Modernity, revolutions and frontiers in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* or a contribution to the fourth culture

Maria do Rosário Monteiro  
CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Portugal

**ABSTRACT:** Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* is a series of fantasy narratives for (young) adults. Its complexity and structure place the novels directly within the theme of this publication: Modernity, Frontiers and Revolutions. The three segments of the title are all intimately connected throughout the texts—are their core. Regarding modernity, it is present in the ethical perspective, the scientific references and the series structure. The revolution plays a significant part in the whole plot, being the aim of a multitude of characters. It will be a political, social, cultural religious and ethical revolution taking place in a variety of universes. Frontiers, in so far as they act in an ambivalent way, both as containers and promises for change, as obstacles and challenges, are also one major topic in the series, with characters travelling from world to world, crossing borders and returning to their homelands.

Two teenagers, sometimes under supervision, face difficult issues like death, truth, friendship, war, and love. However, most of the time they have to decide without guidance, relying on their consciousness, on principles inherited from the cultural milieu, on their friendship but also on their intuitions and emotions. The two characters are complementary, and this characteristic allows them to make the right ethical choices, even the most painful.

Pullman proposes some radical transformations in literature for young adults, and he also paves a road out of formulaic and/or post-Tolkien fantasy while, at the same time, fulfils the “mission” of “speaking out of tone”, of contrasting and questioning cultural agendas of mainstream literature and culture.

Pullman’s possible worlds are complex and inspiring fictions that question the frames of the actual world, and this is, definitely, one of the essential functions of fantasy literature, part of its genetic code. *His Dark Materials* establishes a distinctive and sophisticated dialogue with literature, mythology, culture, ethics, quantum physics, religion, “consensual reality” and fantasy.

**Keywords:** Fantasy literature, *His dark materials*, Philip Pullman, ethics, revolution, modernity

1. **INTRODUCTION: THE FOURTH CULTURE**

This text follows Armstrong’s premise:

1. The title is inspired in Lehrer’s definition in *Proust was a neuroscientist* (2007: 196). Referring to McEwan’s *Saturday*, Lehrer proposes “the birth of a new fourth culture, one that seeks to discover relationships between the humanities and the sciences. This fourth culture, much closer in concept to Snow’s original definition […], will ignore arbitrary intellectual boundaries, seeking instead to blur the lines that separate. It will freely transplant knowledge between the sciences and the humanities, and will focus in connecting the reductionist fact of our actual experience […]. While science will always be our primary method of investigating the universe, it is naïve to think that science can solve everything by itself. […] We now know enough to know that we will never know everything. This is why we need art: it teaches us to how live with mysteries. Only the artist can explore the ineffable without offering us an answer, for sometimes there is no answer”.

There are many good reasons to undertake cross-disciplinary studies, but one compelling justification is that a problem one wants to solve cannot be adequately addressed with the tools of one’s discipline alone. (2013: 1)

This said what follows has the contribution of literary theory, cognitive science, psychology, narratology and philosophy. These disciplines will be called to help us understand how deeply narratives are rooted in human lives, shaping the perception of reality, emotions, reasoning, actions and decisions. Turner (1998) sums it up brilliantly right at the beginning of his book.

The literary mind is not a separate kind of mind. It is our mind. The literary mind is the fundamental mind. Although cognitive science is associated with mechanical technologies […] that seem unliterary, the central issues for cognitive science are in fact the issues of the literary mind.
Part I: Modernity: Frontiers and revolutions

Story is a basic principle of mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories. (1998: V)

We do not simply think and learn through stories. We construct them unconsciously and even entrusted them with our individual and collective destinies. It happens every time we formulate a fictional hypothesis to help us decide what route to take, what graduate course to choose, how to invest our money, in which political party to vote for, etc. We even construct fictional scenarios to help us decide whether to accept an invitation for a drink. Taking a bolder step, one may state that humans are (most of the time unconsciously) addicted to stories. It is a natural, physical, psychological, cognitive and healthy addiction that has a stalwart ally: emotions.

Human beings have a passion for plots. Stories are shared in every society, in every age, and in every social context, from intimate personal interactions to impersonal social gatherings. This passion for plots is bound up with the passion of plots, the ways in which stories manifest feelings on the part of authors and characters, as well as the passion from plots, the ways stories provoke feelings in readers or listeners. (Hogan, 2011a: 1)

Emotions are also deeply connected with the way one learns and constructs his/her memories, the way one "stores" the knowledge and information. The way one sees the world defines "reality" is directly related to both human "literary mind" and emotions. They are the filters through which one interacts with one another, solves problems or takes decisions.

