Esotericism Without Religion: Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

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When, in 1995, Philip Pullman's publishers offered a novel called *Northern Lights* to the market niche of "young adults," he had no great hopes for it.[1] Several years before, he had left the security of teaching to write full-time, and had had moderate success with that dwindling readership; he reckoned that his new book "would be read by about 500 people at the most."[2] But the right people did read and review it, and the next year it was awarded the Carnegie Medal for the best children's book. A sequel, *The Subtle Knife* (1997), was an instant bestseller. Three years later, the trilogy was completed by *The Amber Spyglass*, and Pullman's fans, now exceeding his gloomy estimate by several orders of magnitude, argued over whether or not the final volume was a let-down. It did not matter: the book won the Whitbread Book of the Year award, given for the first time to a so-called children's book—though more than one reader exclaimed: "This is Harry Potter for grown-ups!" Translations into dozens of languages followed. In 2004, London's National Theatre staged *His Dark Materials* (the collective title) in two plays of three hours each, and now the first novel of the trilogy has reached the apogee of fame as a "major motion picture." After years of precarious survival in the home of lost causes, Pullman found himself showered with literary prizes, honorary degrees, and the plaudits of the great and the good.[3]

Not everyone is pleased by his success, for reasons that will become obvious. For those who have not read *His Dark Materials*, the essentials can be summarized quite briefly. The heroine, twelve-year-old Lyra, lives in a parallel world somewhat resembling our own, in which history has taken a different course. In the sixteenth

century of Lyra's world, the fanatical reformer John Calvin was elected Pope. After his death, the papacy was replaced with a theocratic "Magisterium" headquartered in Geneva, which succeeded in gaining control over every aspect of life.[4] Science was classed as "experimental theology," and all speculation subjected to rigid censorship. By the present day, when the story happens, technology has advanced to the point of steam trains and majestic zeppelins.[5]

That is the modern history of Lyra's world. The ancient history, scattered in hints throughout *His Dark Materials,* embraces not only hers but all the myriad worlds, and it goes as follows.[6] The universe is uncreated and consists of material particles, the most subtle of which are known in the book as "Dust." At some point, these particles became self-conscious, and matter began to understand itself, and to love itself. As it did so, more Dust was formed, and the first conscious being emerged: an angel, known in the book as "The Authority." When other angels emerged from the evolving substance, the Authority told them that he had created them (which was a lie), and sought to exercise his power over all conscious beings. Later, one came who was wiser than the Authority (elsewhere identified as Sophia or wisdom), but she was banished.[7]

Before our present world was created, some of the angels, followers of wisdom, rebelled against the Authority and were cast down.[8] They continued to work for his downfall and for the opening of the minds he sought to close.[9] Led by Sophia, they gave to the evolving beings in each world a gift that would help them understand themselves and become wise. In some worlds, they gave them a dæmon.[10] In our world, these angels had dealings with humans, and interbred with them.[11] The awakening to fully human consciousness occurred here between 30,000 and 40,000 years ago, as part of the rebel angels' plan against the Authority.[12]

On rare occasions, humans on both sides of the conflict were able to rise to angelic status. Such was Baruch, one of the pair of angels who helps in the assault on the Authority. Another was Enoch, who graduated from the human state 4000 years ago, and was chosen as Regent of the Authority under the name of Metatron.[13] At the time of the story, this Regent, seeing conscious beings becoming dangerously independent, is planning to intervene much more in

human affairs and to set up a permanent Inquisition in every world.[14] The Authority, for his part, has gradually withdrawn to his residence in the "Clouded Mountain." When we meet him near the end of the book, he is in the last stages of senility, and dies.[15]

One of the defining characteristics of epic literature is the presence of the divine and its interaction with humans. It figures largely in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*; Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (together with Blake, the primary literary influence on Pullman and the source of the phrase *His Dark Materials*), Goethe's *Faust*, and Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*. If these do not always "justify the ways of God[s] to man," at least they represent them, with all their implications. Another characteristic of epic is that it usually contains a cosmogony or creation myth, and a cosmology or explanation of the world-system.

