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Tales Newly Told

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Abstract

Donaldson, Stephen R. *Mordant's Need*. Tepper, Sheri S. *The Awakeners*.

Tales Newly Told

A Column by Alexei Kondratiev

Few modern fantasists can boast of having been, at one and the same time, so highly praised and so thoroughly reviled as Stephen R. Donaldson. The popular success of the Thomas Covenant chronicles is unquestionable, and while the weaknesses of Donaldson's style are numerous and obvious, have been much discussed, and need not be gone over here, they are not the typical weaknesses of a derivative hack. The Thomas Covenant books revealed a writer with a natural sense of the rhythm and dynamics of the epic form (a rare thing in a writer nowadays), a true personal vision and philosophy, and a repertoire of images that seemed to have deep roots within his psyche. Most importantly, Donaldson has been willing to test and expand the scope of his craft, instead of basking in his early success.

His latest large-scale work, *Mordant's Need*, published in two parts as *The Mirror of Her Dreams* (Del Rey, 1986) and *A Man Rides Through* (Del Rey, 1987), represents a major turn away from the Thomas Covenant manner. Gone are the excesses of obscure vocabulary; the writing here aims (not always with success) at Classical sobriety. Gone also are the para-Tolkienian landscapes full of non-human wonders. Although there still are some monsters about, and Donaldson's inventiveness is not flagging by any means, this is clearly not an epic but a novel, a story of the growth and interaction of very recognizably human personalities. Much of the action takes place indoors, in the huge, somewhat Gormenghast-like castle of Orison, the capital of the land of Mordant, which is ruled over by the mysteriously inactive King Joyse. In an effort to find a warrior capable of defending Mordant, Terisa Morgan, an American woman, is summoned into Orison (in error, it seems) by Geraden, a likable but ineffectual young man whose lack of talent prevents his advancement within the guild he belongs to. One can of course predict that his talent will be revealed in due time, and that it will prove to be most unusual. The guild of Imagers is the book's seminal metaphor: technicians who devise mirrors that, instead of reflecting their surroundings (to face one's true reflection is a dangerous experience in Mordant), provide images of unknown worlds, or of other places in the Mordant-continuum, and can be used to translate those images into three-dimensional expression in the Imager's own environment. Because of her dismal upbringing Terisa has almost no sense of ego and actually needs mirrors to reassure herself about her own existence; so her immunity to the consequences of self-reflection will (like Thomas Covenant's "unbelief") play an important role in balancing the forces of the secondary universe. Also like Thomas Covenant, Terisa is (at least throughout the first volume) a trial to the reader, as she relentlessly makes the wrong choices, fails to act, trusts the wrong people, betrays her friends, etc. It is through her rela-

tionship with Geraden (in whom she is, at last, reflected to herself as a real person) that she is gradually brought to recognize her duties and to act decisively in response to the events around her.

Donaldson's most unique strength is his ability to write straight allegory (often underlined by the characters' names) while yet fully engaging our feelings for the protagonists as human beings. King Joyse of Mordant, who pretends to be senile and ineffectual and whose will is done through those who still love him and believe in him, is an obvious allegory of a God hidden from His creatures and accessible to them only through faith; yet his interaction with the other characters always rings true on the human level. Joyse's daughters Elegia and Myste are presented as believable personalities, though they are also clear allegories of the "exoteric" and "esoteric" approaches to life, the analytic/social/political versus the intuitive/emotional/personal. The best developed symbolic elements are of course those involving Imagery itself, which is the power of human imagination. The fact that Imagery can be used to translate images of destruction serves to remind us that our lethal technology or war is a by-product, however negative, of human mythopoeia.

Despite the major changes in style, those who have disapproved of Donaldson's writing in the past will probably find enough imperfection here to maintain their suspicions. Although the plotting is well-paced and constantly engages the reader's attention, the very bulk of the narrative structure he is dealing with causes Donaldson to lose control of some of the threads at times. For instance, the subplot involving the princess Myste and the alien warrior Darsint, announced so portentously in the first volume, is allowed to fizzle out somewhat anticlimactically. And while the newly sobered-up diction is generally effective, it is not without stretched flatness and jarring lapses into "Poughkeepsie" (e.g., and inhabitant of "Mediaeval" Orison saying "I have a good feeling about this!"). Still, there is plenty of evidence here that Donaldson is a genuine talent with a message, willing to express his gift in new manners, whatever the risk.