Human beings cannot have "pure" experiences. They can only aim at a "consensual notion of reality" (Monteiro, 2010). Reality is a fiction construed through a process of conditioned selection and interpretation.

... experience itself is never "pure" and "direct." It is mediated by our sensory and cognitive architectures, the innate structures, the acquired processes and contents that shape what occurs in the world into what we think occurs. The fundamental operation here is encoding – the selection, segmentation, and structuration of input at various levels of processing. (Hogan, 2011b: 14)

Similarly to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, we cannot ever know "the reality", only the consensual notion of what is real, that familiar human fiction that allows knowledge, interaction, evolution, emotions and the sense of belonging and sharing the same space, of living together with the immensity that it encompasses.

However, this consensual fiction that is "reality", time, space and culturally shaped, this world is only one of many possible worlds. Moreover, it is time to appeal to logic to help us make sense of this imperfect consensual reality. Calling on Bradley and Swartz (1979) one can state that

Given that we are so often ignorant of what is, we need a rich sense of what might be. In matters of practice, we need to consider alternatives where knowledge is denied us. In matters of theory, we need to consider hypotheses where facts are unknown. (1979: 1–2)

And this is what modal logic tells us:

Actuality is, as it were, surrounded by an infinite realm of possibilities. Or, as we might otherwise put it, our actual world is surrounded by an infinity of other possible worlds. [...] The fact is that we can, and do, conceive of social and legal, biological and technological, and perhaps even of physical, possibilities which the world of fact may never encompass. (1979: 2)

According to Bradley and Swartz (1979: 1)

For, whatever the historical facts happen to be, we can always suppose—counterfactually, as we say—that they might have been otherwise. We constantly make such suppositions in the world of real life. The world of fiction needs no special indulgence.

2. Heisenberg uncertainty principle, defined in the field of quantum physics, states that “one can either know the position of a particle or its momentum (mass times velocity), but not both variables simultaneously. In other words: we can’t know everything about anything” (Lehrer, 2007: 196).
In other words, the rules of modal logical can and should be applied to narrative fiction, because it is also through literature that one can experience what does not exist yet, what may be possible, what one cannot ever experience because,

in matters of practice, we need to consider alternatives where knowledge is denied us. In matters of theory, we need to consider hypotheses where facts are unknown. (BRADLEY et al., 1979: 1–2).

Here is where fiction, story-worlds come to help our complicated process of making sense of “reality”. It is at this point that logic, cognition and fiction join together, neither “as mere fancy of the dreamer or a refuge for the escapist” (BRADLEY et al., 1979: 1). Rather, as Tolkien puts it, from time to time we all need to:

to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab but of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness. (1983: 146)

This need does not apply only to fantasy literature. It is a function of all story-worlds as Herman (2007: 3) explains:

Rather than focusing on general, abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people – and of what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change – a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, “scientific” modes of explanation that characterize phenomena as instances of general covering laws. Science explains how in general water freezes when (all other things being equal) its temperature reaches zero degrees centigrade; but it takes a story to convey what it was like to lose one’s footing on slippery ice one late afternoon in December 2004, under a steel-grey sky.

Coming near to closing the circle, one still makes a stop at quantum physics and the theory of Many Worlds. Controversial but none the less existent, this theory, born in the late 1950s, has a lot to offer not only fantasy and science fiction but also narrative in general. As Marie-Lure Ryan states, Tegmark’s Description of Parallel Universes (2003) presents four hypotheses

The literary and narratological counterpart of the notion of parallel universes (Ryan, 2006b: 643) and the major literary theories in this field are, as Ryan mentions, Umberto Eco (1979), Thomas Pavel (1988), Lubomir Doležel (2010; 1998) and Ryan (Ryan, 2006a; 2006b; 2005; 2001), among others.

Doležel (2010) alerts no theory can be simply transplanted into literary theory. It must always undergo adjustments to the peculiarities of literature. The same says Ryan regarding not only modal logical but also quantum physics:

In narratology, the philosophical idea of a plurality of possible worlds and the contrast between the actual and the possible provide a model of the cognitive pattern into which readers organize information in order to interpret it as a story. But the many-worlds interpretation of physics and the possible worlds (PW) model of narrative differ in their conception of the ontological status of the multiple worlds: in physics they are all actual, while narrative theory stresses the contrast between actuality and mere possibility. (2006b: 633)

Literature, regardless of its genre, needs to embrace the concept of the fourth culture actively and put it into practice. More than discover connections between literature and sciences, the writer most follows Pullman’s advice: “read like a butterfly and work like a bee” (2009), pick what may be useful while fluttering through a variety of different books subjects and apply it to writing.

