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The Influence of Jean-Paul Sartre's
and Albert Camus's Existentialism on
Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles
of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*

by
Benjamin Laskar

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Suicide and the Absurd: The Influence of Jean-Paul Sartre's and Albert Camus's Existentialism on Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*

Benjamin Laskar

EXISTENTIALISM and epic fantasy at first glance seem to be incompatible. Existentialism is generally preoccupied with a reality that it identifies as absurd and meaningless. It contends that the individual is absolutely free, that objective ethical values are illusory, and that these realizations often engender feelings of despair, nausea, and anguish. On the other hand, epic fantasy (also known as high fantasy) has usually been defined as an escapist genre that avoids the exigencies of reality by immersing the reader in a fully imagined Secondary World that has no spatial or temporal connection to the real world. Furthermore, epic fantasy frequently depends on such supernatural agencies as magic and contains, as Gary K. Wolfe observes, "a struggle in which some central cultural value or values are at stake" (31). This struggle is often portrayed via a clear-cut binarism of 'good' versus 'evil,' with good (understood either overtly or implicitly in Christian terms) finally triumphant. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) is unquestionably the paradigmatic, as well as the best-known, epic fantasy. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories" (1947), Tolkien reveals the bond between epic fantasy and Christianity by noting that an epic fantasy author can offer the reader a reprieve from "the sorrow of this world" by immersing him in a Secondary World and allowing him to partake of a "eucatastrophe," the feeling evoked by the experience of a happy ending, which is similar to religious Joy as it implies the promise of a Christian salvation ("Fairy" 155). Today, the genre of epic fantasy largely conforms to Tolkien's criteria, although variations do exist. Stephen R. Donaldson's trilogy *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*, consisting of *Lord Foul's Bane* (1977), *The Illearth War* (1977), and *The Power That Preserves* (1977),¹ is one such variation. It is an epic fantasy that contains but does not conform to underlying Christian notions.² Strongly influenced by the philosophy of existentialism, this trilogy explores "the sorrow of this world," resulting in the creation of a new subgenre-existential epic fantasy.³

In “Epic Fantasy in the Modern World: A Few Observations” (1986), Donaldson suggests that Thomas Covenant is “the quintessential exemplar” of Sartre’s idea that “‘Man is a futile passion’” (7), and that Sartre’s attitude is “ruinous” because it damages an individual’s will to go on living (16). In *Lord Foul’s Bane*, Donaldson offers the counter-suggestion, based on Camus’s concept of revolt (*la révolte*), that life can be effective and worth living. First, I will outline Camus’s conception of the absurd (*l’absurde*), how people react to it, its relationship to Nature, and how it can bring about revolt. Then I will suggest how in *Lord Foul’s Bane* leprosy leads Covenant to an awareness of the absurd. I will argue that his initial reaction to his ailment is to embrace the Sartrean notion that he, his actions, and relationships are futile, a realization that only pushes him closer to suicide. Covenant’s attitude also leads him to reject the Secondary World (the Land), viewing it as an illusory escape that has harmful results. Yet his belief that he is futile begins to change as his exposure to the Land’s Nature, Beauty, and people increases. By the end of the novel, Covenant engages in revolt: his new-found passionate assertion that his life is of value in the face of absurdity indicates that he no longer believes he is ineffective, and so he is able to reject suicide.

Camus views the absurd as a relationship encompassing the whole of existence: “man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (*Myth* 31-32). Existence is therefore paradoxical; man is a seeker of order who must contend with a chaotic universe. John Cruickshank, in *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (1960), claims that Camus believes that certain factors can initiate a feeling of absurdity: “[1] the mechanical nature of many individuals’ lives, the deadening routine that marks them ... [2] a realization of the inevitable and ineluctable character of death ... [3] a feeling for the contingency and arbitrariness of our existence ... [4] an acute sense of our fundamental isolation from other human beings” (54). Camus notes that the realization of absurdity can often bring about a desire for suicide because there seems no point in continuing to live.

While some people commit physical suicide to escape the absurd, Camus notes that others attempt “philosophical suicide” (*Myth* 32). Here individuals either completely embrace faith in some form of absolute Truth in an effort to impose meaning upon the universe or come rationalistically to believe all values illusory or completely subjective. Camus does not feel that philosophical suicide offers a solution to the absurd dilemma: “I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms” (*Myth* 51).

Focusing on man’s immediate physical circumstances, Camus believes that Nature offers man an undeniable suggestion that life is worth living: “And here are the trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste. These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings when the heart

relaxes-how shall I negate this world whose power and strength I feel?" (24-25). In "Nuptials" (1938), he adds that, surrounded by Nature, "everything seems futile here except the sun, our kisses, and the wild scents of the earth The great free love of nature and the sea absorbs me completely" (66). For Camus, the body is the site of a happy marriage between man and nature. However, while Nature evokes the feeling that life is of significance, man is not in possession of this meaning-rather he is participating in it with others: "it was neither I nor the world that counted, but solely the harmony and silence that gave birth to the love between us. A love I was not foolish enough to claim for myself alone, proudly aware that I shared it with a whole race born in the sun and sea" (72). Meaning, love, and happiness are awakened in man when he becomes exposed to Nature; realizing the importance of it also causes him to realize the importance of others.⁴

