

## The Good Liberal and the Scoundrel Author: Fantasy, Dissent and Neoliberal Subjectivity in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

In September 2012 Philip Pullman published a new book, a re-telling of his fifty favourite stories by the Grimm Brothers. News of the publication caused much excitement amongst book critics and academics alike: 'Pullman, with his blend of myth and legend, his willingness to see the world in shades of grey, strikes me as the perfect author to be marking the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Grimm tales' first publication' and 'This is really exciting. Philip Pullman is the right man; he tackles this stuff supremely well.' (Flood 2012; Gray in Clark 2012). Reporting the impending publication, *The Independent* reprinted a quote from Pullman's website: 'I'm not in the message business; I'm in the 'Once upon a time' business.' (Clark 2012). On the moment of the publication of this new collection, it seems timely to reflect on the position of Pullman in culture, in order to question the nature of his critical reputation, and highlight some of the contradictory ideas about genre, the imagination, and ideology that it rests upon. Pullman protests that he's 'not in the message business' yet maintains a powerful public presence speaking out on issues of education and liberty. His supporters and fans laud his supreme facility with fantasy, and his reputation rests upon the popularity of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, supposedly the greatest work in the genre since Tolkien. Yet Pullman is dismissive of fantasy as genre, and of respected authors who've established its presence, like CS Lewis and Tolkien himself. In commenting on his interest in retelling the fairy tales collected by the Grimm brothers, Pullman suggests that his 'interest has always been in how the tales worked *as stories*' where the story 'is in a perpetual state of becoming and alteration' and storytelling 'is an art of performance' which for Pullman is superstitiously animated by the 'sprite' that gives his story a voice. (Pullman 2012, emphasis in original) Three key elements about Pullman seem striking here: his public engagement with civil society; his disavowal of fantasy whilst writing within its terms; and his value for the transparent neutrality of the author, symbolized by his 'sprite' – a state which may never be achieved, but which nevertheless authenticates and reifies the story as artifact. This essay will explore the political implications of Pullman's stature, and attempt to map the relationship between the author's social activism and his fiction, drawing attention to the contradictions and pleasures therein. How can we understand the social world of Pullman's fiction, and the agency of Lyra, the

orphan girl who makes the republic of heaven on earth? I will be proposing an account of *His Dark Materials* that suggests that the affection with which it is held derives not from its refusal of fantasy nor from its dislocation from the specific cultural moment, but instead derives from the unevenly executed political dissidence of its author, a political engagement that critiques the privations of the enterprise society, but which demonstrates the limitations of bourgeois dissent.

Philip Pullman has achieved a remarkable position in Anglo-American culture, and in UK society. Whilst his economic success pales beside that of JK Rowling, like her, he is a children's author who has achieved substantial crossover appeal to an adult audience. Recently, Pullman was shortlisted for the 2011 Man Booker International Prize, which recognizes a writer's 'overall contribution to fiction on the world stage' ('Fiction at its Finest'). Unlike Rowling, he maintains a powerfully influential presence in regard to a range of cultural and political debates about secularism, childhood, commercialism and freedom of speech. Sally Vincent, writing in the *Guardian* suggests that Pullman soars 'into the metaphorical...but there's none of that lazy nonsense about magical spells, potions and wands' (Vincent 2001). Pullman's thoughts on modern culture continue to be both solicited and circulated with little reservation or caveat (Rabinovitz 2003). And whilst the reception of Pullman's work is by no means consistently uncritical, his work is feted by an impressive spectrum of academic and cultural commentators from Margaret and Mike Rustin, and Nick Tucker, to Christopher Hitchens (Rustin 2003a; Rustin 2003b; Rustin 2003c; Tucker 2007; Hitchens 2002). It is for his seemingly contradictory position on the question of organized religion that Pullman attracts most criticism: Andrew Stuttaford (2002) is frustrated by the quest-like nature of the narrative of *His Dark Materials*, and points out the extent to which the author relies on Christian motifs and themes, despite his avowed atheism; this is an argument developed by Elisabeth Gruner (2011), who suggests that Pullman invests in the very myths he seeks to undermine. This may explain the seemingly paradoxical view of former Archbishop Rowan Williams, who has suggested that Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy should be taught in all schools. Notwithstanding the tolerability of Pullman's ambiguous and over-determined preoccupation with religious themes to those with or without faith convictions, unsympathetic perspectives on the author are hardly culturally prevalent: the *Times* has suggested Pullman is one of the fifty greatest

post-war writers, and he is recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the Carnegie Medal, the Whitbread Book of the Year and numerous other literary prizes. In 2010 he was a prominent signatory to a letter published in the *Guardian* protesting against Pope Benedict's state visit, whilst in early 2009 he gave a high-profile speech at the Convention on Modern Liberty that was published in the *Times* (Pullman 2009; Pullman 2010). In 2006 he was one of the signatories of a letter to the *Telegraph* that linked rising levels of childhood depression with poor diet, stressful educational demands and 'sedentary, screen-based entertainment' ('Press Letter on Toxic Childhood').