His Dark Materials satisfies epic tradition in these respects, as also in the heroic and tragic nature of its protagonists. This summary also reveals some of the things that irk the defenders of the faith. Pullman's depiction of the Church and its ministers makes them out to be sleazy, repressive, and cruel. The trilogy's dramatic mainspring is the reversal of the outcome of the last War in Heaven—the one described in *Paradise Lost*, in which God's angels conquered Satan's. In the process, Lyra and her boy companion Will Parry travel to the Land of the Dead (another requisite of epic literature) to find a drab Homeric Hades in which the Authority has imprisoned the spirits of all conscious beings. Will and Lyra's task is to let these ghosts out, so that their subtle atoms can return to nature, a process of dissolution experienced as ecstatic release. The children learn the lesson that there is no paradise but the here and now, and no prospect superior to the "republic of heaven" that we may build while we are alive. The promises and threats of the monotheistic religions, in short, are revealed as a pack of lies.

Catholics and Evangelicals alike have savaged *His Dark Materials* on the grounds that it denigrates religion and woos its young readers to atheism.[16] As we know from the examples of Salman Rushdie (author of *The Satanic Verses*) and, more recently, Mel Gibson (director of *The Passion of the Christ*), nothing generates

more publicity than upsetting people's religious sensibilities and getting them to protest against one's work. But one has to be careful about whom to annoy. Although Mr. Pullman has rightly said that "every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him," he has more sense than to attack Islam or Judaism directly.[17] In secular Britain, Christianity is easier game, and less likely to hit back in unpleasant ways.[18] Instead of slinking around in fear of the Ayatollah's assassins, as Mr. Rushdie did for years, Pullman has the Archbishop of Canterbury eating out of his hand.[19] It remains to be seen how this will go down in the USA, if the filmmakers do not shirk Pullman's image of what many Americans still regard as God.

Seen from the other side, it is no wonder that many Christians of another stamp, Archbishop Williams included, feel no animus toward Pullman and his novel. For one thing, they can recognize fiction when they see it. For another, the Calvinist theocracy of Lyra's world is the last brand of Christianity they want to identify with. They share what Pullman describes as his "deep anger and yes, horror at the excesses of cruelty and infamy that've been carried out in the name of a supernatural power."[20] As to whether the books encourage atheism in their young (or even older) readers, that is a matter for reflection rather than hysteria. Dr. Williams says that it is healthy for anyone to ask himself or herself what sort of god they do *not* believe in.[21]

While its cosmogony is atheist, in the sense that the universe is uncreated, and its cosmology materialist, *His Dark Materials* lacks for nothing in wonder and magic. Spurning the drab, denatured universe of the existentialist novelists, Pullman has drawn on another current that has often run in opposition to the churches: the esoteric tradition. Magpie-like, he has picked up fragments from Hermeticism, from Kabbalah and Jewish legend, from Gnosticism, theosophy, and the occult sciences, and interwoven them with current notions of physics. His worlds proliferate with angels, witches, shamans, specters, talking beasts, and especially with dæmons.

Readers and critics agree that one of his happiest inventions is the dæmon: a part of the individual exteriorized in the form of an animal,