While a preoccupation with Nature aids in the awareness that value can exist without a belief in an absolute, divine power, Camus notes, "everything that exalts life at the same time increases its absurdity" ("Nuptials" 91). Nature reminds man of his temporal existence and how his enjoyment, happiness, and life must come to an end. Awareness of mortality, along with the refusal to engage in "philosophical suicide," results in intensified freedom of action. Camus states: "if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies on the other hand my freedom of action. That privation of hope and future means an increase in man's availability" (*Myth* 56). Man realizes that he can choose to revolt and assert value, even though it might not be absolutely verifiable. Camus states that "the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and an unceasing struggle.... The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to" (34-35). Revolt becomes the foundation of any ethics; it gives meaning to how one faces the absurd and engenders the passion to live life intensely. Suicide is an evasion of the absurd and a rejection of the human need for meaning.

Donaldson begins *Lord Foul's Bane* by outlining the absurdist predicament through the main protagonist, Thomas Covenant. Following the Camusian existential tradition in such works as *The Plague* (1947), *The State of Siege* (1948) and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), *The Chronicles* literalizes the metaphor of the realization of existential dislocation into a sickness or ailment-in this case, Hansen's disease, better known as leprosy. Thomas Covenant contracts this illness and at a leprosarium learns its harsh existential consequences. Doctors tell him that leprosy is "the most inexplicable of human afflictions" because "it comes out of nowhere for no reason. And once you get it, you cannot hope for a cure" (*I*: 16-17). Covenant, who was once termed a "golden boy" (5) because he had such remarkable success in his life, loses to leprosy everything that he had previously invested with meaning: his wife Joan divorces him and takes away with her their young son Roger; his career as an author comes to a standstill; and a horrible, slow, suppurating death seems inevitable.

The doctors further warn Covenant that because of the debilitating nature of the disease, lepers often require great aid both physically and emotionally, but that since physical deformities are common and people suspect leprosy is easily caught and transferred,⁵ communities often despise and fear lepers, condemning them to a life of “isolation and despair” that frequently ends in suicide (17). Covenant learns this truth for himself when, returning home to his typical small mid-American town, he is met with fear and loathing from the community. He is shocked to find the friendships that he once highly valued prove worthless as the community casts him out on the pretext of protecting its safety. Covenant is effectively alienated from his fellow men and despairingly concludes that since his leprosy cannot be cured, his outcast state will continue until he dies.

Covenant also learns from the doctors that because leprosy causes numbness in the extremities, it is possible for small wounds to go unnoticed and fester. They recommend that Covenant be vigilant to ensure that nothing in his surroundings should inadvertently harm him and also to constantly perform VSEs (Visual Surveillance of the Extremities) to check for injuries. His life becomes mechanical and ritualistic, and he is described as resembling some form of “tight machinery” and as having a “mechanical stride” (1, 23). He decides that his only chance at survival is to accept completely the reality of his situation:

He could not afford to have an imagination, a faculty which could envision Joan, joy, health. If he tormented himself with unattainable desires, he would cripple his grasp on the law which enabled him to survive. His imagination could kill him, lead or seduce or trick him into suicide: seeing all the things he could not have would make him despair. (20-21)

It is revealed later that this “law” of leprosy is “a complete recognition, acceptance, of his essential impotence” (439). Covenant embraces the notion of personal futility and believes that this situation will never change. This causes him to be, as George E. Slethaug explains, “a victim of his own self-consciousness: he resents having to do anything which might take his mind off himself and his disease” (25). Covenant sacrifices the qualities that make him human so that while he might be able to avoid suicide, his existence becomes nothing more than a living death. His coping strategy actually serves to bring him even closer to suicide, as is illustrated when he courts self-destruction while shaving. He chooses to perform this act in the most hazardous manner possible, with his left hand (which is unsteady as he has lost two of the smaller fingers to gangrene) and a straight razor. He takes this risk “to discipline himself, enforce his recognition of the raw terms of his survival, mortify his recalcitrance. He instituted shaving with that blade as a personal ritual, a daily confrontation with his condition” (*I*: 21).

In Sartrean fashion, Covenant freely chooses to believe that he and his actions are futile. He embraces a Sartrean interpretation of existence (according

to *Being and Nothingness* [1943]) in which freedom is the basis of value and isolation and anguish are the results, causing suicide to become a real probability. Sartrean philosophy centres on the idea that man (the For-itself), because of consciousness, is forever separated from the world of things without consciousness (the In-itself). Yet man has the futile desire to be an (impossible) conscious/without consciousness object (Being-in-itself-for-itself). Sartre concludes that values are ultimately subjective and that, insofar as individuals attempt to find meaning in things outside of themselves, all human activities are equivalent and without meaning. Sartre states that “my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value” (*Being* 76), and that this realization results in anguish. Covenant is also in anguish. He accepts his condition, and while his strategies protect his body, emotionally he plunges deeper into what he thought he could avoid-self-hatred and despair so intense that suicide seems to offer the only relief. He begins to consider the community’s hostility towards him to be justified and to believe that he can do nothing to change his situation, as he comes to feel that the community’s “revulsion was an accomplished fact, like leprosy, immune to any question of right or justice” (*I*: 10). His view of life becomes increasingly bleak, as is revealed by the short poem he composes, in which people are described as “puppet corpses,” their lives “pale deaths,” while “hell walks laughing” (10). Even though he engages in his strategies to prolong his life, he can also see “clearly the end that waited for him; his heart would become as affectless as his body, and then he would be lost for good and all” (23).