His Dark Materials3 is one of the infinite outcomes of this method. The complexity of the texts, the variety of subjects touched upon, the multitude of intertextual references create an intricate net of references and suggestions that seems infinite to the reader. What follows is, necessarily, just a short glimpse of what can be analysed, studied and learnt from a collection of texts still not finished (there are at least two more novels in the making).

2 MODERNITY IN HIS DARK MATERIALS

His Dark Materials is a series of fantasy novels. This genre, popular since the publication Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, was a romantic creation and, like the novel, it is characterised by hybridism—it mixes “realistic” strategies with what Bachelard defined as reverie, a conscious imaginative creation that indirectly questions the rules of rationality

Part I: Modernity: Frontiers and revolutions

while using them. Tolkien exemplifies this in his essay “On Fairy Stories” when he states:

To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art: indeed narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent mode. (1983: 140)

Usually epitomized negatively as “escapist” literature, this genre assumes that to question conventional assumptions, to question and criticise what is taken for granted, sometimes this can only be done by taking a different road, by distancing oneself from the actual world and look at if from a different perspective, as through a narrative.

For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. (1983: 143)

This quality intrinsic to literature makes it possible to imaginatively access fictional worlds “as if” they are real, according to Ryan (2006b: 646) a game with precise rules:

“pretending to believe that fiction describes a world which is both real and actual.” Pretending that this world is real means pretending that it exists independently of the text, while pretending that it is actual means transporting oneself in imagination into this world and adopting the point of view of one of its members.

His Dark Materials series starts with a quotation from Milton’s Paradise Lost.

Into this wild abyss, The womb of nature and perhaps her grave, of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire, But all these in their pregnant causes mixed Confusely, and which thus must ever fight, Unless the almighty maker them ordain His Dark Materials to create more worlds. Into this wild abyss the wary fiend Stood on the brink of hell and looked a while, Pondering his voyage... (Book II, vv 910–919, 2005: 70–71)

This quotation sets the background of all the action, determines the religious, ethical and cultural environment: the Western Weltanschauung but not in the way a western reader would expect. The character that beholds the “wild abyss” where the “dark materials” float is Lucifer, pondering the route of his rebellion against God.

The universe, creation, revolution, defiance of authority, the crossing of borders, all this is implied in these lines for those who know Milton’s work and the historical context in which it was written.

But the transformation of consensual reality goes even further than the one shared by most people in the actual world. Pullman sets the whole action in a multiverse, a multitude of parallel universes that have only one consistent and universal characteristic: all inhabited worlds have intelligent beings, regardless of their shape, physical structure, and psychological characteristics.

All action is developed by those beings that share the “dark materials”, subatomic particles of conscience. These behave as many subatomic particles that share the same nature: they are attracted to each other.

Modernity is then expressed in modern science, in contemporary theories of the universe, standing on the shoulders of a modern writer: John Milton; but projecting (and subverting) his creation to serve a modern political and ethical agenda as will be demonstrated further on.

4. It is this author’s opinion that fantasy in western literature always had a marginal position, assuming the function of questioning mainstream assumptions. One finds literary text since Antiquity where fantastic structures play a substantial function—as of instance Lucian’s A True Story (2006). Even when the fantastic became a genre, during the late 18th-century, it stayed marginal to mainstream literature and critics. Only in the late 1970s did fantasy and science fiction enter the academic courses as texts worth studying, though this was not the case in Portugal. On this matter see Monteiro (2010; 1997; 1992), Kroeber (1988) Attebery (1992) among others.

5. Regarding the use literature in general and fantasy in particular I consider accurate Ryan’s statement: “Stories are mental constructs that we form as a response to certain texts, artworks, discourse acts and, more generally, as a response to life itself, and narratives are the semiotic realization of stories: their inscription as texts, images, and sounds. The most fundamental mental operations that we perform to extract a story out of a text are the same ones that we execute to interpret the behavior of our fellow humans and to make decisions in our own lives” (2006b: 467). Underline is mine.

6. For a more in deep analyses of fantastic and fantasy literature and its function on the voluntary unsettling of assumed notions and bias on reality see Monteiro (2010) chapter 2.