Typical of the terms in which the author and his work have been understood is one *Guardian* critic's suggestion that Pullman's writing 'keeps you grounded in an immutable moral and intellectual integrity' (Vincent 2001). There are a number of interesting issues at play in this proposition about Pullman's integrity. Firstly, the author's public persona and conscious intervention into civil society ('I'm not going to argue about this: I'm right. Children need art and music and literature ... human rights legislation alone should ensure that they get them') becomes synonymous with the literary works themselves: in some sense the power of the novels is straightforwardly animated by Pullman's political preoccupations (Pullman 2004). To accept this slippage is both to naturalise the cultural capital articulated through the circuit of publishing, broadsheet literary criticism, public relations and marketing, and the taste preoccupations of the chattering classes, as well as to obfuscate the critical innovations of cultural materialism, which suggest that 'the social order *cannot but produce* faultlines through which its own criteria of plausibility fall into contest and disarray' and that 'the task for a political criticism, then, is to observe how stories negotiate the faultlines that distress the prevailing conditions of plausibility... No story can contain all the possibilities it brings into play; coherence is always selection' (Sinfield 1992: 45-7). Even if Pullman's moral integrity is unassailable, we cannot overlook either the value of such a proposition to his status as a producer of commodities, nor the inevitable faultlines that will emerge in his output, not because of his limitations as a writer, but because he necessarily strives for narrative and ideological plausibility in uneven and contradictory conditions.

Of course, I am precisely questioning Pullman's moral integrity; not because he is especially worthy of opprobrium, but because of what can sometimes appear to be a consensus of sycophancy in the media hype surrounding him, and often in academic criticism too, which points to larger, urgent, questions that movements like cultural materialism have been preoccupied with posing. Literary culture may have been regarded as effeminate (Sinfield 1989: 60-84), but otherwise it does not *necessarily* occupy a dissenting or subordinate position in the culture; rather, it exerts considerable symbolic power, and commands institutional prestige (despite its relatively modest economic significance). As Sinfield and others have pointed out, the task of professional literary criticism (including cultural commentary in the quality press) is about 'getting the text to make sense', that is, to help resolve the unevenness and contradictions it will necessarily manifest, in order to apprehend its ideological project (Sinfield 1992: 50). This apprehension, and the interpretative work that produces it, is about making a claim for the authority of a particular worldview. In claiming Pullman's unassailable moral integrity, Vincent is producing it, producing his status in public culture, and in the process authenticating her own world view and that of her social and cultural constituency.

Secondly there's the question of reading pleasure and its connection to 'moral and intellectual integrity' and to questions of genre: what claims are being made here about Pullman for the kinds of social and cultural worlds Pullman offers in his fiction? Pullman has suggested that '*The Lord of the Rings* is essentially trivial. Narnia is essentially serious, though I don't like the answer Lewis comes up with. If I was doing it at all, I was arguing with Narnia. Tolkien is not worth arguing with' (Edelstein 2007). What answers does *His Dark Materials* come up with, and what questions is the author answering? Is there a connection between the political interventions made by Pullman and the construction of alternative universes in his novels? Pullman himself describes literature as a 'school of morals' whilst seeking to distance his work from genre fiction, and fantasy in particular: 'I'm trying to do something different: tell a story about what it means to grow up and become an adult...I'm telling a story about a realistic subject, but I'm using the mechanism of fantasy. I think that's slightly unusual' (Weich 2000). How can contemporary fiction help us shape visions of social change or improvement, how can it 'school' our morals, and how can genre enable or inhibit such a project? Pullman claims to have established a new generic space, in which 'fantasy' becomes more or less a cover story, a

fantasy overlaying, but not finally overtaking, a fiction of what it 'really' means to grow up. There is no hint from Pullman, however, that stories about 'realistic subjects' are also generic, or that realism itself is literary convention that 'presents its practice as a neutral, innocent and natural one, erasing its own artifice and *construction* of the 'real'' (Jackson 1981: 83). Thirdly, the question of Pullman's *immutable* 'moral and intellectual integrity' suggests a consistent and coherent project to *His Dark Materials*. Notwithstanding the insights of cultural materialism, a key starting point of my consideration of the trilogy is a disturbing recognition of the fundamental discontinuities across the three novels. Anecdotally, this is played out in accounts of reading pleasure. Most fans of Pullman's trilogy, including published critics, focus attention on the first book; Harriet Lane is exemplary of this trend: 'Pullman's trilogy, following a scrap of a girl called Lyra as she makes an epic journey through a succession of worlds lit by naphtha, traversed by zeppelins and sledges, and animated by daemons, gypsies and witches, was one of the greatest reading treats I've had in adulthood' (Lane 2004). The troubling domestication and feminization of Lyra in the second novel, *The Subtle Knife*, and her subjugation in the final novel, *The Amber Spyglass*, to the very authorities against which she dissents in *Northern Lights*, are rather less foregrounded in much of the critical canon on Pullman, and from readers' affective response to the memory of *His Dark Materials*. As is any account of the extent to which the trilogy loses its sense of wonder and excitement, its investment in fantastical concepts and challenges, as it progresses, seeking instead to resolve them in increasingly banal ways.