Lord Foul’s Bane essentially begins at the moment when Covenant is overcome by absurdity and suicide is a real possibility. He leaves his home to prevent members of the community from paying his bills and having his groceries delivered so that he has no purpose for coming to town. The community (wrongly) fears that they will be infected with leprosy and view the disease as “proof of crime or filth or perversion, evidence of God’s judgement, as the horrible sign of some psychological or spiritual or moral corruption or guilt” (18). Intending to take legal action despite overwhelming fears that his predicament is essentially hopeless, Covenant goes to his lawyer’s office, but as he is crossing the road a police car rushes towards him. Unable to bear this further stress on his already fragile psyche, Covenant collapses in front of the car because he is “afraid of being crushed” (30). His action can be seen as a form of passive suicide; he has reached a critical moment in his existence when he must decide whether to continue struggling or to give up on life. Camus explains that feelings of the absurd can lead to revolt or suicide:

Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery. (*Myth* 19)

The moment of ultimate dejection also offers the chance to rediscover some meaning in life and so, at the same moment that Covenant loses consciousness, he in some sense undergoes an awakening into the Land, a fantasy world where he has the opportunity to discover that life is not completely futile.⁶

It is important at this point to clarify the nature of the fantastic Secondary World that Covenant experiences. In "Epic Fantasy in the Modern World" Donaldson defines fantasy as "an internal struggle dramatized as external events" (16), adding that in fantasy "characters meet themselves-or parts of themselves, their own needs/problems/exigencies-as actors on the stage of the story, and so the internal struggle to deal with those needs/problems/exigencies is played out as an external struggle in the action of the story" (4). He goes on to state: "Covenant despises himself for his leprosy, so in the fantasy he meets that Despite from the outside; he meets Lord Foul and wrestles with him as an external enemy" (4). In an interview with W.A. Senior, moreover, he notes that "there is a sense in which Thomas Covenant is the Land" (231). Consequently, there is a strong temptation to read *The Chronicles* as an allegory or even as a psychodrama. Yet Donaldson in an interview with Michael Vance (1985) states: "I distrust the word allegory...The term I use is metaphysical...I'm not trying to say, literally, that the fantasy world [Covenant] goes through is only a projection of his own mind. But, it's like being a projection of his own mind because that is the struggle that's happening inside his mind" (10).

In light of Donaldson's comments, I believe that Camus' approach to the novel form can offer some insight into how *The Chronicles* should be interpreted. *The Chronicles* follow quite closely Camus's novelistic strategy in *The Plague*, in which both literal and metaphoric meaning are synthesized into what John Cruickshank terms a "symbolist novel." This is when "the relationship between two or more levels of meaning is not so continuously sustained as in the allegory, yet is more complete and organic than in what might be called politico-metaphysical fiction" (168). Cruickshank adds that unlike allegory *The Plague* does not continually maintain two separate levels of meaning and that the novel's "symbolism, through frequent, is of an intermittent kind" (167). While it is possible for *The Plague* to be interpreted variously as a story about individuals combating an epidemic, about the German Occupation of France, and about man's absurd condition and his revolt against death and futility, the novel should be considered as a whole because the different levels of meaning often complement and support each other. That *The Plague* contains both literal and metaphysical levels of meaning is endorsed by Camus's own theory of the novel, namely (as Cruickshank summarizes it) that "novels should take a middle path between the particular and the universal; that they will receive dimensional fullness only from a proper combination of both. Novels should hold the concrete and the abstract in a natural and closely knit proportion and balance" (169). Cruickshank notes that in *The Plague* Camus imagined "a series of events specifically designed to embody his prior metaphysic" (168) as "the plague provides him both with

the closed world of the absurd (the town of Oran cut off from contact with the outside world) and with the necessity of revolt (the efforts of Dr. Rieux and others to combat the plague and reduce its lethal effects)” (167-68).

Following Cruickshank’s lead, I will explore how Donaldson’s fantasy world offers literal, symbolic, and metaphysical levels of meaning simultaneously. The struggle of Covenant and the inhabitants of the Land against Lord Foul can be taken literally-or symbolically as Covenant’s battle against the self-hatred and despair within himself. The Land also presents Covenant with a metaphysical, absurdist dilemma: he is placed in a world bereft of divine supervision⁷ and must decide whether to deny the Land by maintaining a faith in rationalism in order to keep his leper survival skills intact when he returns to the real world, or to allow a faith in irrationalism and accept the Land, thereby compromising his survival instincts in the Primary World. As is apparent, both these choices are forms of philosophical suicide. Death is also a constant threat in Covenant’s dilemma because if in the real world he does not move past a sense of his own futility he will eventually commit suicide. On the other hand, since the reality of the Land is left ambiguous Covenant could be killed if he does not acknowledge that the Land is real and has mortal dangers.⁸