bird, or insect of the opposite sex, which accompanies every person closely their life long. The dæmon speaks with a human voice, but has the senses and skills of the appropriate animal. It acts as playmate or companion, as an ever-present partner in conversation, and often as a wise counselor. The dæmons of children are unstable, changing from one animal to another according to whim or circumstance, until at puberty they settle into a permanent form. Lyra is distressed when she first comes into the world of her friend Will, which is our world, and sees people without their accompanying dæmons: it seems to her indecent, or tragic, until she persuades herself that people in our world have their dæmons inside themselves. Among the obvious forerunners of this brilliant notion is the *daimon* of Socrates, with its habit of warning him against imprudent actions or dangerous circumstances. Another is Carl Jung's anima or animus as a contra-sexual element in the unconscious, its instinctual wisdom sometimes represented in dreams or visions by an animal or bird. Then there is the idea of finding one's own "animal spirit," which has entered the imagery of the New Age by way of Native American and other shamanic cultures. These parallels show why Pullman's invention rings so true, especially to young readers who yearn for a close and faithful companion, and often find an invisible one, to the annoyance of rational parents and teachers.

Pullman, like any author in touch with the mysterious sources of the creative imagination, is definitely on the irrational side here.[22] He skillfully avoids the reductionism to which the atheist world view is often prone, and the consequent one-dimensionality of the human being. Lyra, already familiar with her dæmon-soul, speculates that humans comprise three things: the body, the dæmon, and the "ghost." Mary Malone, a character from our world, remarks on how Saint Paul talks of body, soul, and spirit, so that Lyra's three-part view of human nature is not so strange to her. As for the ultimate fate of these components, the body eventually decays and its atoms return to nature, as do those of the dæmon, which vanishes into thin air immediately upon death. That leaves the spirit or ghost, which as Lyra says is "the part that can think about the other two."[23] So long as the Authority ruled, the ghosts of all conscious beings have been kept captive in the Land of the Dead. After Lyra and Will have

opened a way out, the ghosts, too, return to their natural elements, joyfully recombining with the wind and dew and earth, and perhaps with the very atoms of their own sweethearts and dæmons.[24]

Readers of the late-antique writings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus will detect an echo of a famous passage describing what happens after death:

> First, in releasing the material body you give the body over to alteration, and the form that you used to have vanishes. To the demon you give over your temperament, now inactive. The body's senses rise up and flow back to their particular sources, becoming separate parts and mingling again with the energies. And feeling and longing go on toward irrational nature.[25]

In short, each human element and faculty returns to its appropriate cosmic reservoir. But in Hermetism this is not the end of the human being. The sage continues: "Thence the human being rushes up through the cosmic framework," surrendering its evil tendencies as it passes the sphere of each planet, "and then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the Ogdoad [the eight higher powers]; he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed he hymns the Father." And beyond this stage, suggestive of the Christian Paradise, there is still more: "The final good for those who have received knowledge [is] to be made God."

The consensus among esotericists, at least the non-Christian ones, is that few humans attain personal immortality, much less the deification that Hermetism holds out as the highest possibility for man. It supposedly takes a heroic effort of preparation during one's lifetime in order to achieve this in the after-death state; the great majority of humans are simply recycled in soul as well as body. (There is a separate current, more occult than esoteric, that takes quite seriously the idea that human souls, after death, are imprisoned—whether by an Authority, by the Moon, or by their own incapacity—in some intermediate sphere.[26]) In Pullman's worlds, this recycling is welcomed as the normal course of nature. After body, dæmon, and ghost have all dispersed, nothing is left to rush up through the cosmic framework and eventually become a god.

But in *His Dark Materials,* too, there are the exceptional instances of humans like Metatron and Baruch, who have become angels and are virtually immortal. Surprising as it may seem, the eschatology of *His Dark Materials* is quite Hermetic.

An aura of Hermeticism, this time of the Renaissance rather than classical Antiquity, surrounds the alethiometer, a golden compass-like instrument which Lyra learns to use for divination. It seems to have been invented in Prague (the Prague of Lyra's world), about 300 years ago, and its function is to "tell the truth" (Greek *alètheuein*).[27] The device displays thirty symbols on its dial, each of them like a ladder of meanings down which one must search for the right one. Farder Coram, the Gypsy sage, explains to Lyra that the first meaning of the anchor, for example, is hope, the second steadfastness, the third snag or prevention, the fourth the sea, and so on.[28] Under his guidance, Lyra finds that she can work the instrument by setting its three pointers to define a question, then entering a state of suspended awareness. The answer comes in symbolic form, which has to be interpreted either through intuition (as in Lyra's case) or, more laboriously, through consulting treatises.