On the eve of the release of Peter Jackson's film *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 2001, Jenny Turner offered a reconsideration of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in the *LRB*. Her essay treads a witty and erudite path between the poles of uncritical adoration, traditional litcrit condescension and adolescent psychosocial obsession that she identifies have characterized discussion of Tolkien's trilogy. She suggests that her aim is not to defend or attack, but to 'describe how the strange power of [Tolkien's] book casts a spell over readers, as children, as pubescents, as adolescents, as adults' (2001). To this end, Turner poses a recurring question: what do we learn on reading these books? Her question implicitly acknowledges that in his fiction Tolkien 'created a machine for the evocation of scholarly frisson,' where 'the thrills are the thrills of knowledge hidden, knowledge uncovered, knowledge that slips away'. The nature of this knowledge may be 'fictional'

the 'lore...self-referential,' but its effect in 'locking-on...the hungry imagination,' a locking-on that makes it 'possible for readers to live their whole lives through Tolkien's universe' is profound. Turner suggests that, alongside Tolkien and Lewis's Narnia books, Pullman's 'magnificent' trilogy is one of the 'three great works of modern English fantasy' (2001).

Taking Turner's question as a starting point would therefore seem like a useful way of entering the world of *His Dark Materials*, and questioning the pleasures and pains therein. Here we find not only a work, that like Tolkien's, offers a fictive universe in which readers can live their lives, but which evokes a scholarly frisson. This frisson derives in part from the signification of Oxford (ours and that of Lyra's world), and from the place of inquiry and academic knowledge in the narrative. This essay aims to instate a materialist analysis of the production of knowledge in *His Dark Materials*, by considering the political rationality informing the fictive events and the universes in which they take place. I want to consider the importance of this rationality for reading pleasure, and for the cultural plausibility of the idea that Pullman as a public figure is morally unassailable. My starting point is Pullman's: I will offer a detailed reading of the first scene of the trilogy, working to set the knowledge gained from it in the context of *His Dark Materials*.

### **'A universe just like ours, but different'**

At the beginning, famously unexplained, we learn that Lyra, a mischievous girl intent on eavesdropping on the conversation of the scholars of Jordan College, has a daemon called Pantalaimon. The first scene of *Northern Lights*, which largely takes place in the opulent and atmospheric retiring room of Jordan College, is spread across two chapters. This world is partially familiar and partly fantastical. It is a world of scholars and servants, all men, and of ritual and luxury, where learning and enquiry are matters of national and political significance. In this first scene, Lyra becomes trapped in the retiring room by her antics, and inadvertently witnesses an attempt on the life of her uncle, Lord Asriel (who we later learn is her father) by the Master of the College. Having foiled the murder attempt, Lyra is solicited by Asriel to spy on his meeting with the Master and the other scholars, a meeting in which we (and Lyra) learn much about the political, scientific and philosophical matters that shape the universe of *His Dark Materials* and which will organize the

trilogy's narrative. A number of profound ideas are introduced, but unexplained: 'severed' and 'intact' children; 'Dust', a mysterious particle that falls from the sky and which affects adults and children differently; trepanning; and the northern lights, which when photographed in a particular way, reveal the image of an alternative world that exists alongside that of Lyra, Asriel and the scholars (22-24).

Some of what we learn seems to relate to 'real' knowledge familiar in our world (for instance, the Everett many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics), and some offers disturbing, intriguing pointers to the fictive world Pullman entreats us to enter, our curiosity aroused by the 'scholarly frisson' of Jordan's retiring room. Pullman includes a note at the beginning of the book that tells us that 'the first volume is set in a universe just like ours, but different in many ways'. We learn from this first scene that the world of *Northern Lights* contains a city called Oxford with a university as steeped in tradition and cultural and political power as our own, and that the society of the book is post-industrial: the retiring room is lit by naphtha lamps, but electric, or 'anbaric' light is used elsewhere (*Northern Lights* 10). Later we learn that the world of *Northern Lights* is pre-postmodern, even pre-capitalist, and that whilst there is social stratification, there is no commodity culture or attendant structure of commodity fetishism. In *Northern Lights* money is liminal: at no point in her quest to rescue her friend Roger from the Gobblers is Lyra's mission compromised by her lack of access to, or even her need for, money. Yet, Asriel has come to meet the scholars in the first scene 'to ask for funds' for his expedition to the North and his researches into what is referred to as the 'Barnard-Stokes business' (*Northern Lights* 20, 24, 31), and Pullman tells us that 'Jordan College was the grandest and richest of all the colleges in Oxford' (*Northern Lights* 34). Despite the failure of money to limit Lyra's mission, there is clearly some sort of economy in the universe of Jordan College, which is, after all, the richest college. Where does this money come from? The economy of this novel seems to map onto Pullman's liberal intellectual values: money is simply a property of cultural capital: Jordan is prestigious and elite, and therefore rich. In short, Lyra's world offers the civilizing comforts of bourgeois liberalism: elite institutions, scholarship, luxury, a rigid class structure, opportunity for personal expression and advancement; but it critically lacks the politico-economic rationality that in *our* world has come to define the entire field of social relations in the form of what Foucault has

described as the enterprise society (Foucault 2008: 147; Venn 2009: 211). This is a proposition I will return to shortly.