The Land, as it is separated from the Primary World, may also represent the closed world of the absurd. The necessity of revolt is here apparent, because only by Covenant asserting that life is of value, even if this is objectively unverifiable, can he find the strength to struggle against death and futility in both the Primary and Secondary Worlds. Covenant must believe in the suggestion of meaning the Land causes him to feel but must disbelieve in the Land as offering any absolute reality. Lena, the first person that Covenant meets in the Land, sings a song to him indicating that beauty, nature, and meaning are linked but that their existence and effects are not based on any absolute reality:

Something there is in beauty
which grows in the soul of the beholder
like a flower:
...
... the world may die,
but the soul in which the flower grows
survives. (57)

Here is the suggestion that a capacity to appreciate Nature enhances the capacity for survival. Through this song Donaldson also alludes to Camus’s theory of art. Camus mentions that revolt is similar to Beauty as it is created through the unification of the rational and the irrational: “[revolt] obstinately claims, so as to satisfy its hunger for unity, an integral part of the reality whose name is beauty. One can reject all history yet accept the world of the sea and the stars....The procedure of beauty, which is to contest reality while endowing it with unity, is also the procedure of [revolt]” (*Rebel* 276). Lena’s

song, then, suggests that the Land is a creation, like art, and that Covenant must recognize its beauty and significance without necessarily fully accepting its reality. The Giant Foamfollower and Lord Mhoram further strengthen this idea by stating that being able to appreciate Beauty is one way to resist despite (*I*: 284).

Unfortunately, Covenant's Sartrean outlook makes it difficult for him to accept the Land at all. To him, the Land offers only false hopes—an escape from his condition and from the idea that it is possible for him to engage in effective action. He fears that if he accepts the Land and ignores reality—that all is futile—his death once he returns to the Primary World is assured. Sartre would also refuse to believe in the Land; he would claim it to be a form of “Bad Faith.” Wilfrid Desan explains this Sartrean concept thus: “bad faith is not a lie, for a lie is the exploitation of the ontological duality between you and myself....In bad faith, *I mask the truth from myself*, not in two different moments of temporality but in the unity of the present instant” (24). Because the Land is ontologically ambiguous, Covenant attempts to reject this literal fantasy that offers to treat him and his actions as significant.

The Land's inhabitants place pressure on Covenant to acknowledge that he and his actions can be effective. When encountering him, people take his mutilated half-hand to be a sign that he is the legendary hero Berek Half-hand, who once saved the Land from the Despiser and, as it was prophesied, will do so again in a time of need. In addition, Covenant's white-gold wedding ring suddenly becomes a talisman of power as he discovers that ancient legends prophesy that the bearer of the white gold will play a crucial factor in the fate of the Land (*I*: 72). Previously, his half-hand and wedding ring had only represented to him life's meaninglessness and his own futility (12, 27). Now these symbols have become invested with significance, but Covenant cannot accept this. After listening to Atiaran explain about Berek and the white gold, Covenant realizes that everyone expects him to save them from Lord Foul. He is unable to assume this responsibility and accept that he might not be as powerless as he desires and runs off into the night. Lena finds him, but her sympathy combined with her confidence that he is a man of consequence enrages him, and in an act he later describes as “a complex way of hurting himself” (*II*: 419), Covenant rapes her. He has refused to accept that he has value or responsibility and that his sense of futility is largely due to his staunch unbelief in himself. He feels that “nothing could be as fatal to him—nothing could destroy him body and mind as painfully as the illusion of power” (*I*: 439). Power is as seductive as Beauty and Covenant fears it will likewise destroy what he feels necessary for his survival—belief in his own futility. Raping Lena illustrates to himself that he is worthless by validating the prejudice that leprosy is “proof of crime or filth or perversion...the horrible sign of some psychological or spiritual or moral corruption or guilt” (18). Furthermore, after the rape occurs, Covenant is unable to admit it happened, as it is his first potent act since acquiring leprosy—both as a physical act and in the sense that it shows him that he can affect his situation. It is therefore a blow to his certainty that he is essentially futile. He also evades responsibility for the power of the

white gold and the wild magic it contains by declaring that he has no knowledge of its use and refusing to learn how to operate it. He continually makes statements similar to the one he makes to Atiaran after he was unable to prevent the slaughter of the Wraiths: "I'm a leper. I don't know anything about power" (168).

Covenant's attitude to the Land itself is also quite Sartrean. Peter Royle notes that

Sartre's attitude to nature is the opposite of Camus's...for Sartre [nature] is menacing and revolting...what Sartre fears is clearly everything that is endowed with life, plants, animals, and in a sense, other people. Everything is classified according to its coefficient of instrumentality or coefficient of adversity...and in the non-human world minerals are liable to be less adverse than plants and animals endowed with life. (37)

An attitude that judges everything according to the potential threat it constitutes is exactly the attitude a leper has towards the world (*I*: 18). In addition, although Covenant shows no particular affinity for mineral artifacts (although at times he is reassured by the solidity of stone), he is occasionally overcome by the power and vitality of the Land, such as when he rides through Morinmoss forest (349) and in his reaction to the horses, the Ranyhyn. These horses are described as looking "like the Land personified-the essence of health and power" and initially Covenant has an intense (fear of and) aversion towards them (277).