One thinks immediately—and Pullman confirms the association—of the order of ideas made familiar by Frances A. Yates: the emblem books of the Renaissance; the ranked images employed in the art of memory and in artificial languages like Kircher's Polygraphy; the rotating volvelles in the books of Ramon Lull and other cosmographers.[29] Other associations are with the exquisite clockworks and dials of German workmanship; the questioning of angels by John Dee and Edward Kelley; and the use by occultists of child mediums whose innocence grants them privileged access to wisdom. I note parenthetically that if the alethiometer had been invented in *our* Prague, it would have had to be a century earlier, in the time of Michael Maier, Emperor Rudolf II, and the Rabbi Loew. But in Lyra's world, with a Calvinist theocracy in place by the mid-sixteenth century, there would have been no wars of religion, no Thirty Years War to extinguish the alchemical and Hermetic tendencies of central Europe, and no Scientific Revolution to impose a mechanistic view of nature.

Later we learn that it is Dust that makes the alethiometer work.

Mary Malone discovers that Dust (which as a physicist she calls Shadow-particles, or dark matter) will respond intelligently to a certain state of mind, a state she has cultivated through consulting the Chinese oracle *I Ching*.[30] She uses a similar "trance-like open dreaming" to perceive her own dæmon.[31] These are some of the many instances of altered states of consciousness in *His Dark Materials*. Will Parry also has to control his mind in order to wield the subtle knife that cuts through everything and makes windows between worlds. He first develops this control under excruciating pressure, after the knife has cut off two of his fingers; later, when he lets himself be distracted by thoughts of his mother, the knife breaks. During the reforging of it by the armored bear Iorek Byrnison, Will is ordered to "Hold it still in your mind! You have to forge it too!", which demands another excruciating effort.[32] This resembles the situation of the alchemists, whose work in the chemical laboratory was futile unless accompanied by prayer and mental effort, with due observance of astrological conditions—all in obedience to the law of correspondences.

No less dedication was required of Will's father, John Parry, whose curiosity compelled him to undergo the initiation of a shaman. In a ritual lasting two nights and a day, his skull was perforated by a trepanning drill.[33] As a result, he gained the power to control men, summon up storms, and travel out of the body, even to other worlds. This he did through "the faculty of what you call imagination. But that does not mean *making things up*. It is a form of seeing."[34] John Parry's definition of the imagination is precisely what one meets with in the school of Henry Corbin, the Sorbonne scholar who first brought the theosophy and Neoplatonism of Persia to the attention of the West.[35] For Corbin and his English admirer Kathleen Raine, the imagination is the organ through which one has access to the "imaginal world" that is without a material substratum, but absolutely real. However, for Pullman, as for Raine, a readier source of such ideas lay to hand in William Blake—if a creative genius needs a source for anything so obvious.

As these pieces of evidence add up, it appears that *His Dark Materials* is esoteric through and through. From the academic point of view, it satisfies all four primary requirements through which

Antoine Faivre has defined Western esotericism.[36] There is the *principle of correspondences* in the alethiometer, whose multiple symbols that convey an infallible truth imply that their source, the cosmic Dust, is similarly structured. There is the principle of *living nature* in which everything receives being, consciousness, and even love from the same mysterious Dust. There is the *function of the imagination* and the presence of an imaginal world, which in many of Faivre's examples is coupled with an angelology—also present in the book. There is the *experience of transmutation* on Lyra's part as she meets her own death, her dæmon reaches its fixed form, and she fulfils her destiny as the new Eve. (In fact, the whole trilogy is about Lyra's transmutation.) Faivre defines two further components of esotericism that are often present, but not indispensable as the first four are. One is an *esoteric transmission or tradition*, which is found in the crucial episode of Will's initiation as bearer of the subtle knife. This object was created about 300 years ago by a guild of philosopher-alchemists, the last of whom, Giacomo Paradisi, bestows it on Will, together with instructions as to its use and the rules that must be observed.[37] (479-480) Faivre's final component is the *practice of concordance*, which reconciles the differences between exoterically conflicting religions and philosophies, but this is of little account when all religious beliefs are regarded with indifference.