### **'Behave yourself'**

In this first scene we also learn a lot about the character of Lyra. We learn that she's not a scholar or a maidservant, and that she's lived in the college most of her life, formally looked after by the scholars, but more emotionally connected to the servants. In this we learn that she's a character derived from classic nineteenth century realism: she is an *Oliver Twist* figure, apparently orphaned, displaced from her rightful inheritance and place in the social hierarchy, but in the end, rightfully restored to her position and privilege in a way that fails to effect a wider fragmentation of the hierarchy (Moretti 1983). We learn that Lyra is excited by danger, and by transgressing rules (unlike her daemon): hiding behind the chair in the retiring room 'she was pleurably excited' (*Northern Lights* 6). We learn that she isn't frightened of punishment: 'she could put up with that' (*Northern Lights* 6). We learn that she is driven both by curiosity about the world (which leads her to the retiring room in the first place) and moral courage. The latter requires that Lyra stay in the retiring room after she's witnessed the Master poison the Tokay: 'How can I just go and sit in the Library or somewhere and twiddle my thumbs, knowing what's going to happen? I don't intend to do that, I promise you' (*Northern Lights* 9). Both drives invoke risk, but it is her impetuous need to prevent Asriel's murder that reveals that she's been snooping, and exposes her to the anger of her uncle who hurts her as he grabs her: 'it might have been enough to make her cry, if she was the sort of girl who cried' (*Northern Lights* 15). We learn, gradually, that Lyra is a child, but that this is less important than the other things we learn about her. Our first clear indication comes when Pantalaimon chides her: 'hiding and spying is for silly children' (*Northern Lights* 9). Lyra ignores him, and this first indication of her age installs an ambiguity: hiding and spying may be for silly children, but Lyra isn't silly and if she doesn't hide then we as readers won't find out what's going on, and we are by no means being treated like silly children by the narrative. Our identification with Lyra, with her curiosity and her fierce, headstrong sense of agency, troubles the notion of childhood passivity and obedience. Her reward for saving Asriel is license to spy further, and access to the knowledge he shares with the scholars. In the process, Asriel makes Lyra an ally.



Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in the first scene of the trilogy we learn that Lyra and the other characters have daemons. The figure of the daemon is uncanny in that it is familiar – seemingly a part of oneself, inside thoughts and feelings – and yet external, material. We learn that Lyra’s daemon can change form but that the daemons of adults not only don’t change but are related to social status and character: we learn that the Butler’s daemon is ‘a dog, like almost all servants’ daemons’ (*Northern Lights* 5), but that the Steward is ‘a superior servant’ whose daemon is therefore ‘a superior dog’ (*Northern Lights* 7). The notion of a daemon appears bound to a number of important concepts that shape the universe of *His Dark Materials*, most notably the mystery of Dust. Daemons have distinct physical form, and interact independently with the material world, but share sensory perception and affect with their human counterpart (‘but the fox-daemon tore at ... Pantalaimon, and Lyra felt the pain in her own flesh’ *Northern Lights* 103), and at death they become incorporeal: ‘what had happened to the dead men’s daemons? They were fading...drifting away like atoms of smoke, for all that they tried to cling to their men’ (*Northern Lights* 105). For Asriel, Dust is original sin, and he plans to travel to the other worlds to destroy its source and triumph over death. Later, we learn that Dust is consciousness: it is what makes the alethiometer work, and what gives Lyra her supernatural powers to read it. The relationship between Dust and daemons appears to hinge on the question of puberty, at which point daemons ‘settle’ in one form, and Dust no longer interacts with them in the same way. This connection invokes the idea of sexual repression, in rather conservative terms. But narratively it also intensifies the mystery of dust and of daemons: both are potentially linked to the nature of existence, the organization of the universe, and the multiple worlds within it. Thus daemons embody the potential not only to invoke the uncanny but to represent a wider and more radical transformation of our sense of a self, deriving from quantum mechanics and metaphysics: in their connection to Dust, a mysterious and yet fundamental particle, daemons animate the possibility of fantastical expansions of our idea of what it means to be human.