Covenant also suffers from Sartrean emotions, such as nausea, anguish, and vertigo. Serge Doubrovsky explains that in the Sartrean world "nausea" occurs because it has "its source in the double awareness of subject and object, of the absolute separation of consciousness and nature, in man's impotent negation of being as he tries symbolically to 'reject' a world from which he is effectively rejected" (74). Vertigo and anguish arise when an individual confronts a situation that seems to offer the potential of death (such as a high place); Sartre explains that in this situation, "I am in anguish precisely because any conduct on my part is only *possible*, and this means that while constituting a totality of motives *for* pushing away that situation, I at the same moment apprehend these motives as not sufficiently effective" (*Being* 68). Essentially, Sartre believes that anguish and vertigo are evoked by the realization that one is absolutely free in the sense that only oneself prevents oneself from doing anything, even if it is jumping off a cliff. Although Donaldson does not evoke these emotions in a strict Sartrean sense, Covenant's experience of these emotions indicates his desire to reject the Secondary World and suggests how his isolated freedom actually leads to the strong possibility of suicide. For example, Covenant almost jumps off Kevin's Watch when he realizes he is no longer in his own world (*I*: 41); after raping Lena, his vertigo and nausea suggest his desire to deny both what he has done and his connection to other people (91); when, at the Rites of Spring, he sees the ur-viles de-

stroy the Wraiths while he merely looks on, Covenant feels “nauseated and enraged and impotent” (163). Almost every moment in the Land causes Covenant to experience vertigo, nausea, or anguish, revealing his constant struggle with absurdity and futility.

Despite all of Covenant’s attempts to reject the Secondary World, he is slowly seduced into feeling that it is of value. Lena the Stonedowner explains to Covenant that the Land possesses a tangible form of magic that can influence the external world and the reciprocity between man, Nature, and community when she states, “there is power in the Earth-power and life...we are blind to them because we do not share enough, with the Land, and with each other” (55). Covenant is exposed to this power when Lena cures his leprosy with the magical mud hurtloam (54) and also when she feeds him aliantha, which makes Covenant feel that “the sensations of eating had never been so vivid, so compulsory” (56). One of the greatest effects that the Land has on Covenant is that it makes it possible for a diseased person to envisage health. In the Andelainian Hills, Covenant realizes that “he was seeing health, smelling natural fitness and vitality, hearing the true exuberance of spring. *Health* was as vivid around him as if the spirit of the Land’s life had become palpable, incarnate” (127). The power and potential vitality of Nature affect Covenant’s outlook on life and begin to dispell his conviction that he is futile. Now the Land offers “a dangerous loveliness, not because it was treacherous or harmful, but because it could seduce. Before long, disease, VSE, Despite, anger, all were forgotten, lost in the flow of health from one vista to another around him” (152). As Senior observes, “The Andelainian Hills provide a medicine for the sterility of both [Covenant’s] body and soul, like the hurtloam and aliantha berries that reinvigorate his lost nerves and touch. Each responds directly to some need or lack in him, parts of an entire world whose being responds to Covenant’s condition” (94).

The Giant Foamfollower also extols the powers of nature, and his song reveals that Donaldson is using Camusian Nature symbolism to illustrate how Nature evokes a sense of value in man and fosters a sense of connection with others. Foamfollower sings:

Stone and Sea are deep in life,
two unalterable symbols of the world:
permanence at rest, and permanence in motion;
participants in the Power that remains. (*I*: 179)

S. Beynon John reveals that Stone and Sea are common symbols in Camus’s works; both suggest the “permanence of nature,” while the sea “also conveys the notion of permanence but in the context of perpetual renewal” (136). I would add the Sky to these motifs of Nature as well, since Camus often mentions how the “raw blue sky” affects him (“Nuptials” 65) and in “Summer” (1954) states, “I found an ancient beauty, a young sky, and measured my good fortune as I realized at last that in the worst years of our madness the memory of this sky had never left me. It was this that in the end

had saved me from despair”(168). Throughout *The Chronicles*, Donaldson highlights the power of Stone, which offers the inhabitants of the Land a means to access the power of Nature through magical means. The Sea and Sky, on the other hand, play a more indirect role in *The First Chronicles*.⁹

Donaldson represents the positive power of the Sky and Sea by embodying it in the characters of the Lords. They evince the same power of permanence and renewal as Camus’s symbols in that the Lords are committed to Nature and to the people of the Land and share a deep reciprocal relationship with both. Blue, described as “only a shade lighter than the clear sky” (*I*: 213), is the colour of both the Lords’ robes and their magical fire. Covenant is also told that this blue colour is “the standard of the Lords. It signifies their Oath and guidance to the peoples of the Land” (213). Foamfollower elaborates on the reciprocal relationship of the Lords with the Land and its people when he speaks of Mhoram, the strongest of the Lords: “he will never falter, because his Lordship, his service to the Land, will sustain him. Service enables service” (385).