7. The way Pullman’s starts the series, and taking into account that he is not a particular Tolkien’s fan, makes it is somewhat ironical, because he confirms Tolkien’s opinion that: “If fairy-stories as a kind is worth reading at all, it is worthy to be written for and read by adults. They will, of course, put more in and get more out than children can” (1983: 137). For a recent and scholarly solid edition of Tolkien’s essay please refer to Flieger and Anderson (2014).
His Dark Materials is in itself a multiverse in expansion. The constant that will enable this expansion will be precisely the dark material, in the novels called simply Dust. Again, we stumble in another ironical trope: dust brings to mind the idea of something unimportant, dirty, unhealthy, something one would do good to get ready off. In these fictional worlds, Dust is not at all ordinary, but the most treasurable particle of all those that form the matter and universe(s): conscience. The particle one should spend his/her life cherishing, nourishing, and developing. The food for these particles are the will to learn, to build knowledge, that of the outside world but also the Delphic dictum: Know thyself, and to share it freely.

In Lyra’s world, there is an Oxford, with all “real” Oxford universities plus a fictional one, Jordan. These universities, some for female others for male scholars (the most prestigious) are in conflict with the Church.

The Church reminds the Catholic Church, with all its institutes, convents, priests, scholars and so forth. With secret societies and private agendas, with the Inquisition pretending to save the souls of those involved in heretic, the academic research. A Church that determines what may and may not be studied and what knowledge is safe.

The reader will feel right inside History as if the beginning of modernity just took a little bit longer. Galileo and his trial spring to mind. All seems clear, but it is not. The Holy Church has its seat in Genève, and the pope is Calvinist.

Pullman turns the Church 180 degrees and puts in charge of it the radical Calvinists, and by doing so, he deliberately connects the two religious extremisms that marked the 17th and 18th-centuries in the Western world.

Modernity is present throughout all the novels, either representing parts of the actual world or changing them into their opposite, creating a sense of altered reality, almost like alternative fictions. What if radical Calvinist ruled the Church instead of radical Catholics? What if dust that one carefully and dutifully vacuums is not just garbage?

When one looks at Western history since the beginning of modernity (Renaissance included because it was the first significant step in human autonomy from destiny), there are two recurrent events throughout Europe and Western societies: political and religious revolutions, changes in human relationships and organizations, some radical, definitions and redefinitions of political and social borders.

There is more to Modernity than these outlined events. However, this text will only centre its focus on these and how they are recreated in His Dark Materials.

2.1 Frontiers in His dark materials

The first narrative of the series, The Northern Lights (Pullman, 1998a) introduces the reader in a fictional world echoing the one of consensual reality but with confusing similarities. For instance, the characters in this world are humans but of a different kind: part of their psyche is materialised in a daemon that always accompanies the character, being (theoretically) unable to separate from each as if linked by an invisible cord. Character and daemon talk with one another and cooperate in physical and mental processes.

As the plot progresses, the reader comes to discover that the demons are materialised expressions of an interpretation of Jungian archetypes anima/animaus and Hillman’s daemons. The majority of female characters have male demons, and male characters have feminine demons. Some characters have demons that are of the same sex though they are a minority. A constant in the behaviour of these demons is the continuous interaction, the warnings, the guidance and even the recrimination when the character fails his mission or acts irresponsibly.

The demons keep changing their forms during childhood when the character’s sexual pulsions are still undetermined. During puberty, the demons begin to reveal a tendency to settle more frequently in a specific form, the one that best suits the character mental and psychological structure. In adulthood, the demons have a fixed form. In His Dark Materials, Lyra learns that some people end up with a daemon that does not entirely corresponds to their expectations. However, the reader gets the

9. The choice has to do with the limited space allotted two the chapter. A vaster work in progress will deal with these and other matters in the near future. For shorter study of the series, regarding Pullman’s trilogy see: Cosmos Fantásticos (Monteiro, 2003).

10. When asked about the origin of demons Pullman said: “Demons came into my head suddenly and unexpectedly, but they do have a sort of provenance. One clear origin is Socrates’ daimon. Another is the old idea of the guardian angel” (Pullman). Plato expresses a similar concept the the Myth of Er, when the souls are given a guardian spirit to guide them through the life they were destined to live (2000: 10614–10621). James Hillman recovers the word to psychology; nearing it to the Socratic meaning: a psychological complex whose function is to guide human beings into their personal call and motivating them (Hillman, 1996). Hillman worked closely with Jung and, in my opinion, the demons in His Dark Materials are a mixture of Jung complex Animal/Animus archetypes and Hillman’s daemons.
Part I: Modernity: Frontiers and revolutions

idea that the fault is nor the daemons' but the characters' that wished for a life that was not the one destined for him, due to his own choices.