Other critics have sensed in *His Dark Materials* "some form of à la carte Buddhism"—a religion (or philosophy) that is never mentioned in the book but bears many points in common with it.[38] No single, personal God is responsible for the creation of the Buddhist universe, summarized in the image of the Wheel of Existence to which all beings, except the enlightened ones, are bound. The "long-lived gods" do exist as an order of beings within the Wheel, but they do not deserve human attention, much less worship. Like the Authority, they are prone to inflate their own importance, but unlike him they have no power over us. Both the Buddhist system and that of *His Dark Materials* accord special importance to the human state, though Buddhism specifically excludes the existence of a personal, immortal soul. In Buddhism, it is only from the human state that liberation from the wheel of existence can be achieved; neither the

gods, the animals, nor the dwellers in the other sectors of the wheel have the opportunity of this.

For Pullman, the special quality of the human state resides in our physical bodies: in the fact of our incarnation, which is lacking in other orders of beings, even ones that seem superior, such as angels. Like the gods of Buddhism, Pullman's angels live for aeons, but are eventually subject to decay (like the Authority) and death. They envy our physicality and the intensity of experience that is only achieved in the material world.[39] They also need us. In an episode of heartbreaking beauty, Pullman describes how the children, Lyra and Will, have come to the end of their endurance and are in an exhausted sleep, and angels come on pilgrimage to be near them: "She [the witch Serafina Pekkala] understood why these beings would wait for thousands of years and travel vast distances in order to be close to something important, and how they would feel differently for the rest of time, having been briefly in its presence."[40]

Commentators on *His Dark Materials* can hardly miss its strong flavor of Gnosticism. The theogonic episode briefly summarized above, in which the Authority lies to the other angels and is defied by one female spirit, later identified as Wisdom (Sophia), comes straight from the Gnostic myth of the First Father, Yaldabaoth:

> When the ruler saw his greatness—and he saw only himself; he did not see another one except water and darkness—then he thought that he alone existed... And he rejoiced in his heart, and he boasted continually, saying to [the gods and their angels]: "I do not need anything." He said, "I am god and no other one exists except me." But when he said these things, he sinned against all the immortal ones, and they protected him. Moreover, when Pistis [=Sophia] saw the impiety of the chief ruler, she was angry. Without being seen, she said, "You err, Samael," i.e. "the blind god."[41]

In Valentinian Gnosticism, the true God is the *deus absconditus*, "inconceivable and invisible, eternal and uncreated, existing in great peace and stillness in unending spaces."[42] Yet in a sense he (or rather It) reaches out to mankind, extending the possibility of *gnosis*, saving knowledge, on which the whole religious philosophy depends (in Christian Gnosticism, Jesus Christ was the representative of this true God). Pullman's trilogy does not attempt to define a "true God"—

which in any case can only be defined by negatives—but it includes the saving gnosis in the form of Dust, which likewise responds to its creatures and promotes conscious life, love, and freedom. In the same Gnostic school, "a deep contempt is now displayed towards the biblical God of creation and his government of the world."[43] *His Dark Materials* names this God unambiguously by the Hebraic terms of "Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty."[44] But when Lyra and Will actually see him, and watch him die, it is not contempt or triumph they feel, but compassion. At the same time, the value-system of *His Dark Materials* turns this "very powerful and persuasive system of thought" on its head, because as Pullman points out, "The essence of Gnosticism is its rejection of the physical universe and the whole tendency of my thinking and feeling and of the story I wrote is towards the celebration of the physical world."[45]