Few modern American fantasists are as productive and as versatile as Sheri S. Tepper. *The Awakeners* (published in two volumes, *Northshore* and *Southshore*, TOR, 1987) is, thematically and stylistically, perhaps her most ambitious work since *The Revenants*. It is actually straight science fiction without any "super natural" or "magical" plot-elements at all; yet the enchanting atmosphere of the first chapter informs us at once that it is images and symbols and the dimension of myth that are to be our concern here, and demonstrates just how irrelevant the traditional distinctions between

fantasy and science fiction have become. On a planet divided into northern and southern halves by a "River" (actually a world-encircling ocean), human colonists co-exist with the avian Thraish, who have exhausted their native food supply and now subsist on human flesh, which they cannot, however, eat unless it has been treated with a local fungus. A complex political relationship has arisen between the Thraish and the human social elite, who provide them with food while, of course, keeping the human masses ignorant of the arrangement. This involves the setting-up of a rigid religious hierarchy (actually a Thraish religion imposed on humans), in which only the upper echelons are aware of the true state of things (in exchange, the human elite gets a rejuvenation drug from the Thraish). The book's pivotal concern is the moral and existential dilemma facing the Thraish: they can switch to a diet of fish (as the despised Treeci have done) and live peacefully and openly with humans; but then they would lose their ability to fly, and this, out of pride and perhaps a congenital incapacity to adapt, they are unwilling to risk. Change does come, however, inexorably; and we are shown how it is observed, stalled or abetted by a wide range of characters, from the Peakean grotesques in the Chancery (the human governing body) to the humane idealist Tharius Don and a sensitive, intelligent "Everyman", the boatman Thrasne. Two female characters serve to focus the plot: the charismatic visionary Pamra Don, a former "Awakener" (i.e., unwitting food-preparer for the Thraish) driven by disillusion and a series of psychic upheavals to foment a Crusade which culminates in her horrible martyrdom; and Medoor Babji, a princess of the Noor (black-skinned humans whose flesh is completely inedible by the Thraish and who are thus considered expendable, at the bottom of the social ladder), a self-contained, balanced, conscientious girl who will eventually lead her people to safety and a new home on the Southshore. The two women are often placed in the same situations, to contrast their different responses. Observing the scene yet somehow detached from it are the Jarb Mendicants, ex-madmen who have acquired complete objectivity by smoking Jarb root -- a device which, however, works only on madmen! Although the psychological mechanisms that govern the functioning of reversion of "truth" is offered in response. One is left with a certain bleak agnosticism, a recognition of the all-importance and bitterness of the mystery of death, with no solution other than the existential decision to love and trust. In the "hardness" of her vision and of the questions she asks about the human condition, Tepper (in this book, at least) reminds one of Le Guin; but she has outgrown such obvious influences, and is very much her own writer.

Continued from page 33

95-98, 111, 113, 172, 176; Tolkien, 87, 113; Williams, 94-98, 111.)

Thompson writes a survey of the Arthurian fiction published between 1882 and 1983 (3), having located 162 novels and thirty-four short stories which have either brief or extensive use of Arthurian materials (169). His survey, while incomplete

--for example, missing John MacCormac's "The Enchanted Week End," *Unknown*, 2:2 (October 1939), 115* --is the best available. He has classified the works in these patterns:

- I. Realistic Fiction (Ch. 3)
 - A. Mystery Thrillers
 - B. Modern Transpositions
- II. Historical Fiction (Ch. 4)
 - A. The Dark Ages
 - B. The High Middle Ages
- III. Science Fiction and Science Fantasy (Ch. 5)
- IV. Fantasy (Ch. 6)
 - A. Low Fantasy
 - B. Mythopoetic Fantasy
 - C. Heroic Fantasy
 - D. Ironic Fantasy

As might be expected, the discussions of Lewis' *That Hideous Strength* and Williams' *War in Heaven* fall in the section on Mythopoetic Fantasy (93-114). Thompson's discussion of Williams' novel includes this comparison:

The search for the relic [the Holy Grail] does... recall traditional elements of Arthurian Grail quests: the torment and despair of the Arch-deacon on the very eve of triumph is the same as that experienced by Perceval in the Perious Chapel before his vision. (95).

Thompson notes the obvious Arthurian borrowings in *That Hideous Strength*: Logres, the Pendragon, the Fisher-King with his wound, Merlin. Thompson comments:

Among his [Ransom's] enemies is "Fairy" Hardcastle, a cruel woman whose name and personality recall Morgan le Fay. (95)

Thompson also indicates the borrowings from Lewis and Williams in Anne Saunders Laubenthal's *Excalibur*: the hereditary Pendragonship from Lewis, the bearing of another's burden from Williams (96). However, the author is not always accurate in his comments -- for example, in saying that Ransom, as the Fisher King, "expiates his former sins through suffering from his wound" (98). The references to Tolkien are a few citations from "On Fairy-Stories." (Notes on pp. 8 and 163 expend these Tolkien references slightly).



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