Yet this radical potentiality is foreclosed by Pullman in a number of ways that offset and contradict daemons’ uncanny and metaphysical possibilities. Firstly, as we’ve seen, daemons are mundanely connected to predictable social stratifications, and to a conservative morality of sexuality and the

boundary between childhood and adulthood. Most daemons are cross-sexed, with only a very few humans having daemons of their own sex ('Bernie was a kindly, solitary man, one of those rare people whose daemon was the same sex as himself' *Northern Lights* 125) which reinforces the naturalness of the hetero-patriarchal cross-sex grid: when Mrs. Coulter bathes Lyra, her treatment of Pantalaimon makes him look away from Lyra's naked body and feel shame, for the first time (*Northern Lights* 78). Despite their connection to consciousness and private thoughts, daemons do not manifest polymorphous repressed and unconscious desires; rather, Pan acts as Lyra's super-ego: his first words to her in *Northern Lights* are admonishing: 'you're not taking this seriously' and 'behave yourself' (*Northern Lights* 3), whilst later, when Lyra insists they have to stay hiding in the wardrobe to 'prevent a murder' (*Northern Lights* 8), Pan tells her that 'I think it would be the silliest thing you've ever done in a lifetime of silly things to interfere' (*Northern Lights* 9). We learn, at the very end of *Northern Lights*, that severing a child from its daemon releases great power, and it is this power that Asriel exploits in order to build a bridge to the alternative universe he identifies in the aurora. But the nature of this power seems narratively unclear, and is grounded as much in the horror of child murder as it is in the metaphysics of daemons, and certainly this supernatural power isn't developed as an idea elsewhere. Furthermore, daemons are physically manifested by animals, and almost exclusively by mammals and birds (only occasionally insects, as in the first scene when Pan takes the form of a brown moth). The form of these animals is usually a metaphor for adult character traits: thus, Mrs. Coulter's golden monkey daemon is physically striking, but cruel, quick and devious. Daemons never take the form of mythological, dream-like or marvelous entities, nor do they ever act to trick, deceive or confuse their own human. They are, on the contrary, unwaveringly loyal, dependable and loving. As such we could see the daemon as part invisible friend, and part fluffy pet: they manifest potential for the marvelous that is stunted by Pullman's resistance of fantasy.

As the narrative of *Northern Lights* progresses, Lyra learns that intercession, the severing of human from daemon, makes people docile and obedient, and she understands this as a great and unnatural horror. But the affective force of her horror is less a function of ontological consternation, or political terror, and more connected to a sentimental identification with the idea of what it might mean to be truly alone. Coming across the pathetic figure of little Tony Makarios, severed from his daemon

Ratter, and clutching a piece of dried fish in its stead, Lyra 'swallowed hard to govern her nausea...she had to go out of the shed and sit down by herself in the snow, except that of course she wasn't by herself, she was never by herself, because Pantalaimon was always there...The worst thing in the world! She found herself sobbing, and Pantalaimon was whimpering too, and in both of them there was a passionate pity and sorrow for the half-boy.' (*Northern Lights* 214-5) Whilst Pullman's realization of daemon metaphysics may conservatively foreclose some of the radical potential inherent in his uneven conceptualization of them, his narrativisation of the plot to sever children from their daemons willfully exploits the faultline potential of the adult/child distinction. *Northern Lights* is a story about child abduction and torture which offers a seductive, charismatic and engaging characterization of one of the most abhorred and demonized subject positions in our culture. Mrs. Coulter, a Myra Hindley figure, seduces and abducts children en masse, having set up an organization for the purpose of exercising her sadistic drive to 'sever' children, and as the Bolvangar scientists note, she takes a morbid interest in the cruelty of the process of intercision. This organization, the General Oblation Board (Gobblers), undertakes covert but systematic abduction and trafficking of children as an industrial process that evokes Nazi death camps and the attendant crisis of Modernity. Lyra's empathy with Tony Makarios not only expresses the horror of being truly alone, but gives extraordinary visceral power to her moral purpose in undertaking her journey to the North to defeat Coulter and the Gobblers.

### **'You're never alone with a daemon'**

What are the implications of the knowledge we gain from this first scene of Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy? Kristine Moruzi has suggested that the lack of a conventional family helps Lyra (and later, Will) become more independent (2005: 58). This may be true, but is too simplistic. In *Northern Lights* Lyra's lack of conventional family constitutes her as both more social and more Other than she might otherwise have been. One of the great pleasures of *Northern Lights* is the figure of Lyra herself, a fierce, determined, resourceful and imaginative character who is both entirely social, and yet decidedly strange, alien and fantastical. Familiar with the world of Jordan's scholars, and with its servants, she belongs to neither; we cannot easily read her class identity: she's described in the narrative as a 'wild' child but behaves with the entitlement of someone of high status (rather like

Oliver Twist, in fact). Able to understand the rules and conventions of a prestigious institution like Jordan, she nevertheless breaks them to suit her purposes. She can read the alethiometer, a feat that defies the greatest minds of her world, in ways that exceed rationality, and she inspires confidence and awe in ways that trouble the notion of the obedient child at the same time as making her super-heroic. In each stage of her quest to rescue Roger, oppose the Gobblers, explore the North and deliver the alethiometer to Asriel, Lyra is constituted as a heroic subject at the head of a confederacy. Her journey is only possible, and only meaningful, in terms of the shifting and complex sets of social constituencies that form around her. Each set of affiliations (the Oxford scholars, the street gang of children, the Gyptians, Lee Scorsby and Iorek Byrnison, the child inmates of Bolvangar, the witches of Serafina Pekkala's clan) is constituted as a series of rich images of confederacy, community and decision-making. Nowhere is this stronger than in the depiction of the Gyptian 'roping', which offers a vision of a fully formed process of social action, planning, decision making and debate, all of which takes place in a context richly marked by wisdom, morality and interpersonal warmth. This utopian vision relies heavily on the racialised and subaltern associations of the Gyptians – a romantic idealization of Roma culture.