Another characteristic that distinguishes children from adults, as Lyra finds out, is that Dust tends to concentrate around adults, but not so much around children. The explanation has to do with the level of consciousness. The more conscious, educated and inquisitive is an individual denser is the Dust around his/her head.

Lyra is involved in a quest to save a dear friend. This journey, full of strange incidents and some dramatic ones, starts when Lyra leaves Oxford to live for some time among gipsies, who live in a free area of marshes. She then travels to the North Pole and crosses several new borders as the land of the armoured bears. Each of the new spaces Lyra enters presents a series of rules: social-cultural and political structures define each of the areas.

In the second volume, *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra travels, in the company of a young adolescent, to a short of contemporary Oxford. Here, planes, instead of zeppelins, cross the sky, there are cars instead of horses and wagons, and being inconspicuous is a fundamental survival strategy, as Will teaches her.

From the second volume onward, Lyra and Will form a double hero, a sort of separated androgynies. The final quest has to be performed by the efforts and sufferings of both characters. This is a fundamental transformation introduced in the mythical hero structure, typically a male protagonist. As Ursula Le Guin does in the Earthsea series, Pullman also adopts the transformation of the hero monomyth, defined by Campbell (2004; 1973), thus adjusting the myth to modern times.

The change is based on the complementarity of both characters. In *His Dark Materials* Lyra and Will complement each other: she is emotive, imaginative (liar/Lyra) compassionate; Will is rational, conscious, educated and inquisitive is an individual denser is the Dust around his/her head. They interact with a multitude of rational beings, from angels to harpies, from witches to mulefia, armoured bears and gallivespans, among others.

Crossing the frontiers is the only way they can perform their destiny. However, in *His Dark Materials*, the borders are also limits that must be restored. It is unnatural for beings to travel across different Universes. Since each world has its proper physical laws that determine the world's nature, each being can only live definitely in his world. The opened frontiers are a physical anomaly. The universe is constituted by parallel worlds separated by a thin frontier constituted of elementary particles. Except for Angels, no other conscious being should pass through. Until some sort of alchemist developed a knife capable of cutting windows in the thin membrane and stepping into other parallel worlds. It is through such windows, already opened (and not closed), or the ones opened by Will that the characters are given the opportunity to fulfill their prophesied destiny.

In the end, Will, helped by the angel Xaphania, closes all the windows, restoring the proper order of the multiverse, knowing that it would mean a definite separation of the young couple that meanwhile had discovered they were in love. This is their ultimate sacrifice, dictated by the principles of ethics and solidarity; and by the supreme dictum having in mind the res publica instead of selfish individualism.

2.2 Revolution in *His dark materials*

To create a successful imaginary world, there is the need for an ability to transform complex elements, as one's cultural formation, aesthetic, philosophical, political, and ethical principles. All this, worked through the imagination gives form to unique fictional worlds, the more complex as vaster the author's cultural formation is.

Pullman based his trilogy on Western cultural social, philosophical, religious and ethical tradition. It is a vast domain, and *His Dark Materials* covers them all, particularly from the beginning of Modernity.


12. This major transformation unfortunately, cannot be developed here, but is part of my current research. The adaptability of myths reveal their importance to human imagination. Western culture was, since de 1960s waiting for such a radical change in one of its fundamental myths, to adjust it to actual Weltanscheung. Another author that has been following the same path is Catherine Fisher ins novels as *The Oracle* (2003), *The Archon* (2004), *The Day of the Scarab* (2006), *Incarceron* (Fisher, 2007) or *Sapphique* (Fisher, 2010). Pullman maintains the same dual hero structure in *La Belle Sauvage*.

13. For more detail information on both the worlds and being present in *His Dark Materials* please see Laurie Frost's *Guide* (2008).

14. This section is partially based on my conference presented at the 21st World Congress of the International Comparative Literature, July 21st-27th 2016, in the University of.
In this very complex fictional world presents political, philosophical and ethical issues that challenge the reader and demand a certain maturity and cultural formation to enable a thorough and enriching reading experience.

Adding to the modern scientific background, in Pullman's texts classical and Judaic-Christian culture are portrayed in all the worlds Lyra and Will travel through, in the mythic characters used: the harpies; the use of canonical and apocryphal biblical texts as the Bible but also the three Enoch Apocalypses.

The quest Lyra and Will are involved is that of a multiverse revolution. The transformation of a celestial monarchy into a republic that hopefully will follow the French revolution motto: equality, liberty and fraternity. Equality among all conscious beings, regardless of their origin. The right to pursue freely one's convictions, including the freedom of speech and access to knowledge, the only way to develop and produce Dust, particles of consciousness. The fraternity means the absolute acceptance and respect for difference.