Although it is bad practice to identify the beliefs of fictional characters with those of their authors, Pullman has been forthcoming enough in interviews and autobiographical writings about the connections between his storytelling and his own thoughts and feelings. More than once, he has stated that he is an atheist. Asked to explain this, he has modified it by saying that he is an atheist in respect to his own experience, having no need or place for the hypothesis of what people call God; but in respect to the whole of reality, since he cannot know everything about it (and nor can anyone else), he is an agnostic.[46] As with any other mature and complex personality, there are different sides to his character, and they all contribute to his writing. There is something in him of the conventional left-wing intellectual, which emerged in his reproach of C.S. Lewis's Narnia books for those cardinal sins of racism and sexism.[47] Yet he shares the moral earnestness that, in Lewis's case, arose out of "mere Christianity." At the dénouement of *The Amber Spyglass*, an angel tells Lyra and Will how to collaborate in the work of Dust: "by helping [everyone else] to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious."[48] If I had met this quotation

out of context, my best guess would have been that it came from somewhere in the Narnia books.

Pullman is often impatient with current pieties, as when he tells the Archbishop of Canterbury: "I'm temperamentally 'agin' the postmodernist position that there is no truth and it depends on where you are and it's all a result of the capitalist, imperialist hegemony of the bourgeois ... all this sort of stuff." Again, when asked a question about the spiritual education of children, he shows disdain for trendy and cliché-ridden thinking: "I don't use the word 'spiritual' myself, because I don't have a clear sense of what it means. But I think it depends on your view of education: whether you think that the true end and purpose of education is to help children grow up, compete and face the economic challenges of a global environment that we're going to face in the twenty-first century, or whether you think it's to do with helping them see that they are the true heirs and inheritors of the riches—the philosophical, the artistic, the scientific, the literary riches—of the whole world. [...] I know which one I'd go for." As a parson's grandson, he knows how much the Church has contributed to civilization, and deplores the way that the Church of England has discarded the Elizabethan language, the music, and the rituals in which he was raised: "if ever I go into a church and look at the dreadful, barren language that disfigures the forms of service they have now, I am very thankful that I grew up at a time when it was possible for me to go to Matins and sing the Psalms in the old versions."[49] Lyra's world, though gently comical in its old-fashioned ways, is a nostalgic vision of what the world might have been if untouched by modernism, infatuation with technology, and the proletarianization of culture.

The more one learns of Pullman's tastes and moral vision, the less he seems to share with the aggressively secular intellectuals who lord it over the British cultural scene and who, on a superficial understanding of his books and beliefs, acclaim him as one of their own; and the more rooted he seems to be in the traditional values of the humanist—using the term in the historical sense of a student and lover of the *litterae humaniores*. In the quotations gathered above, in his many other pronouncements, in his efforts to save the state educational system, and of course throughout his

books, he has always taken the side that seeks to enrich the life of the imagination.

Can a sense of the sacred exist apart from, and even in defiance of, the revealed religions? Without a doubt, all peoples have had this sense, mediated as may be through ritual, philosophy, meditation, aesthetic or erotic experience. The dogmatic atheist alone shuts it out: if he begins to feel it, he immediately checks the feeling and substitutes scientific awe (or existential angst). The sense of the sacred announces the presence of something incomprehensible and greater than ourselves, with qualities akin to benevolence and intelligence. Dust has all these properties. It is not mindless matter or whatever modern physics has reduced matter to, but the source of all the mind, consciousness, and love in the universe. As soon as Lyra hears of it, she is attracted by it, and her quest to find the source of Dust is her spiritual quest.