Part of the Lords’ pledge to the Land also intertwines water and colour imagery as the Lords speak of the rivers that have been poisoned by the Despiser: “we will not rest...until the Gray flows Blue,/and Rill and Maerl are as new and clean/as ancient Lllurallin” (233). The line “until the Gray flows Blue” is of particular importance as it illustrates that Donaldson is continuing to follow Camus’s lead by setting the colour gray in opposition to the colour blue. Alba Amoia notes that “cold northern grayness ... fills [Camus] with a deep sense of despair ... the color gray, for him, is associated with sadness, ennui, and the absence of sensuality” (58-59). As aforementioned, Camus stated that the Sky “had saved [him] from despair.” It is no surprise then that the Lords’ enemy, Lord Foul, is associated with the colour gray. For example, Berek’s army was attacked by the Despiser in the form of “a gray cloud” and that this “gray onslaught whelmed the heroes,” resulting in Berek’s “despair” (*I*: 82). In addition, the Despiser is known as “the Gray Slayer” (35), his presence is heralded by the “universal gray of fogs” (33), and when Atiaran believes that she has failed in her quest, “her voice grew gray with self-despite” (176).¹⁰

Through song, the Lords also reveal to Covenant the dangers of a strict adherence to a belief in futility:

...the Land is beautiful,
as if it were a strong soul’s dream of peace and harmony,
and Beauty is not possible without discipline—
and the Law which gave birth to Time
is the Land’s Creator’s self-control. (258)

This song suggests that Beauty comes from Law, which is also a form of self-control. For Covenant to attempt to achieve Beauty, or “peace and harmony” in his soul, he must first achieve self-control. Covenant already leads a life of extreme self-discipline due to his leprosy. As was suggested

earlier, the “law” of leprosy is “a complete recognition, acceptance, of his essential impotence” (439), and it is this belief that leads him closer to suicide.

The plot of *Lord Foul’s Bane* involves the Quest to reclaim the Staff of Law from Drool Rockworm who is under the power of Lord Foul the Despiser. The Staff of Law is “not a neutral tool” but “a servant of the Earth and the Earth’s Law” (267). Drool’s misuse of the Staff to harm the earth has caused him to become physically warped and prematurely old (see 442). He is also unable to give up the Staff as it allows him some degree of power. Covenant has similarly allowed his personal life-laws to warp him until he completely accepts that he is futile. The rituals that he performs which were initially created to preserve his life, now simply isolate him from the external world and from other people. Like Drool, Covenant does not realize that he is caught in a vicious circle that is ultimately self-consuming. Covenant senses his kinship with the cavewight in that they both abuse themselves through law and despair. When Drool dies, Covenant refuses to rejoice and states sadly to Mhoram, “He’s just another victim” (468). Drool represents what Covenant will become if he is unable to achieve self-control: a mindless puppet of Law and hatred, desiring only to crush the remnants of his will and passion that actually enables survival.¹¹ By participating in the rescue of the Staff, Covenant is engaging in a revolt as he rejects the idea that his life must be strictly ruled by futility.

Donaldson borrows Camus’s use of red colour imagery to further highlight the destructiveness of embracing a law of futility and isolation from others. In Camus’s *The Outsider* (1942), the main character, Meursault, blinded by the light flashing off a seemingly “red-hot blade” (59), kills an Arab and is put to death by what Germaine Brée calls a “miscarriage of justice” (113-14). S. Beynon John notes that Meursault is “the symbol of man perpetually estranged in the world” and that this conception is reinforced when Camus uses the sun and its red light as a “potent destructive influence, absolv[ing] man from responsibility, and hence from guilt, by reducing him to something less than man, to the status of an irresponsible element in nature. In this way, the notion of the absurdity of life...is underlined and given dramatic color” (138). In *Lord Foul’s Bane*, the police car that almost strikes Covenant is a symbol of abusive law, and the “single red gleam” of its siren (*I*: 30) is the last thing Covenant sees in his world, while in the Secondary World, this gleam resolves itself into the “red balls” of Drool’s eyes (31). In addition, Drool’s chamber is full of “red gleamings” (31) and later, when Drool wishes to assert his power, he turns the moon a red described by Covenant as “the color of blood and Drool’s laval eyes” (172). As Covenant progresses in the Land and attempts to maintain a grip on absolute rationalism, a red taint grows upon his wedding ring and only fully disappears at the end of the novel when he rejects suicide (467). While Donaldson’s red imagery is not an active “destructive influence,” it is associated with both Drool’s and Covenant’s destructive behavior.

Covenant’s inability to acknowledge the value of the Land and its inhabitants because of his carefully constructed defense mechanisms reaches a criti-

cal pass in the Plains of Ra. He realizes the damage that he has done in the past, such as his inability to prevent the destruction of the Wraiths and his rape of Lena but still fears to fully admit his responsibility and to acknowledge that he is capable of affecting his situation. In desperation, he attempts to postpone the acknowledgement that he can be effective through a bargain with the Ranyhyn, the power and the health of the Land personified. Covenant promises the Ranyhyn that he will forbear to do anything which might have a harmful result if they promise to stop making him realize the fact that it is possible for health and value to exist: "in return for his forbearance" the Ranyhyn had to "suffer his Unbelief" (374). In essence, this bargain admits the possibilities of his own meaning while at the same time denying that this acknowledgement has to result in him taking action. It is an attempt to admit the absurd situation but avoid confrontation with it. As Camus states,

Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. (*Myth 53*)

For the remainder of the quest into Mount Thunder Covenant attempts to forbear from taking any action, to accept his situation, and to go along with events passively while maintaining his silence. He hungers now only for a resolution of his predicament and feels that by doing nothing he will either die and escape suffering or be returned to the Primary World with his instincts still intact. Soon after the bargain with the Ranyhyn, he attempts suicide by touching the fire that had imprisoned Birinair, an action which he sees as "a chance for immolation, escape" (*I*: 428). As Camus notes, suicide is a flawed solution because "in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death.... The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death" (*Myth 54*).