Gradually we understand that Lyra is a child, but only after we have understood her as a protagonist, an agent, someone who takes moral responsibility in the face of personal risk and discomfort, and someone who is curious, problem-solving and adventurous, a hero with special powers, an Other. As Clare Walsh points out, 'in spite of her gender, Lyra is an active-in-the-world heroine, thereby challenging the assumption that female quest narratives should be fundamentally different in kind from the traditional male quest' (Walsh 2003: 241). After Asriel's meeting with the scholars, he tells Lyra that he's going back to the North. She immediately tells him she wants to come, and Asriel 'looked at her as if for the first time...But she gazed back fiercely' (*Northern Lights* 29). As a child, Lyra commands the respect of adults who are themselves feared by other adults. And perhaps most importantly, Lyra is never alone.

Nicholas Tucker has suggested that most contemporary fiction for children and adolescents privileges the idea of romantic attachments as a way of negotiating a social environment in which children have

'ever-more-demanding schoolwork' and less time spent outside the nuclear home; against this backdrop 'the idea of a personal daemon offers all the consolations of the closest and most intense friendship without any of the possible disadvantages' (Tucker 2003: 142-4). I would articulate this idea more strongly. In the context of a world, very much like our own, but lacking many of its potentially alienating and anti-social structures and institutions (finance capital, commodity culture, aggressively privatized social institutions, mass media and telecoms infrastructure), Pullman offers readers the fantasy of having a daemon as a way of offsetting the privations of neo-liberalism. David Harvey (2005) suggests that neoliberalism is a political ideology that revives nineteenth century liberalism, and which prioritises the role of the private individual. In his analysis of neoliberalism Jeremy Gilbert (2008) stresses the competitive nature of this individualism, along with the importance of the acquisition of private property, in conditions supported by state governments, and where corporations are relatively undisciplined authorities. The consequences of the dominance of this set of political strategies have been diverse, but often coalesce around extreme social alienation, privatisation of life resources, the dismantling of state services and welfare provision, and the increasing commodification and corporate mediation of not only the public sphere, but of the practices of identity and sociality. Drawing on the influential publication of Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France in 1978 and 79, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Couze Venn suggests that contemporary neoliberal capital, operating as a 'zero-sum' game, and withdrawing the concessions to social democracy established in the postwar settlement, is generating greater conflict and thus 'requires new mechanisms that attempt to ensure relatively docile, if not compliant, populations in the form of massively intrusive surveillance, [and] new forms of subjugation using new tools for the government of conduct' (Venn 2009: 225-6). Drawing on the same lectures, Lois McNay articulates a central implication of Foucault's analysis of the question of personal freedom:

there are many social pathologies that can be seen to ensue from the reconfiguration of self as enterprise but one troubling political consequence is that it throws into question conceptions of individual autonomy that commonly underpin much political thought on freedom, resistance and political opposition. If individual autonomy is not the opposite of or limit to neoliberal governance, but rather lies at the heart of disciplinary control through

responsible self-management, what are the possible grounds upon which political resistance can be based? (McNay 2009: 56)

I would suggest that the pleasures offered by *Northern Lights* reside, in part, in its imaginative and fantastical formation of an alternative to this profound antagonism at the heart of neoliberal subjectivity: that to articulate personal choice and freedom is to reproduce the very conditions of our alienation and social deprivation.

Thus, I would suggest that *Northern Lights* offers two mutually reinforcing utopian images. Firstly, the notion of a society 'much like our own' with recognizable pleasures, ambitions and rationalities, but critically lacking a concept of the individual as a living being 'premised on the universalization of property and competition as founding principles of society...pursued through the commodification of everything...[and] in which self-interest is seen as the motor of human endeavour' (Venn 2009: 226). This utopian image is a function of both the absence of governmental dispositifs through which neoliberal biopower is exercised, and of the presence of highly romanticized, but nevertheless detailed, alternative visions of social organisation (Gyptians, witches and so on). There is no culture of money or commodity exchange, and thus, no structure of social networking, competition and self-management. There is no telecommunications infrastructure, no mediatization and no digitization in Lyra's world, and thus no practice of representation, or of the rationality of wealth acquisition. There is no systematized, digital form of data collection and data mining, no structure of what Venn describes as 'intrusive' surveillance, and little suggestion of central government or of biopolitics – management of the population. Instead, there are urgent moral quests that provide opportunity for the articulation of values distinct from self-interest and self-promotion, and which, moreover, provide the conditions for the formation of communities and confederacies. Secondly, as both a symbol of this lack of alienation in Lyra's world, and as its instrumental materialization, everyone has their own daemon, a companion who is part fluffy pet and part uncanny super-ego, but which may also embody fantastical metaphysical possibilities: as Vincent suggests, 'you're never alone with a daemon', and in Lyra's world 'you must be on your guard ... because the world is full of insatiable power-mongers who want you to be less resistant to their wickedness than you are when you've got a good daemon in tow' (Vincent 2001). I would thus suggest that one of the considerable achievements of *Northern Lights* is

how it works, ideologically, narratively and affectively, to offset the privations of neoliberalism, and stand as a critique of the currently prevailing form of social, economic and cultural organization. In this context, the almost unquestioning approval of Pullman in scholarship and the liberal press articulates the affective power of the pleasures offered by such a critique. However, the question remains, exactly what kind of critique is Pullman offering, and what kinds of political and cultural rationality does it underwrite?