Unfortunately, it is religious people who have defined all the terms one would like to use in discussing these matters: spiritual, sacred, holy, divine, etc. As soon as one uses them, one seems to be on their ground. This is a problem for those outside religion but with a strong spiritual consciousness: they don't want to sound pious. No wonder Pullman shuns the word "spiritual." In the English intellectual world from which he comes, there is a marked division between the Christians and the non-believers. Christian intellectuals, second to none in their brainpower and erudition, dominate one side of the divide; their allies are the college chaplains of Oxford and Cambridge. Although the two sides treat each other with perfect decorum and often friendship, there is an uneasy feeling that the Christians would like to convert the others, and that they rejoice when someone enters their fold. The non-believers are usually uninterested in conversion, but Pullman is an exception, and it is his potential success in "de-evangelizing" the young that causes consternation.

What does he offer as an alternative? *His Dark Materials* adopts an esoteric world-view, but he can hardly expect people to live by that in the real world; there is no indication in his own interviews and other writings that he practices alchemy, Kabbalah, Buddhism, or whatever Gnostics are supposed to practice. Like William Blake,

instead of the Authority, he offers the Imagination.

The creative imagination is independent of belief, for it does not obey the structures and strictures of this world. It has the power to create new worlds for the outer and inner senses, and to transmute the experience of a world which we appear to share with other beings (though we can never be quite sure of that). In recent millennia, one of its sources of energy has been the biblical mythology and its believers. The irony of *His Dark Materials* is that, like *Paradise Lost,* it co-opts the Hebrew myth: within the rules of the story, the Authority is a real being, the angels did rebel against him, Eve was tempted, etc. Outside the story, the author has an agenda, as surely as Milton did, though in the contrary direction. But to those who value the imagination more than the certainties of believers (religious and atheistical alike), it is the stories that count.

Readers of *The Amber Spyglass* will recall the emphatic command to the dead: "Tell them stories!" and its context. Until Lyra's "harrowing of hell," the ghosts of all humanity have been trapped in the Authority's prison. Under the new covenant that Lyra makes with the Harpies who guard the Land of the Dead, the ghosts will henceforth tell their lives' stories, then, if they have told true, will return to the impersonal bosom of nature, their every atom rejoicing in its freedom. There are no posthumous rewards for good conduct, or punishments for evil; the story is literally the meaning of life. In our world, Philip Pullman may be something of a moralist, but in *His Dark Materials*, the ultimate value is aesthetic: the alchemical distillation of experience into art.

Notes

1. A slightly different version of this article was published in *Tyr: Myth, Culture, Tradition*, 3(2007). In the American edition of the trilogy, as in some foreign editions, the first volume of *His Dark Materials* is entitled *The Golden Compass,* to match the titles of the other two volumes; but this does not do justice to the theme and atmosphere that make *Northern Lights* one of the great Arctic novels. The title refers to the journey to the polar

regions that occupies much of the book, and to the Aurora Borealis, which provides a spectacular backdrop to its climax.

2. Quoted from Philip. Pullman, "About the Writing." http://www.philip-pullman.com/about_the_writing.asp.

3. A common sobriquet for the university city of Oxford, Pullman's home.

4. Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials* (London: Scholastic Press, 2001), 31. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

5. Lyra's world somewhat resembles the theocratic Britain of Kingsley Amis's novel *The Alteration* (1976), in which it is supposed that Martin Luther became Pope. Pullman's little book *Lyra's Oxford* (London: Scholastic, 2004) fills in some further details about Lyra's world and its ways of life.

6. In his conversation with Archbishop Rowan Williams, Pullman says that this creation myth is never fully explicit, but that he discovered it as he was writing it. "The Dark Materials debate: life, God, the universe...," chaired by Robert Butler, *Arts Telegraph,* March 17, 2004. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/03/17/bodark17.xml.

7. Pullman, 622.

8. Pullman, 367.

9. Pullman, 983.

10. This is not stated in *His Dark Materials,* but in the BBC's "Interview with Philip Pullman." http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/beliefs/scripts/philip_pullman.html.