Pullman develops a fictional world where conscious criticism is used to question taboos and dogmas as well as our consensual notion of reality. However, the primary aim of Pullman's criticism is the social and cultural practices followed without the use of critical reasoning.

From Milton's Paradise Lost, Pullman burrows not only the quotation presented above, but also two characters: God and Lucifer (played by Ariel as the leader of the revolution), and adapts them. Ariel represents Lucifer as the leader of the revolution. God will be referred under different names being the most common Authority.

Unlike Judaic-Christian tradition, this Authority is not the worlds' creator but merely a once mighty angel that convinced all the other beings that he was the creator, instituting an authoritarian monarchy, the kingdom of heavens that would control all creation. So one may say that God is also portrayed as a primordial Lucifer.

The first statement concerning this state of affairs appears only at the beginning of the third volume, announced by the angel Baruch:

The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty – those were all names he gave himself. He was never a creator. He was an angel like ourselves – the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angel condensed out of Dust at the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but that was a lie. (Pullman, 2001: 33–34)

Further, in the same volume, another character gives better enlightenment to the problematic of creation:

This is angelic knowledge [...] It shocked us to learn that the Authority is not the creator. There may have been a creator, or there may not: we don’t know. All we know is that at some point the Authority took charge and since then angels have rebelled and human beings have struggled against him too. (2001: 221–222)

Therefore, the angels would be one of the many forms of conscious matter that inhabits the uncountable universes. However, in doing this, Pullman, though presenting another explanation to the angelic origin, keeps them deeply tied to Judaic-Christian mythology through the names he gives them. In His Dark Materials, the angels are the bene ‘elim, God’s children, the same name used in the enigmatic chapter 6 of Genesis15.

Judeo and Christian tradition frequently interpreted these bene ‘elim as the fallen angels, those engaged in a revolt against God. The theme of the angels' revolution is announced at the beginning of the second volume, The Subtle Knife, but the orthodox presented is progressively transformed. In the last book, Baruch confirms the existence of that revolt against the Authority, though with different motivations: the uprising and ensuing war was due to the will of putting an end to the kingdom of tyranny imposed by the Authority, replacing it by an egalitarian republic. There are hints that the leader of the first war might have been Xaphania, the feminine angel that will enlighten Lyra and Will as to what must be done to bring about such a republic.

Of this war, there are only reminiscences in human memory, enigmatic short texts, as the one we find in Isaiah:

Thy pomp is brought down to the nether-world, and the noise of thy psalteries; the maggot is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee. How art thou fallen from heaven, O day-star, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, that didst cast lots over the nations! And thou saidst in thy heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, above the stars of God will I exalt my throne, and I will sit

15. “And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives, whomsoever they chose. And the LORD said: ‘My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for that he also is flesh; therefore shall his days be a hundred and twenty years.’ The Nephilim were in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bore children to them; the same were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown” (Margolis, 1917: Gen. 6:1–4).
Part I: Modernity: Frontiers and revolutions

upon the mount of meeting, in the uttermost parts of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High’. Yet thou shalt be brought down to the nether-world, to the uttermost parts of the pit. They that saw thee do narrowly look upon thee, they gaze earnestly at thee: ‘Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms. (1917: Isaiah 4: 12–15)

However, other texts do present more extensive narratives. That’s the case of a series of books that Pullman also used as intertextual references, the three Enoch apocalypses (Charlesworth, 1983: 5–90; 91–222; 223–216). In them, we read the story of Enoch, the seventh descendant of Adam’s line, after God took him into the heavens16.

In God’s company Enoch crossed the seven heavens, saw mysteries, witnessed the fall of the Angels, pleaded (unsuccessfully) on their behalf before God and then, in the third Apocalypse, we learn that Enoch was transformed into the vice-regent of the Kingdom of Heaven under the name Metatron:

I said to Metatron, “Why are you called by the name of your Creator with seventy names? You are greater than all the princes, more exalted than all the angels, more beloved than all the ministers, more honored than all the hosts, and elevated over all potestates in sovereignty, greatness, and glory; why, then, do they call you ‘Youth’ in the heavenly heights?” He answered, “Because I am Enoch, the son of Jared”. “[…] And the Holy One, blessed be he, appointed me in the height as a prince and a ruler among the ministering angels.” (Charlesworth, 1983: 258)

