

Excerpts from

*Variations on
The Fantasy Tradition*

Stephen R. Donaldson's
Chronicles of
Thomas Covenant

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The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant: "To Bear What Must Be Borne"

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.
Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act or rest,
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,
Born to die, and reas'ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;
Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole Judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!
- Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man"

The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, comprised of *The Wounded Land* (1980), *The One Tree* (1982), and *White Gold Wielder* (1983), recounts the return of Thomas Covenant to the Land some three to four thousand years after the action of the first trilogy. But it would be inaccurate and misleading to see Donald-

son's sequel trilogy as simply a continuation of the first. As Donaldson himself puts it,

I didn't want this to be "Son of the Land" or "The Land Revisited." I wanted to accept what I hoped was the resonance, the strength, of the first work and to do something with it rather than simply trying to extend it. That essentially involved attacking it. Once I had set up this beautiful thing called the Land, I had to, in a manner of speaking, nuke it to force the characters of the story to confront the issues inside themselves in a new way. (Interview, 1991)

So if the First Chronicles varies from the standard fantasy tradition by reversing many of its hallmarks, the Second distinguishes itself by further twists of those very reversals.¹

As *The Wounded Land* begins, after a ten-year hiatus in the primary world and an epochal gap in the secondary, Covenant's wife has returned to him, but as a demented, warped agent of Lord Foul, and vampirelike she tries to drink his life out through his blood. The wholesome life of the Land has been utterly denatured so that the Land itself is a horrid perversion of desert, rotting garden, horrid plague, and torrential rain. Revelstone has fallen under the control of a Raver to become home to the Banefire, a huge inferno fed with the blood of the people of the Land to oppose the Sunbane, Lord Foul's corruption of nature.² Covenant has lost his Unbelief, so he has become committed to the restoration of his personal paradise, but the peoples he meets in this vision of Hades are pitiful remnants of their glorious ancestors, throwbacks to an age of complete atavism. Because of Foul's depredations, they die yet more horribly than even in the First Chronicles, and their bloodshed is greater and even more affecting because of its immediacy. Finally, the hero dies in the end, itself an unusual, if not stunning, denouement to heroic fantasy.

These changes signal the Second Chronicles's exploration of a wider thematic and physical geography, which builds on and extends that of the First Chronicles. Events from the early proto-history of the Land and from Covenant's first sojourn come to closure while, at the same time, Donaldson branches his narrative

out to include other locations and peoples of his secondary world: the Elemesnedene of the Elohim; the Sandhold of Brathhairrealm; the mythic isle of the One Tree; the uncharted seas of the world with their attendant dangers, such as giant serpents and haunted rimes; even the northern mountains beyond the Land itself. Along with the geographical expansion comes a shift and redirection of vision and purpose as Donaldson redefines and refines his concepts of evil and of heroism.

The whole of the second trilogy has its roots in the first works, and the narrative action involves once again saving the Land from its demon.³ Lord Foul, the eternal, mythic enemy who wishes to escape from the temporal prison of this world, hatches far-ranging, disguised plots that lurk in the most innocuous possibilities and that result from Covenant's experiences thousands of years ago. Mhorham, Foamfollower, and Elena return briefly as ghosts; Giants and Haruchai play central roles; and Revelstone and Mt. Thunder remain opposed monoliths of power. Foul's most powerful servants, the Ravers, persist, still thwarted and opposed by their opposite Andelain, the focus of Earthpower in the Land. Recurrent themes include the problematic nature of knowledge, the use of power, the necessity for free will and choice, the burden of responsibility, the problems of belief, the question of evil within each person, the mystery of paradox, the effects of doubt and fear, and so on. Covenant's leprosy and the metaphor of disease remain crucial elements but take on added significance in view of the Sunbane and its effect on the Land. And the three novels, like all epic fantasy, recount long journeys full of privation, hardship, and setbacks. However, the *Second Chronicles* approaches more insidious problems from different perspectives. The first major dislocation from the earlier works is the presence of Dr. Linden Avery, a second character from the primary world, who is called by the Creator as Thomas Covenant was, but her summons is attributable to her health sense, something that has been lost in the Land. A second major change is the appearance of the Search, a ship's crew of Giants who replace the Lords and Foamfollower as Covenant's friends and counselors. A third is the conflict: the overt threat of Lord Foul in the first novels is a military one and can be addressed, however unsuccessfully, through military means or forces. The action revolves

around armies, battles, guerrilla raids, strategy, and open war - in short, the contest of power. However, remarkable for a high fantasy, there are no armies, no ascendant warrior heroes, no crucial pitched battles in the Second Chronicles; none would help solve the Land's problem or eradicate the Sunbane, especially since almost no one is left to fight. So opposition and conflict move inward, within the characters themselves. In *Epic Fantasy in the Modern World*, Donaldson explains that the inhabitants of a fantasy world are projections of internal characteristics and traits, that each functions as the personification or evocation of some intangible, so in the Second Chronicles he complicates the fantasy paradigm by further internalizing the battles of his psychodrama within those very projections.