### **'The books are still in the Bodley's library'**

At this point it is important to assert the importance of both the discontinuities to be found across *His Dark Materials* and the specific set of ideologies Pullman upholds in his public pronouncements. However remarkable the first novel is (and I would argue that it is), as the trilogy proceeds, Pullman increasingly rejects the imaginative space he has established, and makes his creation subject to a didactic discipline that subordinates Lyra (and Will) as children, as Moruzi argues (2005). The shifting subject position occupied by Lyra is one of the key discontinuities of *His Dark Materials*. Lyra's status as child, as heroic agent, as female, as emergently sexual, as magical, is uneven and contradictory throughout *His Dark Materials* but becomes increasingly so as the trilogy progresses towards its conclusion. In the final scene of *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra returns to the luxurious rooms of Jordan, but no longer as a dissident spy, but as a guest invited to dine with the Master and Dame Hannah. Scholars who for Lyra were once 'dim and frumpy' now seem 'cleverer...more interesting, and kindlier by far than... she remembered' (*The Amber Spyglass* 541). Here, Lyra is alone in a way she wasn't in the first scene of *Northern Lights*: there is no mention of Pantalaimon, no private discourse with him, no shared purpose; it is as if she has been subjected to intercession, 'severed' from her daemon and calmly docile as a consequence. After the upheavals of the wars across the worlds, the colleges of Oxford are 'settling back into the calm of scholarship and ritual', but 'the Master's valuable collection of silver had been looted' (*The Amber Spyglass* 541). Thus, we learn that this is a world impervious to cross-dimensional crisis, an environment more immutably real than those we glimpsed through the windows opened by Asriel's quantum experimentation. Lyra has lost her magical ability to read the alethiometer, and laments the loss of 'all those thousands of meanings' (*The Amber Spyglass* 543) but Dame Hannah tells her, 'they're not gone, Lyra...the books are still in the Bodley's library. The

scholarship to study them is alive and well' (*The Amber Spyglass* 543). Where once Lyra's agency functioned through her anarchic and passionate assembly of social constituencies, animated by curiosity, adventure and moral purpose, by her super-heroic agency, now her subjectivity becomes framed by bourgeois preoccupations: she worries about not having any money ('I suppose I'll have to work' *The Amber Spyglass* 543), and where she'll live; she agrees to become a student at Dame Hannah's boarding school until she's old enough to become an undergraduate. She will diligently make a life's work of studying, in order to recapture her lost ability to read the alethiometer.

What do we learn about the world Lyra inhabits here? This is not a world of fantastical metaphysical possibilities, shimmering with new paradigms: all the knowledge Lyra could need is already known, and resides in the Bodley library. This is a world of deference to authority, of educational achievement marked by the rationality of institutional hierarchy, where imagination and creativity are regimes of truth circumscribed by the sin of 'lying'. The angel Xaphania tells Lyra that it is possible to travel between the worlds without cutting windows with the subtle knife, but that to do so 'uses the faculty of what you call imagination. But that does not mean *making things up*.' (*The Amber Spyglass*, 523, emphasis in original) Like regaining the ability to read the alethiometer, learning the particular kind of imagination necessary to travel between the worlds, will take 'a whole lifetime to learn' but Xaphania tells Lyra that 'what is worth having is worth working for.' (*The Amber Spyglass*, 523) Here the very supernatural itself, in the shape of an angel, stands as guarantee of bourgeois ideology. Sociality as coalition, distributed decision-making and shared purpose steadily gives way to domestication and the regime of the nuclear couple as the trilogy proceeds. In *The Subtle Knife* Lyra's social relations are defined either by interaction with her mother (who drugs her into a coma) or with Will, with whom she forms a monogamous couple. Her relations with Will are highly gendered, feminizing her in sharp contrast to her character in the first book; this feminization recasts her earlier willful rebelliousness as a tomboy phase rather than a defining character trait. In *The Amber Spyglass* Lyra's parents re-establish their role in her life, and become morally redeemed by saving her, thus diminishing the scope of her heroic achievements. Will increasingly becomes the extent of Lyra's social engagement, and eventually displaces even Pantalaimon as her super-ego ('she would have reveled in showing it off to all her urchin friends...but Will [had] taught her the value of silence and



discretion', *The Amber Spyglass* 546). There is no shortage of vivid characters in *The Amber Spyglass*, but these are distributed through the narrative as atomized pairings, rather than nodes in a complex confederacy: Barusch and Balthamos are monogamously committed homosexual angels, Mary Malone and Atal the Mulefa become cross-species flatmates, Coulter and Asriel declare their love for one another and die in each others' arms, Parry and Scoresby form a heroic homosocial partnership, Tialys and Salmakia are married secret agents. In each case, the couples function autonomously, alienated in purpose and in decision-making: there is kindness, self-sacrifice and courage here, but a fundamentally different mode of sociality from that offered in *Northern Lights*.

