raver-/Giant-led army is crushed, and Covenant has been so affected by events that his concern for the Land and for his responsibility there has burgeoned. Once he has reacquired friends, a trust of others, an appreciation of beauty, a rejection of the spite that afflicts him, and love, he can no longer

withdraw from the Land and rely on numbness - physical or correspondingly emotional - to validate his inactivity in his own self-circumscribed existence. The actions of his second sojourn in the Land lead directly to his acceptance of responsibility, one of the axes of the third. Forced by his resurgent humanity to slough off his inhibition and reluctance, in *The Power that Preserves* he also comes to terms with the question of ethics as set forth in the beggar's note.

The third novel escalates the violence and the persecution both in Covenant's world and in the Land. Hitherto, Covenant has met with only minor personal physical suffering, but his distracted state and neglect of himself as a result of Elena's death, as explicated in the opening chapter, allow his leprosy to reassert itself, and he sustains a number of wounds, from the razor cut of the tampered bun to the laceration of his feet in the woods, all of which will find expression in his physical torment, shattered leg, and hypothermia in the Land. However, the next step in Covenant's pilgrim's progress is the recovery of order, for in the loss of his own routines and rituals a proportionate chaos results in the Land and finds expression in the increasing violence. Much of the action of *The Power that Preserves* revolves around the dual focus of law or creeds, two exponents of an overreaching order, and their efficacy or inefficacy. Slethaug says that "even the police car that hits him suggests the force of the law victimizing him" (23), which intimates the violation of law early in the story. As Covenant discovers that law concerns not justice but the manipulation of a code and that religion has degenerated to charlatanism, he embarks on a request for both ethics and spiritual regeneration, the resurrection of a personal order that will in turn generate a greater one.[4]

At the sheriff's insistence, the town undertakes a suit to remove Covenant from his home. Here is a direct parallel to the breaking of the Law in *The Illearth War* when Elena drinks the Earthblood and summons Kevin, thereby losing the Staff of Law. Now obsessed with Elena and his own guilt, a disoriented Covenant babbles to his lawyer, Megan Roman, who is warning Covenant of the legal threat to him, that "The Law doesn't have anything to do with me. She broke it. Anyway, I - it can't touch me" (2). But he is wrong in both worlds, as he was about beauty in *Lord Foul's Bane,* for just as

Covenant is unjustly assailed by the law in his town, so Revelstone is under siege by Foul, who uses the absence of natural law against it, calling up the dead to break its defenses and threatening the Land with an endless, unnatural winter. Justice or ethics diverge from law, and the latter comes to exclude the former. The town's inhumane and unjust use of the law to unhome Covenant mirrors Foul's illicit use of the unbinding of law to deprive all those in the Land of their homes. As order breaks down, law has no force to reassert it and crumbles accordingly.

Faith, therefore, becomes crucial as the inefficacy of belief systems comes under scrutiny in this final book. The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant does not directly address or include a specific religion or creed, but the series does lay stress on individual adherence to a chosen code of conduct, like the Vow of the Bloodguard, the faithfulness of the Ranyhyn, or the Oath of Peace. The sundering of the Vow and the loss of the Bloodguard spotlight the importance of a unifying social or cultural code, and Trell's aborted Ritual of Desecration demonstrates Milton's "vasty gulf" that exists for those who have lost their personal creeds. The imposition of an organized, external system of religion stands counter to the leper-driven vision of Donaldson's books. Covenant's rejection by the snake-oil preacher and his hypocritical assistant and the emptiness of their self-promoting theology actually forces him away from their sham and leads him to move from being a passive to an active moral and physical agent. Whether the Land exists or not is no longer a valid question to him as he confronts the question of ethics posed in the note from God in *The Illearth War*. For the lessons of the Chronicles assert the necessity of individual rectitude and moral positivism.

In the end Covenant's acceptance of responsibility for the little girl with the rattlesnake bite directly parallels his willingness to do something about Foul. He beseeches Mhoram to discontinue the summoning because "That little girl is all alone. I am responsible for her. There's no one to help the child but me" (III:57). Yet he also responds to Quaan's rebuttal that "you are responsible for us" with assent: "He met Mhoram's gaze painfully and answered, 'Yes, I know. I am - responsible'" (58), a sentiment he has never before expressed. His tender solicitude for the frightened child and accom-

panying self-neglect and sacrifice pave the way for his own later healing in the Land by the Unfettered One of the Forest (III:279-94). Once he has delivered the child to her parents, he slips into unconsciousness with the words "All right, Mhoram .... Come and get me" (68), thereby articulating his desire to meet his obligations to that world. By saving the child and then the Land, Covenant redeems himself and provides his own salvation in the love and appreciation he now holds for the Land and its inhabitants, whether they are real or not.