Upon the peak of Mount Thunder, Covenant comes to the realization that silent acceptance is the way to suicide and at last he revolts, he asserts that his life is worth living in the face of absurdity. Trapped between ur-viles and cavewights, the Quest seems doomed, yet Covenant realizes that it is his choice to take action and reject suicide even though he feels he is sentencing himself to death in the Primary World as this action violates the law of his leprosy. With the aid of Bannor the Bloodguard and Prothall, Covenant grasps the Staff of Law, triggering the fire-lions and thereby destroying Lord Foul's minions and saving the Quest (465). His affirmation of the value of his life in the face of the absurd results in his freedom from a sense of futility and self-hatred.

It is significant also that Covenant's ring is now freed from Drool's red taint (467). Covenant's wedding ring is the site of wild magic and as Fike

notes, Covenant's "white gold is not a weapon like a sword but...articulates wild magic, allowing it to become an extension of his own passion" ("Nature" 20). The disappearance of the red taint symbolizes Covenant's recovered capacity for meaning and passion for life. Although until now Covenant has been unable to consciously access this power, at the end of *Lord Foul's Bane* the potential for him to access it has been restored. Covenant returns to his own world and draws comfort from the fact that "he had survived" (I: 474).

Donaldson has dramatized Camus's concept of the absurd through his presentation of Covenant's world as offering only futility and incoherence and of the Land as offering the possibilities of meaning and significance. A Camusian revolt is apparent through Covenant's rejection of futility and his assertion that value can exist (fostered by a recognition of the importance of Nature and of others) despite being ultimately unverifiable. Covenant willingly helps the Land, and even though its reality is not absolutely verifiable, the effect the Secondary World evokes in him gives Covenant the strength to resist suicide temporarily; however, the relief is only temporary because Donaldson makes it clear that the situation is far from resolved. The Despiser and the Illearth Stone continue to exist, and the Land is still in danger. Donaldson wishes to illustrate that a successful personal revolt restores the capacity for meaning to an individual, but that this is only the first step in ensuring a victory over self-hatred and a sense of futility. In the vein of Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*, Donaldson has made it clear that Covenant has recognized his own importance as a human being, lending him the strength to confront the absurdity of existence. However, Donaldson has so far failed to clarify the consequences of these realizations in relation to others, and has produced, as Cruickshank notes of Camus, "a solipsistic moral world" (88). Covenant has not learned what actions to take nor how to live his life in a community¹²; his passion has been activated but it requires guidelines. It is this very problem that Camus addresses in *The Rebel* and that Donaldson will continue to explore in subsequent books of *The Chronicles*.

It is certainly the case that Donaldson's epic fantasy has been influenced by existentialism, and interestingly enough, Hazel E. Barnes notes that much of the fiction by Sartre and Camus could be termed "myths" or "fantasies" (26). Donaldson's theory that fantasy serves to express man's condition, that it is "the internal made external" (*Epic* 3-4), actually bears close resemblance to Barnes's observation that in existentialist "fantasies,"

the plot is ancillary to the metaphysical question. Its purpose is to serve as a framework within which human possibilities may be developed and a man's choice of himself made evident ... the imagination is used to portray man in what is, from one point of view, a purely fictional situation but at the same time a revelation of man's actual philosophical or human condition. (27)

It seems then that fantasy and existentialism are not as diametrically opposed as might first be imagined. While Donaldson has written a trilogy that would

not completely satisfy either strict fantasists or existentialists, perhaps *The Chronicles* can be judged in their own right as a fine example of existentialist epic fantasy. Donaldson has created a remarkable and original work, but we can detect the indelible fingerprint of Camus's thought throughout *The Chronicles*. These two writers share the common goal of creating stories, be they fantasies or myths, "with no other depth than that of human suffering and, like it, inexhaustible. Not the divine fable that amuses and blinds, but the terrestrial face, gesture, and drama in which are summed up a difficult wisdom and an ephemeral passion" (*Myth*, 106).

Notes

¹ Hereafter, I will use *The Chronicles* to refer to the trilogy. In parenthetical citations, *Lord Foul's Bane*, *The Illearth War* and *The Power That Preserves* will be referred to as 'I,' 'II,' 'III' respectively.

² Matthew Fike observes that the name 'Thomas Covenant' is indicative of "the doubting Thomas of the Gospel of John-the original 'unbeliever'-and an embodiment of the term 'covenant' ... [which] involves self-sacrifice, [and] which is the essence of the divinely enabled agapic love Christ embodies on the Cross." Fike further notes, "although Thomas Covenant rejects, and is in a sense rejected by, religious doctrine, he nevertheless journeys ... toward the meaning of his name" ("Hero" 34-35). I believe Fike to be correct in his assertion that Covenant learns the love of self-sacrifice (and compassion), and would further agree that Covenant "does not participate in the divine" (35), because as will become apparent, according to Camus, the divine is something individuals must rebel against.