If Milton’s authoritarian and despotic God serves as the motto for Pullman’s contestation of a traditional, irrational and dictatorial religious practice, devoid of humanist values, his conception of worlds as spaces inhabited by sentient matter does not allow for an abstract idea of awarded eternity. Matter feeds on matter as literature feeds on literature. It is the responsibility of every sentient being to not allow for an abstract idea of awarded eternity. (Shakespeare, 2003: act 5, scene 1, vv. 193–196)

Therefore, since the Authority is only an angel, he too is subjected to the laws of matter. That is why the Authority, who once vanquished the revolutionary angels, with colossal cosmic consequences for all conscious beings, is now an old and fragile being. The information regarding God’s fragile health appears in the second volume, when the monster of the cliffs, also an elderly being enlightens the younger about the coming war:

As for the forces of the Authority, why, they number a hundred time as many. But the Authority is age-old, far older even than me, children, and his troops are frightened and complacent where they’re not frightened. (Pullman, 1999b: 284)

At the beginning of the third volume, Baruch refers to the transformation that, through time, the Authority introduced in his celestial palace, in his Merkabah, described by Ezekiel as a throne on wheels17.

17. “Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel at the bottom hard by the living creatures, at the four faces thereof. The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl; and they four had one likeness; and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel within a wheel. When they went, they went toward their four sides; they turned not when they went. As for their rings, they were high and they were dreadful; and they four had their rings full of eyes round about. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went hard by them; and when the living creatures were lifted up from the bottom, the wheels were lifted up. Whithersoever the spirit was to go, as the spirit was to go thereto, so they went; and the wheels went with them and the wheels were lifted up beside them; for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels. When those went, these went, and when those stood, these stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up beside them; for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels. And over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of a firmament, like the colour of the terrible ice, stretched forth over their heads above. And under the firmament were their wings conformable the one to the other; this one of them had two which covered, their bodies. And when they went, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, like the voice of the Almighty, a noise of tumult like the noise of a host; when they stood, they let down their wings. For, when there was a voice above the firmament that was over their heads, as they stood, they let down their wings. And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above. And I saw as the colour of electrum, as the appearance of fire round about enclosing it, from the appearance of his loins and upward; and from the appearance of his loins and downward I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him” (1917: Ezek. 1:15–27).

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam and why of that loam, whereto he

16. “And Enoch lived sixty and five years, and begot Methuselah. And Enoch walked with God after he begot Methuselah three hundred years, and begot sons and daughters. And all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty and five years. And Enoch walked with God, and he was not; for God took him” (1917: Gen. 5: 21–24).
The characteristic of the throne mobility is maintained in Pullman’s text since the mountain where the Authority has his throne is mobile.

[The Chariot] is not fixed: it moves from place to place. Wherever it goes, there is the heart of the kingdom, his citadel, his palace. When the Authority was young, it wasn’t surrounded by clouds, but as time passed, he gathered them around him more and more thickly. No one has seen the summit for thousands of years. (Pullman, 2001: 34)

The effects of old age force God to delegate his power in Enoch/Metatron. The prince of divine presence in the third apocalypse of Enoch is, in *His Dark Materials*, the Regent or the Prince of Angels whose intense luminosity is unbearable to human eyes, as Ezekiel can only perceive Yahwe’s, seated in the throne through a veil. The contrast between Metatron’s strength and God’s fragility become self-revealing in chapters 30 and 31 of *The Amber Spyglass*. During the Second War in Heavens, or Heavens War II, God is a senile elderly that dissolves himself in infinitesimal particles spread through the air when the door of his sedan chair is opened.

The whole trilogy evolves through a path that makes the cosmic battle inevitable, a clash of different incompatible cosmovisions. Metatron’s power is portrayed as negative: it is an arrogant, despotic power, the cornerstone of all fundamentalisms in which human history is fertile, whenever religion steps outside the private sphere and overcomes all forces, philosophies, and politics. When rationality recedes and lives the field opened to unchained emotions.

There is no doubt that if Metatron wins the war, all worlds will face an inquisitorial court of cosmic dimensions.