11. Pullman, 439.

12. Pullman, 530.

13. Pullman, 648. Pullman's theology and angelology are based, often quite faithfully, on apocryphal scriptures such as *I Enoch* and the collection of texts found at Nag Hammadi. See James C. VanderKam, *Enoch, A Man for All Generations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); J. Edward Wright, *Baruch Ben Neriah: From Biblical Scribe to Apocalyptic Seer* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

14. Pullman, 647.

15. Pullman, 926.

16. The Catholic writer Leonie Caldecott deplores that "Pullman is effectively removing, among a mass audience of a highly impressionable age, some of the building blocks for future evangelization." L. Caldecott, "The Stuff of Nightmares," *The Catholic Herald,* October 29, 1999. http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/misc/reflections.htm.

17. "Heat and Dust," interview with Huw Spanner, *Third Way,* 2000. http://www.thirdway.org.uk/past/showpage/asp?page=3949. Pullman described

this interview as "the best I've ever read."
18. Sarah Johnson puts it with brutal bluntness (and a total lack of appreciation of the novelist's art): "What if Pullman had replaced the Magisterium's crosses and churches with crescents and mosques? Not that he would have dared. Like any playground bully, Pullman knows which kids are least likely to kick him back." "A Preachy Rant against the Church," *The Catholic Herald,* January 16, 2004. http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/misc/reflections.htm.
19. Rowan Williams, "A Near-miraculous Triumph," [review of the dramatization of *His Dark Materials*] *The Guardian,* March 10, 2004. http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/features/story/0,11710,1165873,00.html. See also "The Dark Materials debate."
20. BBC "Interview with Philip Pullman."
21. Rowan Williams, "A Near-miraculous triumph."
22. "I am the servant of the story—the medium in a spiritualist sense, if you like..." Pullman in "Heat and Dust."
23. Pullman, 733.
24. Pullman, 906.
25. *Corpus Hermeticum,* I, 24 (translated by Brian P. Copenhaver).
26. See Joscelyn Godwin, "The Survival of the Personality According to Modern Esoteric Teachings," in R. Caron, J. Godwin, W. Hanegraaff, & R. VandenBroeck, eds., *Mélanges Antoine Faivre* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 403-414. Several of the esotericists mentioned there refuse to make a distinction between spirit and matter, or regard the whole of manifestation as to some degree material.
27. In the developing vocabulary of esoteric studies, "Hermetism" refers to the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, while the broader term "Hermeticism" refers to later developments along Hermetic principles, especially alchemy.
28. Pullman, 106.
29. "Philip Pullman Webchat," response to question by Graham King. http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/hisdarkmaterials/pullman_webchat.shtml.
30. Pullman, 401, 406.
31. Pullman, 1005.
32. Pullman, 750.
33. Pullman, 423.
34. Pullman, 997.
35. For example, in Henry Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), and more accessibly in his *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (1977).

36. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) is one of the many places in which he defines esotericism through these 4+2 components.
37. Pullman, 479-480.
38. Greg Krehbiel, "Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*," *Journeyman* I/1 (2001). http://www.crowhill.net/journeyman/Vol1No1/Darkmaterials.html.
39. Pullman, 898.
40. Pullman, 550.
41. "On the Origin of the World" II, 100, 103, in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 163, 165.
42. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: the Nature and History of an Ancient Religion,* tr. R. McL. Wilson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), 62.
43. Rudolph, *op. cit.,* 79.
44. Pullman, 622.
45. "Philip Pullman Webchat," reply to question by Russell: "Would you call yourself a Gnostic?"
46. This précis is based on the BBC's"Interview with Philip Pullman" and on "Heat and Dust."
47. Pullman made these remarks at the 2002 book festival in Hay-on-Wye; see *The Guardian,* June 4, 2002.
48. Pullman, 995-996.
49. "Heat and Dust."