I will argue that Christian transcendentalism is ultimately rejected by *The Chronicles*, and, in so doing, try to resolve a problem raised by Brian Attebery, who feels that since Covenant cannot commit himself to the fantasy world he experiences, he never establishes a relationship with anything outside of himself. Furthermore, Donaldson cannot demonstrate that this world truly exists, as Covenant would then seem foolish for not engaging in it. This reasoning allows Attebery to conclude, "Donaldson fails to bridge the gap between his personal and cultural concerns and the adopted medium in which he is seeking to express them" (160). W.A. Senior responds by pointing out that the narrative structure of *The Chronicles* suggests that the fantasy world is in some sense 'real,' but I feel that neither Attebery's nor Senior's views on this issue are completely correct. Senior further observes in an endnote, "existentialism offers an entire approach to the Chronicles" (256). Building upon the work he has already done, and the major existential theme of revolt that I identify in *The Chronicles*, I will argue that the ambiguity concerning the authenticity of the fantasy world the reader feels is constructed to mirror the doubt Covenant experiences. Like Covenant, the reader is simultaneously drawn to believe and disbelieve in the fantastic realm in order to learn an ethical lesson.

³ I use this term to describe epic fantasy that incorporates ideas or themes commonly associated with existential philosophy. George E. Slusser has suggested a somewhat broader definition in which the term is used to describe the tendency of

some modern fantasy to be opaque and present images that are nonreferential (150-178).

⁴ Donaldson deviates farthest from Camus in this respect, as Camus is preoccupied by the effect that an actual, tangible world has upon the individual, whereas the Nature that Covenant experiences in *The Chronicles* is never portrayed as tangible or absolutely real. As will become more apparent, Donaldson has not completely abandoned Camus here; he has chosen rather to highlight the correspondence between Nature and man's nature through the medium of fantasy, which Donaldson describes as "a form of fiction in which the internal crises or conflicts or processes of the characters are dramatized as if they were external individuals or events" ("Epic" 3-4), and by his presentation of the Land's reality as ambiguous, which develops Camus's idea that the meaning that individuals discover in life has no absolute, verifiable ground.

⁵ Doctors actually inform Covenant that "[leprosy] is not fatal; it is not contagious in any conventional way" (16).

⁶ In keeping with the idea that Covenant's Primary World is a Sartrean world, in Covenant's collapse Donaldson literalizes an example Sartre uses in *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1939). Sartre hypothesizes his own fainting at the approach of a ferocious beast and explains his behaviour thus: "unable to escape the danger by normal means and deterministic procedures, I have denied existence to it. I have tried to annihilate it. The urgency of the danger was the motive for this attempt to annihilate it, which called for magical behaviour. And, in the event, I have annihilated it so far as was in my power. Such are the limitations of my magical power over the world: I can suppress it as an object of consciousness, but only by suppressing consciousness itself" (66). I believe that Donaldson uses this example to illustrate that the influence individuals have over their world is greater than Sartre imagined, as Covenant's experience is much more than a mere suppression of his consciousness.

⁷ The Creator of the Land explicitly states he is not allowed to interfere in the Land (*III*: 472).

⁸ The note that Covenant receives before he enters the Land states the dilemma that he faces in very Camusian terms. It describes the powerful effects of the Land's Nature, the dangers of philosophical suicide, and even ends positing a remarkably similar thesis to Camus's thesis in *The Myth of Sisyphus* ("Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" [11]). I offer the note here in its entirety:

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.

The man refuses to believe that 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 ex-

ists. 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 behaviour courageous or cowardly? This is the fundamental question of ethics. (I: 24-25)

⁹ Donaldson limits the direct effects of the sea in *The Chronicles* to swimming. As John notes, in *The Plague* "the plunge into the sea is at once an act of purification from the plague (insofar as the epidemic represents suffering, evil and death), a rite of friendship, and a means of recovering freedom or, at least, of being recalled to it" (142). In *The Illearth War*, after Covenant swims with Elena in Lake Glimmermere, he is able to speak frankly about his despairing condition, share a kiss with her and they begin to feel love for one another (II: 146). Furthermore, in *The Power That Preserves*, after Mhoram goes swimming in Lake Glimmermere, he is able to resist psychological despair and then sets out to fight its physical manifestation, Lord Foul's army (III: 333). The role of the sea expands and becomes central in the *Second Chronicles*.

¹⁰ Atiaran stands as an example to Covenant of the dangerous and destructive effects that despair has on individuals. She has allowed despair to utterly destroy her own feelings of self-worth, causing her to believe that her every act is meaningless and futile. She charges Foamfollower to continue the mission to guide Covenant, while incorrectly believing that she had "already caused it to fail" (176). Atiaran's forehead reveals her internal despair in that "etched there was the vastness of the personal hurt which she contained by sheer force of will, and the damage she did herself by containing it" (177). (For the rest of the trilogy, head wounds are synonymous with individuals who experience despair.) Covenant recognizes that he shares a sort of kinship with Atiaran, as is evident when he makes a silent plea to her as she leaves him because of her own self-hatred, doubt and despair: "At least forgive yourself...Why are we so unable?" (178).

¹¹ In Drool's case, he seeks to destroy the Lords even though they would help him by taking the Staff from him.

¹² Even when Covenant helped Prothall, it was because Bannor placed Covenant's hand on the Staff (I: 465).

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