**Conclusion: 'what is worth having is worth working for'**

If *Northern Lights* solicits affective delight in its (implicit) critique of neoliberalism, and in its images of alternatives to the entrepreneurial society that draw on the fantastic for their power, the concluding books of *His Dark Materials* illuminate the particular nature of that political critique. At the very end of the trilogy, Lyra embraces loss – loss of love, loss of agency, loss of knowledge – in exchange for a vision of what needs to be built: 'the republic of heaven' (*The Amber Spyglass* 548). This republic resonates not with provocative, imaginative and progressive ideas, but with reactionary ones: this isn't a republic to be strove for, but recuperated. Pullman's utopia is a tradition to be recovered and protected: Lyra's Oxford, with its university, its library, its hierarchies, is Pullman's utopia. At the end, the Master still has his servant, Cousins. In the first book Cousins and Lyra were enemies, but in the final scene he greets her with affection: he accepts his place, as he accepts hers; like *Oliver Twist*, eventually Lyra is restored to her rightful place. In Will's Oxford, he and Mary Malone will be friends, but this Oxford, *our* Oxford, is less comforting: Mary is in trouble with the police and the university authorities, Will needs to negotiate the healthcare and welfare bureaucracies to get his mother properly looked after. Utopia, apparently, lacks a state apparatus, but retains elite institutions. Is this the 'immutable moral and intellectual integrity' ascribed to Pullman? In his public statements, such as the celebrated address to the Convention on Modern Liberty in 2009, or his more recent speech to a small group of library campaigners that went viral and became a social networking 'sensation' hailed as a 'classic piece of oratory', Pullman decries the absence of curiosity, courage and modesty in the

organs of the state, and derides the 'clammy hands' of 'market fundamentalists' (Pullman 2011; Page 2011). He has suggested that:

A modest kingdom...would have to think for a moment or two whether or not it was a republic, because its royal family would be small, and its members would be allowed to spend most [sic] their time in useful and interesting careers as well as being royal, and because their love affairs would remain their own business; and people would always be glad to see them cycling past (Pullman 2009).

Such propositions seem emblematic of what Raymond Williams has described as 'bourgeois dissidence', a trait he ascribed to the Bloomsbury fraction:

Bloomsbury was...against cant, superstition, hypocrisy, pretension and public show. It was against ignorance, poverty, sexual and racial discrimination, militarism and imperialism. But it was against all these things in a specific moment of the development of liberal thought. What is appealed to, against all these evils, was not any alternative idea of a whole society. Instead it appealed to the supreme value of the civilized individual, whose pluralization, as more and more civilized individuals, was itself the only acceptable social direction. (Williams 1989: 165)

Bourgeois dissidence offers a platform from which to decry the idiocy of bureaucrats forced to make budgetary decisions favouring libraries over social care for the disabled (or vice versa), or the 'clammy hands' of 'market fundamentalists', whilst preserving the privileges of entitlement. Pullman's investment in bourgeois dissidence allows him to draw, sentimentally and with great power, on richly evocative images of wealth and power for his fiction, where that wealth and power serves the virtuous purposes of curiosity, courage and enlightened advancement of the individual. But the faultline conditions of this vision, in the first book, lie in its investments in fantasy and magical powers (Lyra reads the alethiometer, daemons express the metaphysical potential of human beings), and the animation of marginal constituencies of beings (Gyptians, bears, witches, urchins, abducted children). Such investments in 'lazy nonsense' (Vincent 2001) for Pullman represent the 'sub-Tolkien thing' (Weich 2000) and don't constitute appropriate terms for the construction of a political programme intelligible to bourgeois dissent: they are, by definition, the property of fiction. And thus, in inverse proportion to Pullman's growing fame and celebrity, and his emergence into civil society as a

respected orator, so *His Dark Materials* plots a dismal path away from the marvelous and towards a reactionary resolution consistent with Pullman's rational defence of libraries and his championing of freedom, courage and curiosity. The republic of heaven is possible, but 'what is worth having is worth working for'. If *Northern Lights* delights us with its images of agency, sociality and confederacy, we must nevertheless recognize Pullman's attempts to foreclose such radicalism in its sequels; finally, Lyra's world is circumscribed, not by the enterprise society – Pullman remains opposed to that – but by petit bourgeois suburban values: hard work, compliance, obedience. Pullman's apologists may deride the magic spells, potions and wands of Rowling's creation, but it's ironic that at the climax of *His Dark Materials* Lyra Belacqua has become a muggle, even a Dursley at that.

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