Moving the analysis to Metatron opponent, Lord Asriel, one should not forget that he is a recreation of Milton’s Lucifer. I agree with Pullman that, despite all the efforts, Milton’s Lucifer is almost human. In *His Dark Materials*, the character who opposes Metatron and will start Cosmic War II is remarkably intelligent but also able to sacrifice all to attain his objective. He can command a huge and heterogeneous army, as Lucifer did. However, if we return to Enoch’s apocalypses, we will find that one of the fallen angels, Azazel, is the one who taught:

The people (the art of) making swords and knives, and shields, and breastplates; and he showed to their chosen ones bracelets, decorations, (shadowing of the eye) with antimony, ornamentation, the beautifying of the eyelids, all kinds of precious stones, and all coloring tinctures and alchemy. And there were many wicked ones and they committed adultery and erred, and all their conduct became corrupt. (Margolis, 1917: 1 Enoch, 8: 1–2)

The similarity of names is self-evident, but the identification may be taken further when one analysis Asriel’s life: he is a scientist, capable of manipulating materials, he proves the existence of rational matter, the Dust, through the use of a special emulsion (alchemy); he creates a bridge between two parallel worlds by killing a child, and his republic is fully focused on the construction of the most powerful and sophisticated weapons to fight the celestial army.

Almost at the end of the third volume, the war between the Asriel’s republic and Metatron’s kingdom are inevitable, and the consequences are not ignored. There is no doubt, what so ever about the violence, the carnage, and the sacrifice of rational beings the war will cause.

Both must be stopped. And ironically, both die falling in a primordial abysm, reminding the one Lucifer gazes upon in Milton’s Paradise Lost. The circle closes. However, there is no easy way out, no romance, no happiness for individual characters, namely Lyra and Will.

After every war, there is an enormous task of rebuilding a new order: the construction of an egalitarian republic demands the sharing and defence of universal values, as fraternity, equality, and liberty, proclaimed during the French Revolution. Above all this, there must stand responsibility. Having the ability to choose, it is necessary that the choice is made freely and responsibly, even if the correct option implies self-sacrifice of personal interests.

The choice for the common good will rest upon the shoulders of two young adults because they are the future. Moreover, they will have to renounce to their love in order to re-establish the natural balance. Nothing in the world is eternal, and the dark materials, the conscious subatomic particles have to be produced by rational beings through study, hard intellectual work in the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

There is no more eternal hell as it was instituted by the Authority. The dead will participate in this renewal of conscious matter through a straightforward and painful exercise. They no longer endure the harpies’ torments as long as they dare to tell the whole truth about their lives: all they saw, felt, and knew. Then they will be freed to dissolve in the universe as rational particles that will surround and help those who search for knowledge.

Both young adults who accept the truth of existence restore the equilibrium that the authority had disrupted after the war: each one will have to live in his/her own world, renounce their love for a greater good.
Part I: Modernity: Frontiers and revolutions

3 CONCLUSION

As Ryan points out, modern literature is no longer a closed field for critics. Rather:

Fundamental and far-reaching changes in literary studies, often compared to paradigmatic shifts in the sciences, have been taking place during the last thirty years. These changes have included enlarging the literary canon not only to include novels, poems and plays by writers whose race, gender or nationality had marginalized their work but also to include texts by philosophers, psychoanalysts, historians, anthropologists, social and religious thinkers, who previously were studied by critics merely as ‘background’. (Ryan, 2006b: 634)

Multidisciplinary approaches are the only way to get nearer to a more complete, though ever partial, knowledge of the world and ourselves. The changes brought about by postmodernism did not bring about a world or literature that obliterated ethic. This is perhaps more evident, in my opinion, in literature for young adults. It is definitely present in His Dark Materials. A different kind of ethics, one that is not necessarily confined to the borders of religion.

Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack (2001: IX) postulate present ethic shift in literature very clearly and adequately suited to Pullman’s trilogy.

To pretend that the ethical or moral dimensions of the human condition were abandoned or obliterated in the shift to postmodernity certainly seems naive. Part of being human involves the daily struggle with the meanings and consequences of our actions, a struggle most often understood in narrative structures as we tell others and ourselves about what has transpired or what we fear will transpire in the future.

Further on in their introduction, Davis and Womack almost seem to have in mind the ethical and moral dilemmas felt by Lyra and Will and presented in the lives of the characters that we encounter there— to the ethical questions that the story raises in the readers own life beyond the margins of the text. (2001: IX-X)

The complex fictional universe Pullman invites his readers to enter is one to be built, every day, a constant work in progress to be carried by the readers in the course of their lives: a true egalitarian republic. For that, each has to share the same fundamental ethical and moral values in respect of difference.

Modernity is about revolutions, crossing borders, testing limits, and finding new answers, sometimes challenging ones. There has to be a revolution of mentalities based on moral shared values: the future is built by the choices made, and the acceptance of the inevitable responsibility for those choices; a constant search for knowledge and unconditional adherence to the truth. War will never be the solution, and the spoils of war leave deep wounds that never entirely heal.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


